

Leaf by Leaf

**Burnside Writers' Group
Anthology 2018**

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Burnside Community Centre
Burnside South Australia 5065

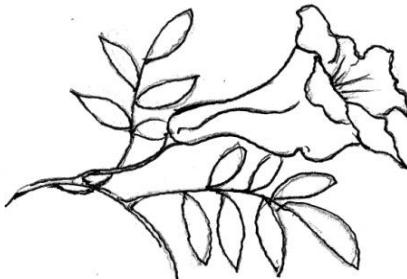
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Introduction

Welcome to this collection of works by the Burnside Writers' Group.

The group began in July 2013, after Helen Anderson and Iris Rowe recognised the potential for a writers' group at Burnside. Writers have come and gone since then, having achieved their aims of finalising stories and novels they had been working on. Nevertheless, a core of original members and strong membership maintains the momentum from those early days.

We learn through coming together and sharing our understanding of writing and editing and continue to encourage each other in our writing pursuits.

Our members' ages and range of experience is vast, and each brings their insight and style to the pages. We explore fiction through our short stories, consider memoir that comes from considered attention, and poetry that asks the imagination to explore and the heart to feel. From the serious to the humorous, we all have stories to tell.

Throughout this Anthology you will discover a loose Christmas theme. Many of those stories were written during a rare excursion into writing on a set topic during a meeting. The quality and range of writing during the twenty-minute exercise was so impressive, some of the stories were offered for inclusion. The stories range from the joy that so many associate with Christmas, to the pain others experience at that time.

The Group now proudly presents its third Anthology of prose and poetry.

We hope our writing captures your imagination and brings memories and an interest in the next year's contribution.

Editors:

Christine Christopoulos

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2018

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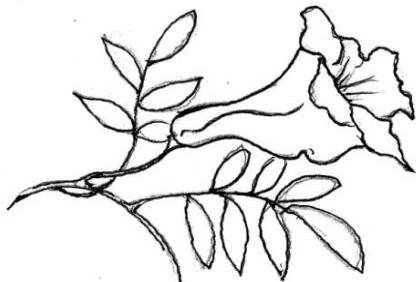
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Iris Rowe

Writing memoirs has become a fascinating journey of intrigue. Researching family history and finding connecting threads continues to reveal a wealth of stories waiting to be explored, recorded and kept for the following generations. Previously, my ancestors were simply names and dates of birth with little knowledge of who they really were. Now I am gathering together fragments of information that have been spoken or written randomly by other family members.

As I write, the colourful tapestry of my family's story is being portrayed in memorable word pictures. And I am attracted by the strong sense of belonging and connection with my ancestors: their humanity, love, care, wisdom and resilience.



Dashwood Bay 1867

From dawn's first light till dusk,
they sail and row in open boat
until the island cliffs draw near.

Blue skies now fade as clouds hang dark and low;
stormy winds grow wild with tempest's power
driving hard against the rocky shore.

In fear of life they conquer swell and come to rest
on sandy beach with seaweed strewn;
beyond the reach and drag of foaming tide.

Struggling now against the wind, no time for tears.
Holding close,
their children wrapped in blankets damp
shielding eyes from salt spray sting.

They came ashore and walked
on bleak and hostile wind swept land.
They found a place to rest,
and sheltered for the night.

The storm passed on, they woke at dawn,
the sea was calm, in sunshine's glow.
This land was fair; they took fresh hope.
They gathered driftwood
tossed on sand and rocks.
No turning back;
they settled on this lonely island shore.
Then called it home; though strange it seemed.

Blistered, bleeding hands lifted
heavy weathered rocks and stones
a humble cottage built.
They cut the broom-bush thick and green
called it thatch, then bound it fast.
Rustic shelter slate stone floor
a refuge from the sun and rain;
called it home; so strange but true.

The children craved the simple fare:
a crackling fire beneath the hanging pot
bubbling stew, fresh bread,
kept warm upon the hearth
for weary man and wife, hungry boys and girls.

They burnt the scrub; they dug the land
with calloused blackened hands.
In dark damp earth they planted seeds;
stooped with aching backs.
Nurtured cuttings from the mulberry tree;
vines for grapes; with vision of sweet harvest,
to cheer the heart.

They toiled in hope from dawn 'til dusk
while scanning skies for signs of rain.
They rested as the sun sank low
and sang sweet songs while watching stars,
as wild waves swept upon the shore.
They called it home;
this lonely place beside the sea.

The Shell – Autumn 2018

Nestled amongst ribbons of seaweed, the shell was waiting. Picking up the weather-worn shell, I marvel as it fills my hand with beauty. Holding my treasure carefully, I continue walking upon the shore until I reach the rocky reef where sparkling waves rise and fall amongst polished rocks. Kneeling on a large rock, I hold the shell beneath the waves and wait, until it is washed clean of clinging sand. Now I see the colours of a summer sunset glowing within the white crust of shell and I am captivated by this long discarded home of a mysterious sea creature.

I hear the sounds and see the beauty of the sea, I feel its magic stirring within my heart and being. The clear waters glistening in the sunshine, remind me of aquamarine gemstones. The gemstone assists communication with the Divine source of power, calming fears and strengthening courage in those facing difficult situations and hardship.

As I ponder, waves racing waves are falling and sweeping upon the sand, receding and rising again, leaving trail upon trail of intricate patterns of lacy foam. No other footprints are on the beach but my own. Sea birds are circling overhead, wheeling on the wing, now settling on sand and rocks, resting while warily watching.

Soothing sonance as the rise and fall of waves play mystical music, transporting me back in time to another age. Now I hear them, those brave early settlers, walking, talking, singing, toiling, laughing and weeping in this place while I am quietly listening.

The Christmas Goose 1948

Mum has had her eye on the young goose for some time. The bird is well filled out from free-range grazing, supplemented by stolen grain from the hens. Having persuaded Dad that succulent roast goose will be a special treat for Christmas dinner and a welcome change from chicken, Dad agrees the extra effort involved will be worth it and the plan to catch the goose is simple enough.

Rounding up the flock of geese is proving to be difficult, they are instantly suspicious. Used to roaming free, they are alert and wary of being driven into corners. Keeping them away from the river is another challenge, water is their sanctuary and freedom. The gander is watching us closely while jealously guarding the hens. We start moving in closer to them; Dad and Mum, armed with wire hooks.

‘Watch out – the gander’s coming!’ Graham yells as the big gander comes charging towards us, hissing loudly with lowered head and outspread wings, its manner so ferocious we back off a few paces; poised for a hasty retreat, not wanting to be the victim of his fury! We try coaxing the hens with handfuls of grain, throwing it towards them until the gander’s greed overcomes his protective instincts. He greedily gobbles the grain on the ground. The flock calms down while warily snatching at the grain.

‘Quick Dad, there it is. That’s the one Mum wants...right in front of you.’ I shout.

Stealthily moving in closer with the long wire hook, Dad quickly snares the unsuspecting young bird around its leg. Deafening pandemonium breaks loose as the captured bird protests, frantically flapping its wings and squawking

hysterically while the rest of the startled gaggle scatter. Scrambling in panic, they flee, falling and trampling on each other while desperately pushing through the thicket of tall grass and heading towards the river.

The alarmed and protesting captive's feet are tied together, then the bird is quickly shoved into a wheat sack. Grinning broadly, Dad slings the sack over his shoulder and heads for home with the struggling goose trying in vain to free itself. The sack is cumbersome and Dad stops and complains, so much Mum helps him carry it to the shed yard. After all, it is Mum's idea to have goose for Christmas dinner, it's not Dad's idea at all!

'Catching it was the hardest part,' Mum cheerfully comments. Dad raises his eyebrows. Disappearing behind the shed with the goose and the axe, Dad performs the gruesome task of chopping off its head, then leaves the convulsing headless bird hanging from a high post to bleed. The cats are curious and prowl around the grotesque bundle of feathers and webbed feet. Mum stokes the copper fire, pushing more stumps onto the glowing coals, hot water and plenty of it is going to be needed. An hour later Mum is in the backyard filling a large galvanised wash tub with boiling water.

'Keep out of my way,' she warns us kids. We know that tone of voice and back off a bit while staying close enough to watch. Holding the heavy, headless goose by the feet, she repeatedly plunges it up and down in the hot water, attempting to soften the skin and loosen the feathers, then carries the dripping mass over to a patch of grass: she is ready for the formidable task of plucking. It should be easy after plunging it in the hot water, or so she tells us. Seated on a wooden fruit box, Mum begins, easily plucking the

smaller feathers. The big wing feathers are stuck fast. Fluffy down is sticking to Mum's sweaty arms and face. She is persevering but her patience is failing.

‘Someone, bring me some pliers,’ she yells.

Brian scurries off and comes back with the biggest pliers he can find and hands them to Mum, then moves away to a safe distance. Holding the goose in one hand while tugging and pulling on the large wing feathers with the pliers, she struggles for a while but the feathers are holding tight. Mum is exasperated. It was her idea wasn’t it, not ours.

‘Someone, come here and hold the goose,’ she calls impatiently. Graham hangs onto the bird while Mum grips the pliers with both hands and tugs on a feather. The feather comes out leaving a grotesque blue pin feather on the wing. Progress is being made and the goose is a sorry sight as the pile of feathers slowly increases on the grass at Mum’s feet. Mum is not happy but she is determined. We children hover around, not really wanting to be involved but offer to help her. We don’t want Mum to collapse from exhaustion. Who’d cook Christmas dinner?

Mum takes a break and makes herself a cup of tea. I had no idea that feathers could be so difficult to pull out. Why didn’t they kill a hen or young cockerel? Whose idea was it to kill a silly goose? It was Mum’s idea wasn’t it! Two hens would have been easier and all finished by now.

An hour later mum is still struggling with the last of the feathers. Clumps of sticky bedraggled feathers litter the area. Mum is tired and itchy and she is not even trying to hide her annoyance.

‘Are you going to save the breast feathers to stuff a pillow Mum?’ I ask enthusiastically. She gives me a glare, so

I don't mention it again. Quietly looking at the soft feathers on the grass I think it's a pity to waste them. My great grandmother used goose feathers to fill quilts.

At last the feathers are out; now the stumpy pin feathers have to be pulled out with the pliers. I offer to help and slowly remove them one by one. Now Dad is called in to hold the naked goose while Mum sets a roll of newspaper alight and while Dad turns the goose, the remaining clinging down is singed off in the flames. Dad is looking nervous, it is summer time and we don't want the grass to catch alight, that would mean real trouble. The whole district could be burnt out.

No one volunteers to help with gutting and cleaning the goose. Placing my bare hand inside the body and pulling and tugging on the innards would make me feel sick. We kids scatter, claiming it's time to milk the cows, feed the hens, fill the wood box and collect the morning wood for the kitchen fire. No one can gut and clean as well as Mum and now is not the time for us to learn. I secretly thought Christmas Eve was a time to be singing Christmas carols.

By sundown the goose is wrapped in a calico bag and hanging in the meat safe. Intrigued by the aroma of freshly killed goose, one by one the cats prowl around silently watching. Are they scheming? Wondering how they can get at it during the night?

We eat our evening meal by lamp light. The kitchen is decorated with crepe paper streamers strung beneath the ceiling. The Christmas cake is decorated. Garlands of bracken fern and white flowering tea tree branches hang above and around the back door. It's Christmas Eve and we love the secretive atmosphere of rustling paper as gifts are wrapped.

The Mulberry Tree

Remembering

I sought you after many years
and found you almost hidden from my view
beneath tall gums intruding in your space.

I found you bowed and broken,
quietly sleeping
as though waiting.

They told me, still you give sweet fruit in summer.

Beholding now your tragic plight,
reminding me how large you grew,
always reaching for the sky.

We climbed and gathered of your sweetness
while tiny birds flew near and feasting
on your ripest berries, higher than our reach.

Now reaching out I touch your leafless twigs,
alive, still resting
as I whisper, soon ,tis time for you
to answer springtime's call.

Now taking part of you within my hands
I'll carry it beyond this shore
planting soon this part of you
watching over until it stirs and grows
in perfect likeness of that memory of you.

Winter Awakening

Untouched by the hand or mind of man, the iris shows its beauty in June. While hidden in the depths of the heart of the plant, something has been happening silently and unnoticed. Awakened by autumn's April showers, the bud begins to swell and, with an unseen power, slowly pushes its way through the foliage towards the light of day. A miracle has been taking place.

Today the bud unfolds; the delicate petals are reflecting the blue of winter's skies. My thoughts return to my childhood and my mother's garden, stirring memories of mystical moments in my protected world when all was pure and filled with the wonder of discovery. Early one chilly winter morning, I quietly went into the garden and tiptoed down the path, the cold moss tickling my bare toes. Then I saw it, the first iris flower lifting its fragile blue petals above the leaves. This was my flower; my mother told me it was mine, because it shared my name. A raindrop was resting on a petal and while gently touching the petal I watched the raindrop roll and fall. The magical moment was gone but the memory is mine and remains with me.

Today I am in my own garden; a sunshine shower has bestowed its gift of glistening raindrop jewels upon the petals. The perfection of beauty is before me, encapsulated in this moment of time.

Imagine

Imagine if
you live on an island;
where storm tossed seas
come crashing on the shore.

Imagine if
you own;
majestic rolling hills and river flats
where gnarled and towering sugar gums
and golden wattle bloom.

Imagine if
there flows a river,
that finds its way from back of rolling hills
comes tumbling down a rocky waterfall
and fills your heart and mind with awe;
then flowing on with unconcern
it twists and turns and forms
deep rushy bordered pools,
where wild things stoop and drink.

Imagine if
you own some thousand trees;
where countless birds in chorus sing
and wildlife rest beneath the canopy of leaves.
'Twas to this land my father came, still but a lad.
He knew no fear, he loved it so.
This land was ours you know,
our heritage; to hold and treasure.

Christmas 1993

Leaving the stuffiness of the Underground, Sue and I shuffle with the crowd at Notting Hill Gate station. We emerge into fresh air, crisp and clean, the biting cold wind whips around us. Pulling our scarves closer we make our way down Portobello Road, amazed at the number of vendors.

Their wares spilling out onto the footpath and road catch our eyes: art works, pots and pans, kitchen scales, bric-a-brac, all from another era; once loved, discarded, now waiting for new owners to carry them home and be given pride of place. Together we wander from stall to stall, exclaiming at the beauty of antique clocks, faded framed photographs, old lamps, lanterns, cameras and dinner sets and linen tablecloths.

Fingering a set of bone-handled silver fruit forks, I am captivated and hand over my five pounds. Spotting a pair of oak candlesticks, I run my fingers over the silky surface of time-worn timber; once a mighty oak tree, now a holder of light. I pick them up.

‘Look Sue, would you like these?’

‘Love them,’ she breathes.

‘I’ll buy them for you for Christmas.’

‘Oooh – thanks sooo much.’

Sue is holding a little leather bound photo album in the palm of her hand, her eyes on me. ‘This is beautiful Mum; I’m buying it for you.’ She opens the album and together we look at exquisite miniature photographs.

We move downhill and find a coffee shop and a sheltered corner seat. Warming our hands on mugs of steaming coffee, we munch on hot sugary donuts.

Iris Rowe

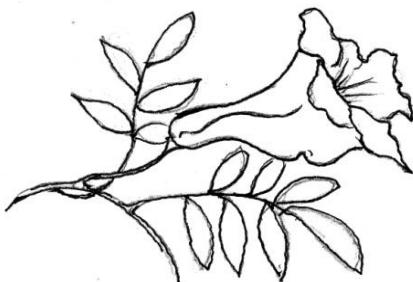
Across the road from us, a man is selling real
Christmas trees, hewn from the forests of Europe.

'I love the atmosphere of Christmas,' I murmur.

Anne McKenzie

Anne McKenzie

Reading and writing are my two passions in life. Food is a close third! I read widely and that reading inspires the writing. I enjoy writing poetry and prose pieces, frequently drawing on my work as a social worker and my personal and family history. I am now extending myself by learning the craft of short story writing.



Going Home

They say you can never go back but here I am in Merredin standing in the dusty unpaved street in front of the house where I once lived. Merredin is a Western Australian wheat belt town roughly halfway between Perth and the gold mining town of Kalgoorlie. I can't believe the house is still here. It's been 40 years and I've driven across the Nullarbor from South Australia to get here. I notice a few changes. A white picket fence has been added across the front. The red corrugated iron roof is either new or has been repainted and the weatherboard has been newly oiled and is a rich chocolate brown. They're not the tannin-leached grey boards I remember. The house's age is showing but then that can be said for all of us, can't it? Essentially though, it's just as I remember. It doesn't disappoint at all

My grandfather bought the house in 1926 for 90 Pounds, money loaned to him by his boss, Miss Alice Cummins. Miss Cummins – she expected to be addressed thus – owned the local brewery where he worked as a factory hand and as her part-time chauffeur. The house was within sight of the brewery, which was further up the street and across the railway line. The ruins of the brewery are still there but you have to know what you are looking for.

The house was to be home for my step-grandfather, his new wife (my grandmother) and her daughter (my mother). In time a son, my Uncle Ross, was to be added to the family. Some thirty years later it would become my home too when my mother returned, bringing my sister and me with her. Our father had left us and we had nowhere else to go.

It was a small cottage comprising just four main rooms – a kitchen, a lounge room (always referred to as the front room) and two bedrooms – but had generous front and back verandahs. The back verandah had been enclosed to make a bathroom and a louvre-windowed sleep-out.

The home was simply furnished – iron-framed beds and wooden dressers and wardrobes in the bedrooms and sleep-out; a sideboard, wireless, piano and two-seater sofa with two matching chairs in the front room; and in the kitchen, a Coolgardie safe, Kelvinator refrigerator, blue kitchenette, and matching blue kitchen table and chairs.

My mother had one of the bedrooms in the house and my grandfather and uncle had the back verandah sleep-out. My sister and I shared the other bedroom with my grandmother. She had a single bed and we shared the grand old four-poster bed with its lumpy feather mattress. When we were finally moved into single beds we missed the snugly warmth of that feather mattress and the way it seemed to remember you and welcome you back to exactly where you had lain the night before.

My grandmother gave the four-poster to an Aboriginal family, the McPhees, who lived not far from us. I can still see that old bed, carried by my grandfather, my uncle and two of the McPhee boys, one man to each corner, staggering across the paddocks to the McPhee's home, a large corrugated iron shed. Old Mrs McPhee is as pleased as punch and runs ahead of the men urging them on. The rest of us, yapping children and dogs, bring up the rear.

The front room was where guests were entertained and family evenings spent listening to the wireless and playing cards or games. I can see us now playing dominoes with my sister about to draw another tile. She has already

drawn the best tile, a double six, an astonishing three times. My grandfather says he will buy her a watch as big as a camp oven lid if she can do it again. She does, to roars of applause.

There was an open fire place in the front room. Here Mallee roots and occasionally coal were burned for winter warmth. We collected the Mallee roots from local farms where they'd been grubbed out in the clearing of the land. I remember my grandfather driving his truck slowly across those dusty paddocks and the rest of us walking behind slinging the Mallee roots onto the tray back. Coal we sometimes found along the nearby railway line where it fell from passing steam trains straining to make the bend in the track, their tenders filled to overflowing in the nearby Merredin station.

The railway line was so close to the house that every train rumbling past shook its foundations. At night the din woke us from our sleep and it felt like the train was running right through the house. During the day we'd run from the house to watch the approaching trains. In the cab of the huge locomotive, the fireman would often look up and give us a cheery wave. Next to him the driver would blow the whistle and clouds of steam would belch out of the engine.

The house's bathroom was basic, boasting a hand basin and a bath tub but no hot running water and no toilet. Hot water for bathing had to be bucketed in from the wood-fired copper in the separate wash house where the laundry was done. The bath water was often shared so you had to be quick about your ablutions so the last in line didn't get stone cold water. When a chip heater was finally installed in the bathroom and we had hot water on tap, we thought we were in heaven.

Our toilet was a dunny on the back boundary fence at the furthermost point from the house – a location chosen to accommodate the nightsoil man and to isolate any unpleasant odours. To get to it you had to go through the chook yard, past the ancient weeping mulberry tree and the wood heaps. This was such an inconvenient, and for the young, frightening journey in the dead of night that either a chamber pot under the bed, or a clandestine wee in the violets at the front of the house, was preferred. Using the dunny you needed to wary of two things – the ubiquitous red back spider, who clearly has no sense of smell – and, in the day time, neighbourhood children, who delighted in lifting the back flap, poking naked bottoms with sticks, and running off giggling. But there were hazards to using chamber pots as well. I remember too well the sudden coming to wakefulness upon stretching my feet to the floor and into the warm liquid contents of a potty not properly shoved back under the bed after use.

Across the front of the house and down one side were raised garden beds planted out with vegetables and almond trees. Fruit trees – peaches and apricots – lined the other side of the house. Out the back grew a fig tree and a grape vine. A garden had to be productive not decorative.

The garden was my grandfather's passion. Wearing khaki shorts and a singlet, his arms and shoulders bronzed by the sun, I can still see him digging over the beds. I can see him chasing cabbage moths away from his sweet new plantings with frenzied swings of an old tennis racquet. As ever, my sister and I are his shadows, pestering him with silly questions.

‘Can I kick your cat up the bum, Grandad?’ I say, eying off the sleeping ginger cat at his side.

‘Yes, love,’ he says.

So I do.

The startled cat hisses, arches its back and strolls off with wounded pride.

‘What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?’ my grandfather yells.

Sitting cross legged on the path, my sister stokes the fire of her cardboard box wood stove and reaches for the miniature frying pan beside her.

‘What would you like for breakfast this morning, dear?’ she addresses our grandfather.

Still bent over his tomato seedlings, he replies gruffly, ‘I’d like some bloody common sense, that’s what I’d like young Miss.’

‘Will you have one egg or two with that dear?’ she enquires again.

Inside the house was my grandmother’s domain and she ran things with enviable structure and order. There was a washing day, an ironing day, a shopping day, and a baking day, and they never varied from week to week.

On shopping day we walked the two kms to town to buy groceries which were later delivered by truck. Milk was delivered to the house to a billy we hung on the front gate and bread similarly to another container left out for that purpose.

Each day began with my grandfather getting up and lighting the wood stove in the kitchen so breakfast could be cooked. He would turn on the wireless in the front room to catch the 6.00 am ABC news and wake us all. Still that rude awakening was softened by the cup of tea he brought us all.

Although my grandfather was a capable cook, my grandmother did most of the cooking. Breakfast, a cooked

meal for ‘the boys’ – my grandfather and uncle – was always on the table by 7.30 am. Lunch was ready for twelve noon or otherwise cribs (packed lunches) prepared instead. Lunch always had to be over by 1.00 pm so my grandmother could listen to her favourite radio serial, ‘Blue Hills’. But if we weren’t finished eating by then we had to shush. Tea was on the table by 5.30 pm. And Saturday lunch was always a roast.

I loved my grandmother’s cooking, especially her desserts. In winter, there’d be pancakes, apple and apricot pies, and rice, tapioca or sago puddings. In summer there’d be fruitcakes or home-made ice cream and jelly. Money was tight and no food was wasted. Stale fruit cake was served with ice cream. Stale bread became bread and butter puddings. Leftover lamb was made into shepherd’s pie. Leftover Yorkshire pudding was warmed and served with lemon juice and sugar as a dessert.

Heated only by the front room wood fire and kitchen wood stove in winter, the house was stinking hot in summer. Being inside then was only marginally better than being outside. There was no air conditioning, no insulation and just the one small electric fan. To escape the heat, chores and activities were done in the early morning and afternoons spent inside lying down reading or dozing. At night all the windows and doors were thrown open to try to charm a breeze. Often mattresses were pulled off beds and into the doorways or onto the front verandah. Sometimes, too, the promise of a storm to break the heat would have us sitting out on the front verandah in the late afternoon staring at the western horizon. We’d watch as bruised and swollen clouds rolled in, bunched together, rumbled their discontent and spat out jagged barbs of lightning.

‘What are you doing love? Casing the joint or something?’

My reverie is interrupted.

A woman has come out of the house and is standing by the front gate, calling to me. I can tell by her manner that she doesn’t for one minute think I’m a would-be burglar.

I wave, smile and cross the road to her.

‘My apologies,’ I say. ‘I used to live here many years ago when I was a girl. I just wanted to see what the place looked liked now, even if it was still here. It was the one place that was home to me.’

‘Another woman came by and said the same thing a year or so back,’ she says. ‘She looked a bit like you, come to think of it.’

‘That was probably my sister,’ I say.

‘So what do you think of the place?’ she asks.

‘It looks loved and cared for. And the almond trees? They can’t be the same ones I remember, surely? No. You replaced them. People used to stop and photograph the house surrounded by all that wonderful blossom.’

‘They still do,’ she says. ‘Would you like to come in, have a cup of tea and have a look around?’

‘That would be lovely,’ I say, although really there is nothing I need to see.

Anne McKenzie

Illusions

Our words can weave a wondrous spell
and even deeds bewitch while lies they tell
to raise a vision so compelling
that stays the eyes in wonder dwelling
and moves the lips enchantment telling.

Words

Words are but picture postcards of
the places where my mind has been,
glossy still-life narratives of
all I've felt and seen,
they touch my meaning
unfeeling,
know my dreaming
unseeing.

Beach Walk

I walk along the shore
where sea and land compete,
at once at peace,
removed from city's toil and heat;
my weariness ebbs away
like the water through
the sand beneath my feet.

Self

Fears and self criticism
jokes and quick witticisms,
one to mask the other
while restlessly I wander
life's identity parade,
hoping to see,
looking for me.

Lost Love

The tears I cry
and the pain I feel
for love of you
will pass in time
as shadow lines
into sunlight.

The love you gave
and the joy I knew
in love with you
where none may steal
memory will seal
secure.

Christmas

‘He’s been. He’s been!’ my six-year-old self squeals excitedly, her waking gaze taking in the red sack bulging with presents hanging off the foot of her bed.

This is my first memory of Christmas – and of unbridled joy.

I’m 69 now and I still love Christmas just as much and as simply.

I love decorating the tree with tinsel and coloured baubles, and festooning it with winking lights. I love writing out Christmas cards and buying and wrapping gifts. I love the Christmas carols played endlessly in shopping centres. I love the Christmas baking. I love the traditional hot roast turkey dinner, even if it’s 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. Seafood and salads just don’t cut it, I say! And I love those after lunch (I knew I shouldn’t have eaten so much) languid afternoons spent laughing and catching up with everyone.

As a child Christmas was all about receiving. As an adult it’s all about giving – giving that specially prepared meal to gathered family and friends and giving carefully chosen gifts to loved ones. I love that Christmas gives us the freedom or license to acknowledge and spoil those closest to us.

Christmas isn’t a Christian festival to me. It’s an opportunity to spend time with loved ones. It’s a time for thankfulness too, and of remembering what you have and the people in your life. Sometimes Christmas can be a time of review, of looking back at the year that has gone, before ‘girding the loins’ to go forward into a new year.

Not everyone shares my love of Christmas. There are always the naysayers, aren’t there, who argue it’s just

rampant commercialisation and consumerism. 'I'm just not into it,' they say and roll their eyes. Well, I just let their negativity float on by me. Sometimes, you've just got to protect your happiness from other people. 'Try one of my fruit mince pies,' I say. 'Brandy sauce with your pudding?' I ask.

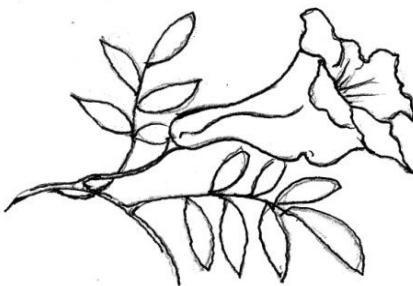
Rossana Mora

I consider myself a blessed child of God, even though I follow no religion. I have lived a full life and I value my family above all. I am a strong-minded woman who loves politics, congruency and discretion. I love my right to a private life.

I come from Mexico and have been in Adelaide long enough to know that this is where I belong now; this is my community, my home. This is where I want my dreams to come true.

As an amateur writer, I greatly cherish the doors that the Burnside Writers Group opened for me to join them last May. It is a space for sharing, helping and most importantly for me, learning.

This is my first public written work in English. I am writing fiction; indeed, perhaps it is memoir covered up as fiction. The reader will be the judge.



Isabel

‘Why do I have to do it mum?’ The teenage girl asked, almost complaining.

‘You have to do it because you are very good at speaking to the crowd and people love seeing young girls like you interested in politics, so hurry up and get ready. We are leaving soon,’ the mother replied not giving space for another question.

That evening Isabel improvised simple speeches about education, freedom of speech and basic human rights; all with a beautiful touch of hope, sharing them with neighbourhoods where the Left party was campaigning.

It was 1988 and Mexico was at a crossroad, standing on perfect soil to produce political change.

When the front-runner presidential candidate came to Isabel’s little town she saw the eagerness in the people who had come from many nearby towns and villages. They waited patiently for hours standing under the sun, talking, chanting and sharing meals prepared on the sidewalk. It was almost like a family gathering; hope had brought them together and people behaved and interacted cordially. That impressed her very much. The image of people tirelessly waiting just to listen to their presidential candidate in such a festive ambience, spoke for itself: Mexicans were ready for a change.

That evening, on Election Day, the news stated, ‘The electoral system failed.’

A few days later the Government declared a winner: the candidate that couldn’t have possibly won.

Mexico suffered many social seizures. Simultaneously all over the country for nearly four months,

big demonstrations of angry people wanted to take up arms. They were very difficult times. Isabel was fifteen years old and couldn't fully participate in decision making or lead demonstrations, but she gave them poetry instead.

She would go to the demonstrations every day after school to declaim, eat and chant. There was a pain in her heart and many times she wondered: Did I read the signs wrongly? What I saw did not reflect the reality. Was the peoples' will betrayed or did others truly win instead of us?

The answers to her questions would come with time.

Roses for Grandma

'Grandma just died,' mother told me over the phone one evening in July.

While driving back to my hometown, I remembered the day I offered to shave my hair off so my grandma and I could look alike. She'd had leukemia for several months and her hair was falling out making her feel insecure. We both laughed at the idea of walking down the street wearing exotic wigs once she was out of the hospital. We never had the chance to do it.

The night she died, the road seemed longer and emptier than ever. I just wanted to get to her house and to talk to her. Lots of memories kept coming back. I could actually hear her telling me her story about being married at the age of thirteen and finding out about her period one year later, finally understanding why she was not getting pregnant as her husband wished.

Before arriving at her place, I stopped to buy the most elegant and beautiful bouquet of pale pink roses for her. I didn't want to get any white flowers that symbolised death. For me, grandma was on a trip to a better place; she was not gone as I would feel her, embrace her memory and have her by my side during tough times. Once beside her, I told her how much I loved her. I told her how deeply hurt I was with her departure from the earth. I kissed her good-bye on the forehead and I left her room.

Her funeral was a massive gathering of people. Family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances waited in a long line to present their condolences to her children. Thousands of white flowers were everywhere. An angel had been called back to Heaven.

Blue Bows

It was in 2000 after a federal election in Mexico when I was told that my almost three-year-old daughter needed heart surgery. I had been working nearly sixteen hours a day and I felt horribly guilty for having to leave her under the care of a nanny while I was directing a nationwide campaign.

In those days, I had moved temporarily to Mexico City and I was a guest at my brother's apartment. I can recall clearly the night my brother arrived from work and asked me, 'How are you?' I burst into tears and became incapable of articulating a word. I ran to my room and locked myself in, to my brother's surprise. Then, I did the only thing I knew would ease my pain – I wrote.

I wrote in my journal while crying until no more tears came. I wrote until my mind was clear and my heart was strong enough to let me get up and face the fear of losing my baby during surgery.

Ten months later, on Mother's day, my daughter and I were sharing a room with some other kids and parents at the hospital. It was then I told her why we were there, 'Some fairies need to work on your heart to make it healthier and more powerful. They're also going to work on other kids' bodies and there is going to be a prize for the best behaved child and that prize happens to be the doll you want.'

All she needed to do was to fall asleep deeply for several hours, fearless of not seeing mum and dad. She was safe and we would see her again in few hours.

After delivering her to the surgeon's hands, we waited quietly in the designated area along with the many family members who came to be with us.

As the hours passed, I knew something had gone wrong, so when we heard our last name called, we approached the counter in fear of bad news. She'd had an aneurysm and we weren't able to see her until the next day.

Entering intensive care was a nightmare, I saw my little baby naked, unconscious, with several tubes coming out of her body draining her blood slowly. She lay there her mouth open, her little body with bruises on her hands, arms and feet.

I saw crystallised tears in the corner of her eyes and I knew she needed me more than ever to reassure her that all was fine. I composed myself and broke the news in her ear: she had won the prize. She was the most well behaved child in the hospital, but she needed to keep sleeping and resting

for more hours in order to collect the prize. I told her that everyone in that room loved her; I told her she was an amazing awesome little girl and the family was there barracking for her.

Once I finished, I looked up and saw my husband's face all red, tears flowing down his cheeks. I threatened him just by looking at him not to talk to her. I knew she could not afford to hear sadness in our voices; she needed to hear happiness and confidence from us. Once outside, in a corner of the big waiting room, we cried and held each other tightly.

That night was an awful, long night. The last thing we wanted to hear was our names being called again from the nurses' counter.

The next day, when we entered the room again, there she was sitting up drinking guava juice with a straw and with her normal big beautiful smile.

'Mum, I won,' she said triumphantly and kept drinking.

She was a winner, indeed. My eyes were full of tears of happiness. Seeing the cute little blue bows holding her recently tied piggy tails allowed me to see the angels wearing nurses' uniforms all over the intensive care room. The fairies, the angels and the magic of love did their work overnight.

My daughter came out of hospital the next day. She was wearing a blue coat with a red beanie with laces. She was holding her prize.

Seventeen years later, those little blue bows are still in the wooden chest where I keep the most valuable family treasures. They were made from blue disposable breathing masks by the caring loving hands of the nurses. They are the proof that angels do live on the earth.

Escape

I had to think fast and move quickly to finish the meeting. It had been more than six hours without either side able to accommodate the other, so nothing was resolved. They were very stubborn: some people are when they first come to the negotiating table, but this was just too much. I could sense the negativity and the threat. I needed to run.

On my way to the toilet, I called the pilots, 'Get the helicopter ready, we'll need to take off immediately. It's not safe here anymore.'

I went back to the negotiations and spoke decisively to emphasise that the meeting was over. I remained standing. They were caught by surprise. I had tried all of my diplomatic skills but made no headway. They thought they were going to make us hostages in order to negotiate at a higher level.

They arranged a car to drive us to the tiny dirt runway on which we had landed earlier that morning. The driver was not aware of the negative outcome of the meeting so he drove as fast as we needed.

We escaped without harm.

Just the week before, these so-called negotiators had blocked roads and torched three cars and caught the Mayor of that little town, and almost killed him

Several people in the mob were armed and very, very angry. They had torn his clothes off, kicked him, urinated on him and put a rope around his neck to hang him publicly. This, they considered a punishment for having ties with drug smugglers and kidnappers.

Two months later, after several meetings in the capital city, we went up to those mountains again,

Rossana Mora

determined to put an end to the violence. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together; we could feel there was some solution.

This time, we were at the military facility in a neighbour town. Soldiers were armed and ready but that did not stop people coming by the hundreds to the gates. They also were armed and ready, and they outnumbered the soldiers by many. Tension was in the air.

The meeting and negotiations lasted nine hours and we finally were able to announce that the Mayor had resigned.

That was the day I started thinking of resigning too.

The Promised Land

I live in wonderland, where the chirping of the birds wakes me up every morning. Where my eyes fill up with the colours of nature that surround me. The fallen leaves of all sizes and shapes show my path graciously when I go out for walks. I am happy and I am safe, living in the Promised Land I never thought existed.

I am in love with life, feeling blessed for knowing the only thing that matters in life are those you love.

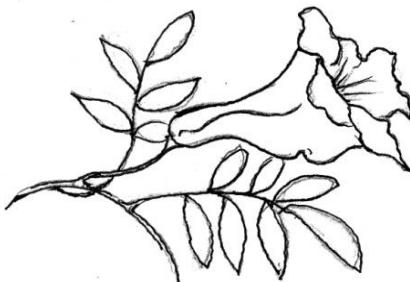
Seeing my partner's face at dawn makes me so happy. At first, I notice his smile, then his eyes, his mouth, his shape. I see his inner fire, burning slowly, quietly, waiting for me to feed the flames, and I do, I do it every time I kiss him because that lights up my inner fire too. Then, we become one, we seal our promises with no words, we share our dreams and hopes with no words, we travel through time without leaving the bed, we go to heaven in slow, tender movements that create the way at every step; all is warm, soft, nice and beautiful. We are two free souls performing happiness in the play of life. Sometimes I cry because the intensity is overwhelming and I need to let that infinite well of love and happiness find its own way out, so not to explode my heart.

I love us, I love him and I love me. Every day the new beginning starts as the birds come chirping to my window; here, in this beautiful Promised Land.

Roger Monk

Roger Monk

I write for fun, and please myself when I work.
It gives me time to do the vacuuming
and bring in the clothes when it rains.



Roger Monk

Dark Glasses in June

Dark glasses in June!

It's hard to believe.

It's almost mid-winter and yet still we cleave
To summer's accessories; oh what a boon,
To dig out once more our
Dark glasses in June.

It's easy to see that

Old Sol hasn't looked

At his almanac or his geography book.
For were he aware, he'd soon change his tune,
And we'd have to take off our
Dark glasses in June.

But quite unaware,

He sails in the sky,

And warms the cold breezes while clouds turn and fly.
What isohel made him from winter immune?
To sparkle and flash on
Dark glasses in June,

So unexpected,

Days warm and dry.

A hiccup that altered a low to a high.
A brief flash of summer, and most opportune!
We do enjoy wearing
Dark glasses in June.

Faces

'I know what faces are,' he said, staring into space, 'but I don't know how to write about them.'

'Oh, go on,' replied his wife, 'there are lots of ways. Let's see; faces are the external indicators of the inner person. Faces are mobile expressers of emotions. They show pleasure and horror, joy and sorrow. They are sculptured skin that reflects the mind.'

She paused for breath, quite pleased with herself.

'You been swallowing the dictionary again?' he asked, pulling a face.

'No,' she replied, 'just letting my mind waffle a bit. Stretching the old elasticity, so to speak – and facing the creative possibilities,' she added with a grin.

'A fat lot of help that is,' he replied. 'I can't waffle, as you put it. I've got to face the fact that I must find a hundred words about them for my writing class tonight, and you just sit there talking about elasticity and creative possibilities.'

'What's the problem?' she asked. 'Just let your mind open up. Let's see, a face is individualistic, ever changing, ugly, pretty, beautiful, ordinary, saved, bearded, regular, vacant, clean-shaven, in-your, irregular, good, full, thin, gaunt, lean, angelic, fat, distorted, serene, rat, crimson, pale, painted, friendly, upturned, down-cast, white, heavy, lifted, interesting, red, lined, open, fish, haunted, smooth, sphinx, enigmatic, pig, radiant, child-like, two, valued, brave, twisted or poker.

'Faces can be most of those things at different times in a person's life,' she added. 'Let's face it, there's plenty to write about. Just face up to it.'

'Thanks a lot,' he said, facetiously.

Roger Monk

What You See Isn't Me

An example of the free, expressionistic verse form technically known as Worse Terse Verse

When you look at me,
It isn't me you see.

What you see is my engine,
That keeps me alive
And carries me around.

I am that truly amazing,
Small lump of thinking meat.
Hidden at the top of the engine,
Between the ears
And behind the eyes.

Sometimes, a little of me
Escapes through those eyes,
Or from the mouth,
Or by unguarded movement
When my back is turned.

But most of the time,
I sit silently working,
Behind the face.
Giving of myself,
What I want to give.

'Hello,' you say,
For you recognise my engine.
And we talk and laugh and look.
But what you see,
Isn't me.

Say Nay to They

‘You can’t use that silly “s/he” thing,’ she said. ‘It’s not a word.’

‘Yes it is,’ he replied. ‘In fact, it’s one and a half words.’

‘One and a half words? How silly is that?’

‘Well, it’s the same as an abbreviation. Like “he’s” instead of “he is.”’

‘It’s nothing of the sort,’ she replied. ‘Not the same at all. You can’t use “s/he” in lieu of “she or he” in a good English sentence. “S/he” is not a word or a proper abbreviation. It’s a silly made-up bit of shorthand that you’ve invented. Use “they” like everyone else, these days. “They” is the new he or she.’

‘Don’t be silly yourself – and stop bullying me! “They” is even worse. It’s not even English. It’s grammatically incorrect. “They is to walk beside the Premier.” or “Could be him or her but they will be arriving soon.” It’s ridiculous!’

‘Well, it’s becoming very popular so go with the flow. And I’m not bullying you. You’ll know when I’m bullying you. Don’t you worry about that?’

‘Go with the popular?! You must be joking! Since when has popular English been correct English? And anyway, popular English is full – chock-a-block – with abbreviations, and mine is an abbreviation. Just because you didn’t think of it first, you think it’s just a silly bit of language junk. You wait a bit; you’ll soon see what the public think of it.’

‘Public thinks of it, numbskull. Public is a collective singular. Just shows what a fat lot you know about

grammar. And what about the beginning of the last paragraph. That first sentence: a question mark and an exclamation mark together at the end of the sentence. Hells bells! What next?

‘And where does it say that you can’t use them together. Eh? Eh? I was exclaiming and questioning at the same time. You’re just being picky because you’ve lost the argument. Go with the flow yourself, you bully?’

And Yet

You couldn’t say that Michael’s mother-in-law was a nasty piece of work. She wasn’t. She didn’t remind him of Lucrezia Borgia either, and she didn’t tear wings off butterflies or put three-corner-jacks in small children’s shoes. And yet...

In fact, she was a rather striking woman and in her day she’d turned many an eye. Michael was pleased because, if it is true that the daughter takes after the mother, then he was quite content to let time take its toll.

And yet... Michael tried to analyse exactly what it was as he drove across town to pick her up that afternoon. What was it about her that made him uneasy? Uncomfortable? He shook his head, unable to pin down the feeling. And what could be more pleasant than what he was doing right now: taking her to visit friends in the country?

She hurried down to the car and smiled at him, reminding him of his wife. He immediately forgot all about his reservations and launched into a long description about his little son’s latest escapade. They chatted and laughed

together, and before long they'd left the city behind and were speeding past open countryside towards the farm.

And there it was. Down a dirt road creased with corrugations that raised a fine, white dust behind them, and into the yard behind the house. He pulled up under one of the gums, and out from the shed tore two large sheepdogs, barking frenziedly. Blue heelers, thought Michael, his heart sinking. They rushed around the car, snarling and slobbering, and then they just stood, tongues panting and eyes glistening, waiting.

Michael's mother-in-law peered out of the window, paused and gave a sigh of exasperation. 'You get out, dear.' she said, 'and if they bite you we won't stay.'

Robert Schmidt

I was born in Myrtle Bank in Adelaide, moving down the road to Highgate when I was five. I was schooled at St Johns Primary then Concordia College. Curiously some of my teachers were relatives. I was not known for being creative or academic.

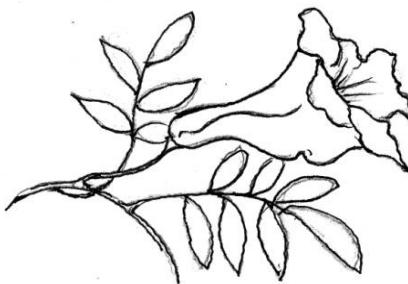
I moved to Glenunga in 1982, where I now reside. I have been married to my wife Jane since 1995.

I worked in the clerical section of Otto & Co. for thirty years.

My brother Peter was a music teacher; my brother David was a talented photographer and my sister, Pauline, is a good artist. I got the writing gene!

I like reading biographies and am enjoying one about Eric Clapton at the moment.

I hope you enjoy my funny stories especially the 'woe is me' ones.



Insomnia

It's eleven in the evening; feeling very sleepy, had a glass of Sauvignon Blanc; nothing on TV. Time for bed.

Nice and comfy. Thinking I'll be asleep before long.

I often wonder if you're aware of the precise moment you doze off. Type of thing keeps you awake all night thinking about it. *Cut this out.*

After a while I look at the clock, midnight. Still *wakey-wakey*.

Then a slight doze. Look at the clock again, 12.45 am. I make a quick trip to the toilet, not sure I need to go. A sip of water from the fridge. Back to bed.

More dozing, another look at the clock, 3.05.

Few hours of more trips to the toilet; more tossing and turning. Even though my mind's blank I'm more awake than ever.

I usually sleep better than this before a half marathon.

Then it's a loud plop, a revving of a car – the paper's on the porch. Going outside, I collect it – some sort of ritual.

I really know I'm having a bad night when I hear planes going overhead, one after the other. I'm fearful of opening my eyes, in case there's a gathering light.

All of a sudden I'm actually having dreams – finally asleep. Then I awake with a start, it's 7.30. No! No! It's time to get up. Heart Foundation Walk day. My eyes are blurry. I drag myself out of bed, condemned to be one of the many walking zombies.

Couldn't Even Get a Coffee

As it's getting close to 30 June, this year it's time to replace my trusty 2G mobile phone, as the network is to be switched off.

My wife Jane and I go to Vodafone Unley. Replacing my phone could be painful, not being technically *au fait*. Looking at a range of phones then choosing an expensive, upmarket model, I ask the salesperson to replace the SIM card. Thinking at this moment, he'll give me a few tips about the contraption.

Looking at his computer, he says, 'Your old phone isn't in your name.'

'Are you sure?' I retort.

'Yes,' he almost yells back at me.

I recall that way back in 2003 I bought my brother's mobile to go on holiday to Victor Harbor.

Now I've had many phones since, thinking they were all personalised; especially the voice mail.

Anyway, I have my ID and putting it in my name should be a piece of cake.

The salesperson says, 'Can you bring your brother here?'

Sadly replying to him, 'He died last April.'

'Sorry,' he says. 'You'll need his power of attorney and death certificate and take it to Marion Vodafone head office.'

I say, 'You're kidding!'

At this point he says, 'I need to serve the next person.'

'You haven't finished serving me!' I'm getting really stroppy.

My friend says, ‘They need all this info in case you’re a terrorist.’

Where’s all my metadata going I wonder?

Giving up, my wife says, ‘Chill out with a coffee.’

I don’t want one but give in.

We go into the bakery next door and I ask for a mug-uccino and long black. The young man replies, ‘Only been here for two weeks, I don’t know how to do a long black.’

The Long Black Adventure Continues

Jane and I stared back at the hapless young man unable to make a long black. We leave the *Unley* Dulwich Bakery and proceed by car to the *Dulwich* Dulwich Bakery.

As we drive, still bemused, I say to Jane, ‘That boy back there, he has to be the work experience lad, surely.’

Arriving at Dulwich, I need to use the toilet in more ways than one. The whole Vodafone experience gave me ... well let’s not go there.

In the men’s cubicle, fortunately for me before I go too far, I realise the toilet paper is completely stuck within the guard protecting it.

Damn.

I rush out telling Jane, ‘I have to use the ladies! Can you stand guard outside?’

Rushing in I’m able to use the ladies to my relief, without incident. Bet this disappoints you.

So much for standing guard. Jane obviously too nervous went straight round into the bakery.

Not knowing where she is I find her in the bakery; she's half way through her pasty and mug-uccino.

To my ecstasy, well not quite, I'm glad at receiving a pasty, and yes, yes, a very strong hot long black from the waitress.

I know the waitress and proceed telling her about the nightmare Unley Vodafone put me through, plus all the hoops ahead of me because of them.

She was very sympathetic, 'You poor dear,' she says several times. I stop short of telling her I was unable to get a cup of coffee at the Unley Dulwich Bakery. After all: I'm not stupid.

I Run: I Dare to Dream

I run the back streets of Glenunga and Glen Osmond, all part of my training for my fourth half marathon on 27May 2018.

In the six years since I began running, another form of training is to run round the block sometimes up to twenty times. I often see people sitting on their front porches. They must become giddy watching me go round and round and round.

My friends say, 'One day – you wait – you'll get a bill from the council for wear and tear of the footpath.'

Runners actually dread Saturday and Sunday mornings, getting out of bed, knowing later, rain or shine, they'll need to go for a run.

The morning of the 27th arrives. I rise from bed surprisingly bright. It's an unusually warm twenty-two

degrees outside. As an elderly runner I don't like the warmth. My wife also often describes me as an: 'Old man running'.

At 7.45 am on the dot, five-hundred or so, half marathoners go under an arch at Pinky Flat. Away we go. It's a picture-perfect course. In one section we run adjacent to a train line. I'm a train buff but am not sure I can enjoy the goods train that rumbles past us.

By ten kms my legs are getting heavy. Hell, I'm not even halfway through. The second half of the race is a war of attrition. Eventually, Adelaide Oval appears and I run round to the north entrance. I can hear the bells of St Peter's tolling. I run round the inside of Adelaide Oval, legs killing me, under the finishing arch. I gleefully grab my medal.

I think this is turning out to be a nice Sunday morning. I dare to dream. One day I'll run a whole marathon.

The Distant Jetty

I was staying at Adelaide Shores Caravan Park West Beach. After a refreshing swim I decide to run from the caravan park, along a path to the Henley Beach jetty. I run as the sun slowly sets in the distance. The sea is very tranquil. There's an inlet, then I cross over a bridge, past a statue of a pelican standing on one leg.

There are a few wispy clouds in the sky and a kaleidoscope of colour engulfs the heavens. It's magnificent.

Anyway, puff, puff. Concentrate. Keep jogging.

Ah, there's the Henley Beach jetty. It's only a few hundred metres away. Run. Run. Hang on; the jetty's not getting any closer. Is this an optical illusion? Quite deflating. Makes you want to stop and walk.

Keep going. Finally the jetty, life size and I reach it. I walk along the jetty, past fisher people and other walkers enjoying the magnificent scenery. Some taking photos of something meant for talking about.

Back along the jetty; then it's jogging time again. The sky's now losing its colour. On the run back to West Beach, looking south and east, one by one the lights appear in the distant city and Adelaide Hills.

To add to an already magnificent scene, a close-to-full moon rises over the silhouetted Adelaide Hills.

Keep jogging. You've got ten minutes to reach the West Beach fish shop.

Making it with a minute to spare I run in to get a well-deserved Butterfish, Chiko Roll and maybe a Dim Sim.

I'm Taking a Breather

I was enjoying a beer at the Feathers Hotel pokies section. The machines are all making the whizz-bang sounds they do; all of them very colourful. Sometimes you hear, 'Machine 19 you have won a hundred points.'

Suddenly, an unattended machine close to me starts making weird groaning noises, and then its screen goes totally blank, curiously except for the lower part with the fine print warning about gambling.

This machine continues like this until two workers come to its aid. They work for a while but to no avail, it continues to moan and groan.

They disappear, then come back and put an 'I'm taking a breather' sign on it.

I was amused at putting such a sign on a malfunctioning, inanimate object. Is this machine really human? Is it having a nervous breakdown? Was it just having a sickie?

Perhaps it has a moral compass and was sick and tired of taking money from hapless gamblers. I know it was protesting.

When I left the Feathers the machine was still malfunctioning away.

Sometime later I went back to the Feathers. The offending machine was nowhere to be seen.

Was the machine in pokie heaven? Free of tormenting any hapless soul that came near it?

Mr Businessman

He wore a suit and tie. He was a powerful businessman. He would go to his office, often after delivering one of his many tirades of advice to me at my desk. Or was it just plain abuse? I think he thought he was God in the corporation. He was God.

Really he was a short balding, slightly stooped man. I think he loved his tirades to show he was God. Was he really hiding his inadequacies?

Robert Schmidt

When he disappeared into his office he was engulfed by wall-to-wall papers. There were files stacked up to the ceiling.

He really was a hoarder; fortunately for him he had a photographic memory. He was like a dad to me so it's no wonder I became a hoarder.

Occasionally the hardware boss, Lou, and I would sneak into his office when he was out, removing pieces of paper from his many files. Then we'd wait and see how long before he realised they were gone.

Often he would take his tie off in his office. Wonder how many he lost in his musky smelly office?

Unfortunately, one day between leaving my car and walking into the office, I was involved in a hold up. Two guys on a large motorbike snatched the weekly payroll from my hands. This was incredibly traumatic; however, I still worked the rest of the day. Later on that fateful day, police interviewed me in the boss's office. Initially the boss was in the interview. However, when he stepped out they looked at me.

'We've never seen an office like this anywhere in Australia. How can he function here? It's incredible?'

For a while it seemed they forgot a robbery had taken place. God bless them. Poor me.

Alas, Mr Businessman lost his photographic memory over time and was forced to retire.

God knows what happened to his files.

Mr Businessman Revisited

I return my thoughts to Mr Businessman. He had many ways to save a few cents. He was the ultimate Mr Scrooge.

He did not believe in liquid paper. You know the sticky white border that surrounds stamps in the little stamp booklets? He would deftly tear it off, and put it over an error. He expected us all to do the same. Too bad if you struggle with dexterity as I do.

When mail arrived through the post, he would have us tear off the used stamps in the corner of the envelope. Then we looked for stamps the GPO missed stamping, making them appear unused. We'd soak them in a saucer filled with water; and presto, a new stamp to use again!

That's all very well, but as he was a long time president of a Church Men's Fellowship I thought this was a bit dishonest, let alone a waste of time and money.

He would also have us tear in half envelopes that had come through the post, gather a pile together, staple them, creating an instant pad. Actually not a bad idea; done it a few times myself. However, before long there were hundreds of pads circulating around the office. You weren't allowed to throw one piece of paper out.

He used a very old steel-nib pen that he would dip into a jar of ink. He had blotting paper everywhere; too bad if ink got on his crumpled suit.

Anyway, Mr Businessman made his millions, and is still counting every cent in heaven today.

Christmas and my old Mini

Christmas lunch when I was young was a gathering of the family around a big table. There was lots of food and an opportunity to catch up with my two brothers. They were flat out with their careers.

Part of Christmas, and the highlight for me, was going down the coast, as in the beaches south of Adelaide, surfboards on top of my old Mini.

One year, I think it was 1972, I struck major problems with my little old Mini. It became impossible to steer but, I kept on persevering with the driving. Nothing was going to interfere with the afternoon and evening with my mates.

We surfed to our hearts content.

As dusk came on, I drove the car, which was shuddering badly, back to Adelaide. My dad could hear the car coming a mile away. He hit the roof, ‘You could have had you and your mates killed.’

Boxing Day was a work day. Dad confiscated the car so it was back to riding to work on my very old bike – we used to call it a “treadly” in those days.

Everyone laughed, seeing me on this old bike. It didn’t even have gears. I parked it at the back of work. It was such a useless piece of machinery, nobody would have stolen it.

It was New Year before the car was returned from the repairers, normality restored.

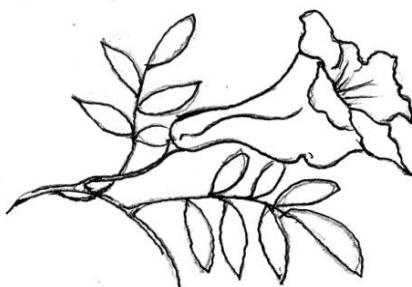
I loved my old Mini. Don’t think dad did.

Lawrie Stanford

I frequently reflect on the human condition and this forms the primary basis of my writing. While this topic can be a serious one, my focus tends to be on the idiosyncrasies, peculiarities and vagaries of us all and the way we interact with the world.

I tend to express my observations through whimsy and humour. The observations I make aren't intended to expand the boundaries of sociology but rather, to simply relax and have a laugh at what we all probably recognise in ourselves. If you read my work you may need to have a laugh at your own expense or the person next to you. Apparently, it's good medicine.

In my working life as an economic analyst and Agri-politician, I wrote extensively on technical matters. While initially a chore, this work gradually stimulated my appetite for putting words together. Now in retirement, I seek to give the creative person trapped within, the chance to write. Please don't hesitate to let me know how I am going.



Lawrie Stanford

Would You Leave Me?

Do you think that you would leave me,
if audibly I swore?
For I know full well that in the past,
it makes some people sore.

And would you stay here by my side,
if I acted like a wally?
There're many times that when I did,
I've been hated for my folly.

And if it's unavoidable,
and I issued forth a burp,
would the first thing that you said
be that I was acting like a twerp?

And if I issued from the other end,
and fouled up all the air,
would you hang around politely,
or give up in despair?

For I know that you are perfect,
and never do no wrong,
it's just that I haven't found you yet,
but it's you for whom I long.

Lawrie Stanford

Would You Like to...?

Would you like to dine with me?
Because I like you, it's quite clear,
can you spend a little time? I plea,
would you like to dine with me?

Would you like to roam around the zoo?
All the animals we could see,
it's you that I am trying to woo,
would you like to roam the zoo?

Would you like to go sight-seeing?
We could go somewhere alone,
it's from the others we'd be fleeing,
would you like to go sight-seeing?

Would you like to dance with me?
We would then be close.
Would you like such intimacy?
Would you like to dance with me?

Would you like to live beside the sea?
Together we could be,
in our very own company,
– if you were to marry me.

Yes Dear

When given friendly advice about something I should do to take care of my health, I frequently look at the adviser, adopt a cheeky grin, and say, 'Yes dear!'

This mimics the familiar scene in old movies where a husband at the breakfast table, with head buried in the morning newspaper, is aware that his wife is talking to him but he really doesn't care to listen. So, at measured intervals, he would say, 'Yes dear' and this would usually keep the peace.

My use of 'Yes dear' is just as expedient. It indicates I have heard, it diffuses the situation through humour, and the adviser understands that the advice is unlikely to be taken. After all, the advice is to stop doing something I enjoy.

Given the foregoing, it was shocking to me that in almost 40 years of marriage, my wife has been doing the same thing to me, and I hadn't realised it.

In my defence, my wife's employment of this tactic is not in the transparent manner I use. Rather, her 'Yes dear' tactic is not transparent because no clues are provided about what it actually means.

I often discuss issues with my wife and a decision is made with a 'Yes' from her. Subsequently however, she ignores the agreement. When confronted with this observation, my wife's response is a blank stare and shrug of the shoulders.

However, I recently achieved clarity on this matter when after a long discussion about yet another instance of a 'Yes' that apparently wasn't, what should have been obvious was finally established.

There are in fact three different levels of 'Yes'. They are:

- Yes, I have listened to what you are suggesting but I may not have understood,
- Yes, I heard it and I understood it, but I may not agree, and finally
- Yes, I heard and understood your suggestion and I agree, lock it in.

I then suggested to my wife that every time she said 'Yes' on an issue of importance, we needed to clarify what level of 'Yes' it was. As such, I would hopefully know better where we stood on the issue and any later disappointment would be avoided.

She said, 'Yes, Okay.'

'Great,' I replied, feeling that we had reached an important decision.

Reflecting on this further, I thought to ask, 'By the way, what level of 'Yes' was that?'

'Well,' she said, 'I heard it and understood what you were saying but I'm not sure I agree.'

'Oh dear, glad I asked.'

Lawrie Stanford

Favourite Child

My wife and I are blessed with two children, a boy, the eldest, and a girl. Both are delightful kids who have made us proud in the way they conduct themselves. And they have caused little trouble along the way. Nonetheless, some of their attitudes have been curious.

I suspect that not unlike most families, we had to deal with each of our children claiming the other was the favourite child. In the teenage years, this emotion was deep-seated and it was difficult to counteract.

For me, it was far too convenient to simply recite that we, as parents, loved them both equally. Rather, my attitude was the rational view that everyone is different, with distinct strengths and weaknesses, and rather than loving the children equally, it was more a matter of loving each with the same intensity, but in different ways.

But how do you deliver a message like this to an insecure, questioning teenager who is ever-sensitive to the slightest hint of criticism or rejection? With difficulty, is the answer. The nature of the response was typically, 'So, you are saying you hate me for my weaknesses! You don't hate the other one for theirs!'

Resigned to the impossibility of rationally dealing with this issue, I decided to deal with it in a male way, by making a joke of it.

On a birthday for our son, I purchased a non-descript trophy from a jeweller's shop and had it engraved with FAVOURITE CHILD and in small print underneath this, Boy Category.

This went down a treat. There was much mirth and laughter and the subsequent banter about who was favourite was changed from high-emotion to good-natured ribbing. It didn't really change the core belief that there was a favourite; it just made the topic more approachable for all of us.

To consolidate the good outcome of this tactic, when our daughter had her next birthday, it was my intention to purchase another trophy for engraving with FAVOURITE CHILD and in small print underneath, Girl Category.

Come that birthday, the look of expectation shone in her eyes; she clearly anticipated a trophy. It was only then that I realised I had forgotten to organise said trophy.

In the aftermath of this huge mistake, I knew I was back to square one, or less.

An Austrian Travelogue

Extract from *Travelling with Gullible*,

<https://travellingwithgullible.wordpress.com>

Introduction to Austria

The moment we crossed the Czech-Austrian border, into Austria, there was a difference. The fields were neater, the crops looked healthy, fences were in order, roads were well maintained and everything was tidy, with weeds kept down and no litter.

Could the Austrians possibly be German? Ja.

Vienna

I like Vienna. Grand buildings, wide streets, modern public transport, clean and tidy, and a pleasant blend of old and modern architecture with impeccable quality.

This, the home of the Hapsburgs, has royal palaces in abundance and palatially-proportioned buildings including opera houses, concert halls, government offices, and the many, many museums. Grandeur is the word that comes to mind.

There's plenty of new building happening also. Most often, the new building is a little out of the city centre, say, a couple of metro stops. Massive public and corporate offices are aesthetically pleasing, modern and tasteful in design, lots of space within and without. The on-looker feels small in the presence of their imposing structure.

It all sums up to a feeling that Austria is wealthy, in control, and well-managed.

It's not absence of humour, it's respect

It is said Germans don't have a sense of humour.

In Vienna, I caught a local late-night TV show. The formula for these shows must be pretty well fixed the world over. The format was identical to all the other late-night shows I've seen – except for one thing.

It went like this. After an apparent priming of the audience to a point of high excitement, the high-profile host bounced in, all smiles and energy, and half-heartedly tried to stop the applause.

He then proceeded to deliver a series of one-liners. Short recitations, commencing seriously but with the developing sense that a punch-line was coming. Then whamo, the punch-line, and a big, beaming look on his face that says 'come on, laugh at me!'

Then came the difference. While some people smiled, maybe even chuckled, the overwhelming audience response was polite-to-enthusiastic clapping of hands.

It seems Austrians don't do humour; they do respect.

Of Austria and Australia

While walking along a pathway in Vienna, I heard someone calling out to me from a nearby car. The passenger in the car asked 'Can you tell us where the canal is?'

At the time, I was wearing a hat I had purchased in Bavaria. Bavaria, in the south of Germany, is adjacent to the north of Austria. The hats are similar in both countries (as in *Sound of Music*). On reflection I realise this gave them the impression I was Austrian.

Having just sorted out on a map where I was, I bravely thought I could possibly assist them and approached the car. The guys apologised for the bother and explained that they were Italian and unfamiliar with Vienna.

I suggested that the canal was in such-and-such a direction, showing them on my map. I was pretty confident but not entirely. When I showed some doubt in my assertion, they said 'Where are you from?' I replied that I was from Australia.

To this, they said, 'Ahh, yessa, you are afroma Austria, butta ya notta afroma Vienna, eh?'

Lawrie Stanford

Diarrhoea

A fellow went to the doctor
to have a check-up on his rear.
He was having awful problems
with persistent diarrhoea.

The doctor said 'There's a medicine
that I hope will give you cheer.'
But the man was back within the week,
still gushing far and near.

'That's confusing,' said the doctor
'but I'll give you a suppository.
Just put it in your back passage.
It'll stem the flow from its repository.'

Well damn it all, it did no good,
you see the fellow's plight,
as there he was, he's back again
and spoiling for a fight!

The doctor said defensively,
'Did you follow my instructions?
Let's see if you did things as directed
before causing any ructions.'

'Well, at home there's no back passage,
so it was on the porch, as it would pass,
but for all the good it did me,
I might have shoved it up me arse!'

Now there's a moral to this story,
so I'll take the time to tell,
if you listen to it carefully
it's sure to serve you well.

When dealing with a patient,
who is obviously slow,
avoid the use of euphemism,
for parts that are found below.

Clarity and Writing

As thoughts around my head they swirl,
they seem so crystal clear,
and if you were to hear them,
I'm sure that you would cheer.

So grand my thoughts develop,
the more on them I dwell,
their complexity shows sheer genius,
worthy of praise, they are so swell!
And I love how my thoughts just tumble down
coalescing just like a jig-saw.
It's marvellous how the story unfolds,
cleverness cuts through like a buzz saw.

But this is why I am aghast,
as I convey my thinking to you,
when I hear myself a-stumbling
over my comprehensive view.

Lawrie Stanford

For I find that in the telling,
it's not, as in my head, so clear,
and as I awkwardly stumble through it,
there is no resounding cheer.

But you know, there is a solution,
I use it to help the cause,
I write my thoughts on paper
to expose and fix the flaws.

Based on my experience,
learned painfully through hard-graft,
thoughts formed in splendid isolation,
just need a simple draft.

So my advice is to be more cautious
before uttering the things you think,
and apply this rule particularly,
after having too much to drink!

Retirement?

What is this thing retirement
in which I am immersed?
Why is it such a mystery
in which I'm not precisely versed?

Now, I know what work is all about,
for starters I had assistants,
and the schedule there was all laid out,
all you needed was persistence.
In retirement though the days go quickly,
it is rare to have much fun,
and I always seem so busy, although
I can't recall just what I've done.

So, what is this thing 'retirement'?
'Prioritise!' I hear you say.
Well, I agree it needs refinement
but there's too much to do today.

Of course I hear you, as you protest,
but my super needs keeping abreast,
and investments to track with cash to divest,
and charitable donations to give to the oppressed,
so my charity, when I get there, St Peter will attest,
and drop into church my sins to confess,
a medical judgement about palpitating chest,
and while I am there, a blood pressure test,
and entertain grandkids with whom we are blest,
and clothes to buy so I am well-dressed,
and whizz-around the market like a man possessed,

for fixing evening meals in time compressed,
and clean up the house in case we have guests,
and then there's the clothes that have to be pressed,
and sort the dog's barking (he's such a pest!),
then exercise to relieve the stress,
while losing weight as is my quest.

Set priorities you say?
Surely you jest?
As you can see,
there's no time to rest.
So what is it I'm too busy to understand
about this thing called 'retirement'?
I must find the time to sort it
before I'm in aged confinement.

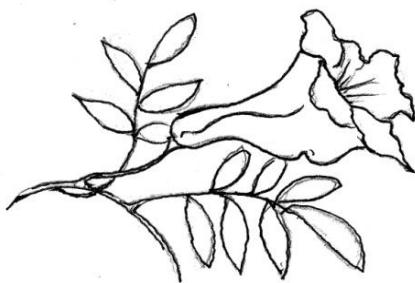
Gweneth Leane

I love writing short stories or flash fiction.

Writing short stories is like painting a cameo with words.

I love writing biographies, recording people stories so people are remembered. It is important to record peoples' lives for posterity. I have written two biographies and ghost written another two.

My favourite authors are Catherine Cookson and Di Morrissey.



The Twins

Standing in the doorway of my office stood my double.

My mouth dropped open, my eyes bulged. What was my double doing in my office and why? I glanced at the memo and read her name, Miss Angela Mole. My twin? My adoptive mother had shown me my birth certificate, I had contacted mother and discovered I was an only child. So, what was going on?

Angela was younger; maybe she was a sibling, after all. We were identical even to a birthmark on her neck. I always wore a scarf or high neckline to hide it but Angela made sure it could be seen. Well, it could be a fake.

The memo said Miss Angela Mole was applying for a modelling job with Pretty Woman Haute Couture Fashion House. I had created The School for Models, to train and groom young women to be models on the world catwalks.

Even though I was top of my modelling profession, world-wide, I had felt in need of a new challenge. I realized, as a model, my career was short and saw the need to train girls to model correctly and decided to set up The School for Models.

The haute couture houses were preparing for the showing of winter designs nationwide. Models were sought and anyone I recommended would be assured of a top position. I was busy grooming my students in readiness for the Winter Shows. Life was crazy, right now.

I stared at Angela Mole. She appeared to have undergone cosmetic surgery to create my double. On a closer inspection I realized it was the clever use of makeup that made her my double. But why imitate me?

Maybe Angela thought being my double she could steal my identity, career and salary. If she could persuade the world she was me she would be made.

‘Can I help you?’ I appeared cool, but my thoughts were surging with consternation.

‘Yes, I want you to make sure I get the Pretty Woman job that is advertised. I must have it because my mother needs life-saving surgery. She’s all I have in the world.’

‘But...’ I stammered.

‘No ‘buts’. You know that if you applied for the job you’d get it. So you apply and I’ll do the job. I can age myself to look like you. If you don’t I will destroy you and your business.’

The reference to aging made me see red, although I knew she had a point. I felt like she was holding a gun to my head, in fact. I checked her out with my gimlet eye to see if she did have a gun. I could see she meant business and lifted the phone to begin negotiations. I had worked hard to establish the School and I didn’t want it destroyed.

My secretary answered, I spoke, ‘Have envelopes left on my desk, please.’ It was a coded message. I hoped Miss Angela Mole, clever as she was, didn’t see through it.

The door opened and my glamorous female bouncer cum secretary, well versed in the martial arts, entered. ‘You rang Ma’am?’

‘Yes.’

There was a knife in Miss Mole’s hand now and a no-nonsense glint in her eye, but my bouncer was equal to the challenge and Miss Angela Mole found herself flat on her face with her hands behind her back and relieved of her knife.

Gweneth Leane

‘What is your story?’ I demanded.

‘What’s it to you?’ Angela was bitter. ‘If my mother dies so will I. I have nothing to live for. You wouldn’t know anything about being alone.’

‘Let’s do a deal,’ I offered. I had been where Angela was before I was adopted. I knew the face of loneliness, I understood what she was saying. I was given a second chance, I wanted to give Angela a second chance.

‘What’s the deal?’

‘I will train you for free, and see that you get the job, but you will resume your identity and name, and in no way impersonate me. Should you seek, in any way, to impersonate me or claim my training centre as yours, you will find yourself in prison, faster than a Jumbo Jet.’

‘I will accept your deal.’

My beautiful bouncer pocketed the gun and released Angela.

I pushed a form in front Angela, ‘Sign this form saying you will never try to impersonate me again, in any way shape or form.’

To my surprise Angela grabbed the sheet and signed.

My double disappeared through the door. Would I see her again? I felt disturbed.

‘You shouldn’t have tried to do a deal, Lisa,’ my gorgeous bouncer said. ‘She’ll return and you and the Modelling School be history.

I picked up the form, there was no signature. Miss Angela Mole won.

A Hard Man

We were stranded somewhere in the middle of Queensland. We had no idea where. Having broken down early in the evening we spent the night sleeping in the car. No homestead light pinpricked the darkness. We were lost, alone and helpless, with a broken alternator and flat battery.

‘He’s a hard man, but he might give you a hand,’ the carpenter from Goondiwindi informed us. He was hired to do renovations to the homestead and was on his way to work when Bruce flagged him down. A rope joined our car to his ute in preparation to tow us many miles to the homestead on a large station property.

‘Well, as long as we can phone up someone and get help,’ my husband Bruce replied hopefully.

The tow was a wild ride. The carpenter drove like a bat out of hell. The road was unfamiliar and at times there was water over the road, due to rain during the previous few days. Regardless that he was towing a vehicle, from the moment of take off until he pulled into the yard of his customer, he never slowed.

The “hard man”, a politician in the Queensland Parliament, greeted us, ‘What’s the problem here?’

‘The alternator is broken, and the battery is flat. Is there a chance to buy a battery off you or get one sent out from Goondiwindi? We’re on our way to Roma to visit our daughter,’ Bruce explained.

‘Just let me get the workmen started, and I’ll see if I can help you. Would you like to come with me as I organise the workers?’ Bruce was taken on a tour of the sheds and property. The property was vast.

Gweneth Leane

The owner's wife came out and invited me inside and offered a cup of tea. 'Would you like to come with me while I take the kids out to catch the bus?' I accepted. To catch the bus was several kms across paddocks to the main road.

Back at the homestead, the owner invited, 'We haven't had breakfast yet, would you like to join us?'

We hadn't had breakfast either, but we said we had food in our car and we would be okay, not wishing to take their hospitality for granted. The owner and his wife overrode our objections and we had a slice of toast and tea.

It was time to get us on the road.

A large battery used for starting earth-moving equipment was brought out. It would have cost a fortune. Would it fit? Yes, with a few adjustments.

'It will get you to Roma,' he said.

'How can I return the battery to you?' Bruce asked, nearly fainting at the casual way this man handed over an expensive battery.

'Are you likely to be going through Goondiwindi?'

'Well, no, we planned to go home another way but we'll come back to Goondiwindi,' Bruce decided.

'Just drop the battery into the Elder's depot, and I'll pick it up sometime,' the owner shrugged as he gave his name and address.

We were unable to sufficiently express our gratitude at the kindness of Mr Fahey and his wife.

So much for a hard man.

Grandmother

‘Grandmother’. The word never crossed my lips. I never knew either of my grandmothers. I regret not experiencing relationships with these two women that could have enriched my life. My story though, is about being a grandmother.

My concept of grandmothers was of women with white hair, dried apple faces worn by time and climate, bodies shrivelled with childbearing. When I became a grandmother in my early forties my concept of a grandmother underwent a change. I was too young to be a grandparent, I thought.

My little granddaughter was beautiful with blond curly hair, blue eyes, a button nose and rosebud mouth. It was not hard to be a grandmother to her.

Early in her life, this young miss decided she did not like peas and became a *Consentino* making the peas magically disappear. The parents of Natalie were proud that they had convinced their daughter to eat her peas. Truth always prevails. When sitting up to the table for dinner, Natalie would call Prince the family’s black Labrador to sit beside her. The truth was, Natalie had been feeding her peas to Prince.

The day came when Natalie graduated with a degree in accountancy. What a moment it was to see my granddaughter walk across the stage in her cap and gown and receive her scroll. I needed to sew the buttons back on my blouse when I arrived home; my pride had burst off the buttons.

The arrival of more grandchildren meant more grandmotherly duties. ‘Mum can you baby sit while we go

Gweneth Leane

shopping?’ became a weekly event. My second daughter had married and was now a mother. The two young mums needed to shed their babies for an hour or two, shop in peace and enjoy some sisterly time together. The spare bedroom took on the look of a nursery with the sleeping babies lined up in their cribs. I enjoyed being a grandmother for a few hours.

With eleven grandchildren, and with more than twelve great grandchildren it inevitably means that I do not get to see them all. Facebook is the answer to my dilemma. The grandchildren are almost all on Facebook and I can be in touch, interacting with them across distances and countries. I can watch the great grandies grow up and create a photo album on CDs as they grow. Some great grandies are already internet literate and Skype me at times.

The tables have turned, Natalie visits me now and jokes that she is number one granddaughter and my favourite and should have certain privileges. She knows I can't be seen to have favourites. She mentors me in the art of smart phones and what is a good deal.

It may not have been possible for me to know my grandmothers, I may have missed out on their wisdom and their friendship but I have made sure that my grandchildren know me and my great grandies have at least heard and seen me on Facebook. I consider that I am very privileged to be able to know my grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Gweneth Leane

The Day It Snowed

A change had come in overnight. It looked cold outside. The sky was heavy with black clouds.

‘This is such unseasonable weather,’ I remarked to John my husband, as I looked through the window. The valley below us was full of fog. ‘It’s Christmas and we’re usually sweltering in 40 degree heat. Instead, we’re shivering.’

‘Of course you’re shivering. You’ve got the air-conditioner turned up full blast,’ John commented, reaching for the remote and shutting off the air-conditioner.

‘Not good weather to have a barbecue for Christmas lunch,’ I remarked to no one in particular. I was about to organise fuel to fire up the barbecue. ‘John, what’s that white stuff falling? It can’t be snow.’ Snow sometimes fell on the hills in summer.

‘Climate change does funny things to the weather,’ John mumbled; his newspaper crackled with irritation.

The white stuff continued to fall; the clouds became blacker and lower. The heat in the room had risen and now felt like it came from the pit of hell. Something was wrong.

‘John,’ I screamed, ‘the white stuff is ash. The Wilson’s house across the road is on fire. They’re going to be burned alive.’ I could see silhouette figures, arms waving, racing around trying to find an escape route. The paper crashed onto the floor as John raced to my side.

‘How did this happen? Why weren’t we warned?’ John raged. ‘It is too late to evacuate. We’ll have to stay and put our fire plan into action. Shut the windows and doors. Seal the house. Pray?’ John ran out to the back veranda, turning on the roof sprinklers. The pump on the swimming

Gweneth Leane

pool spluttered into life and water sprayed over the roof. Smoke engulfed us. We couldn't breathe. The heat was furnace hot. The bush fire licked at our garden, curling the leaves, blackening the trunks and branches. Cinders floated up into the air and carried by the wind, they settled to start another fire.

'We're going to be burned alive, John. What are we going to do?' I whimpered, pleading with John to do something. The roar of the flames drowned out his voice.

'Fill the bath and soak the blankets and put them over us. We just might survive,' John mouthed. I had learnt our fire plan by heart, and understood what John said, though I could barely hear him over the roar of the flames. We climbed under the dripping blankets and waited and waited, feeling as though we would suffocate, wondering if it was our last moments.

Silence pervaded the house, had the fire passed? We peeked from under the blankets. The house was full of smoke. It seemed safe. We coughed and crawled from the blankets, making our way cautiously, outside. Heat struck our faces; around us all was black and desolate.

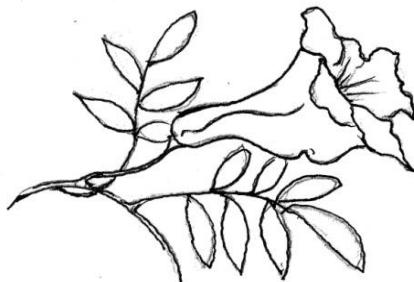
A fire truck roared up the drive. For a brief moment relief relaxed our strained faces. Then we looked over at the Wilson's; the house was a smouldering skeleton. The firemen's faces told us all we needed to know.

A deep weight of sorrow overcame us. Was it luck, a miracle, the vagaries of bush fires, or the bush fire plan that saved us? We didn't know, but we were alive and our house stood. We fell into each other's arms and wept with a mixture of joy and grief.

Edie Eicas

Ever looking for patterns, I found pages of writing about Christmas. Looking to edit what I'd written, I decided against the really maudlin and am serving up, dear reader, the most positive lessons about Christmas.

Christmas is always a hectic time and each of us carries different memories. Reflecting back, there are stories to be told and I hope in the telling, triggers for others.



Dawn Driving

5 am start. The Milky Way lights
reassuring in the black,
it's competition: high beam,
white stripes and red cat's eyes.

The hum of engine tires and wind
sing the song of the long distance traveller.
The Southern Cross marker fades
as dawn announces itself in a band of colour,
the pale blue Sharpie marking the horizon line.

The pink-purple of a sun not yet risen
softens the eastern horizon.
Silhouetted low ridges and the sentinel tree
mark their existence against the elements,
demand their place in the spectrum of morning colour.

The west bleeds into green and blue
as the sun fires up the horizon,
that one last star to farewell the night
refuses to relinquish its place.

The sun, the photographer's apprentice
lights the landscape,
highlights and shadows mark the land,
the pale violet haloed distant hills
begin to reveal their pink contours
as light invades their crags.

The camera's perfect light lights
as the east peels back shadows
that hide in foothills waiting to scour the ridges
line the bends and folds,
define the shapes,
bring drama to the scene.

Ringed by hills, the valley's
sage green stunted salt bushes
paint globes on the highlighted ochre sand,
dot the landscape,
meet muted lime green bushes
and greyed out spindly trees;
their taller cousins grow in bands
along the promised floodway
their abstract beige grey bark a highlight
amongst the blue green leaves.

Painted signs of Country on an ochre background,
circles of plants divided by long lines of rock,
dying tufts of yellowing grass:
splashes of fading colour their job done,
seeded for the next rain.

Christmas Trees

I've had a number of trees over the years from the plastic to the real. One year I harassed the kids' father to buy a real Christmas tree so they could have an authentic experience, and while the fragrance was initially spectacular, leaving the tree up for too long had its own issues. Water goes foul and stinks to high heaven and a dry tree drops all its needles; a bugger to vacuum up. So much for the authentic!

So, back to the plastic.

Another year I kept the kids busy and we made paper chains. The tree looked interesting and now years later the photos look frightening.

In terms of the ornaments, with the addition of the kids' paper contributions from school, I've done multi-coloured but I now have a silver and white theme.

Because it took so long to unpack and decorate the tree, I put it up when I saw the first inkling of Christmas in Coles; I wanted to get value out of the thing.

Last year I was so caught up with visiting a friend in Sydney for New Year and so didn't have time to take the tree down. Then one thing led to another and by June, it was still there.

I figured, why bother taking it down just have two Christmases: one in July and one in December. Then brag about how organized I am.

Christmas Story

My mother was an ambitious woman and when relegated to the suburbs of Adelaide, back in 1951, by a choice my father made independent of her, she never stopped looking for a way to improve her situation.

A few years later, while walking to the shops with one child in the pram and the other dragging along by her side, she saw a shop and house for sale and was inspired to dream. Ever the saver and economizer, she recognized an opportunity, and this time demanded that her rights be recognised.

The house my father had built with found wooden pallets was duly sold, and the shop and house purchased with the addition of the money my mother had accumulated through working in a factory at night sewing garments. With my father's skill as a carpenter, they renovated the shop and my mother began her crusade.

My mother, confident and capable, was like my father, multi-lingual. Knowing they were assigned passage to Australia as displaced people they had, in a matter of a few years, become proficient in English and so began my mother's negotiation for stock. Durrant and Company, G & R Wills and Harris Scarfe were all visited. She both paid for the merchandise and through the force of her personality, and belief in herself, was given the opportunity to prove her worth through the delivery of credit. Thus my mother opened her general store selling everything that a newly arrived family into Australia and her neighbourhood needed.

Not quite two years into the business, the shop was booming. Customers who had not managed to navigate

through the English language of their new country, were accommodated by my mother's linguistic ability and so their patronage quickly built a successful enterprise.

Both the shop and house made of blue stone were of a late 1890s vintage but as the shop was only one room and very small, there was little space for storage. With Christmas 1956 not far away, stock was purchased and stored in the lounge room. To a child of six, the boxes covered by a sheet were a great curiosity.

Alone in the house, temptation got the better of me, and so I began to rummage through that stored in preparation for one of the biggest events on the shopping calendar.

I found Christmas trees and boxes of decorations – their thin coloured glass shapes a visual delight: Father Christmas, birds with feathered tails and baubles in vivid colours with embossed glittering patterns. I was in a frenzy of delight.

At the back and underneath the Christmas offerings was something more and so I pulled out the boxes, spreading them over the floor. Here were the toys my mother would offer for sale to proud parents who relished their successful transition into the new world by spoiling their children.

Boys toys and sweet gifts for little girls; everything was opened. There in the corner, sat the biggest box of all not quite as big as me, but spectacular. A window of clear plastic showed the prize, a doll. She was beautiful.

Innocent desire or greed who can tell?

She had on a pink full-skirted dress with a small white polka-dot pattern stamped onto the fabric with white lace trim on the puff sleeves and around the sweetheart

neck. I could just see her shoes through the window: white plastic Mary Jane's with little white socks to protect her feet. I wanted to touch and hold her.

There through the plastic window she looked at me her blue eyes much brighter than mine. She was gorgeous. Her long blonde hair a cascade of curls held back from her face by a pretty pink and white ribbon.

Her arms outstretched she called to me and I wanted to hold her in my arms as she wanted to be held. I wanted to stroke the pink rounded cheeks and touch the open rosebud mouth, to feel her tiny teeth.

But, the box was sealed, the top held down by long wide pieces of sticky tape that would not budge. Frustrated, I circled the container looking for a way to get to the doll. Pushing at the plastic window it buckled a little and so excited me. I pushed harder and a corner gave away from the cardboard. Now nothing held me back as a pulled at the plastic.

In my excitement the front cardboard frame gave way, ripped, and so stopped me in my tracks but now that I could get my hand in and touch the doll, there was no going back. I ripped the front off and pulled at the doll.

I couldn't get her out. There, threaded through the back of the box, were ties that held her in place and so another frustration. The box had to go and I attacked it with gusto.

The front of the container now shredded, the doll stood before me as I examined the ties that denied me my prize. Not to be daunted I searched for my mother's scissors in her sewing basket and got to work.

As I laid the doll down on the floor she cried "Mumma" and I stopped, frightened at being caught.

Looking over my shoulder and holding my breath I waited. Nothing.

Back to the doll; I finally got her loose.

Holding her up straight, her black eyelashes flashed her blue eyes at me and I was enamoured as I examined every part of her. She looked beautiful. Dressed for a special occasion her petticoat made the dress stand out and the bow at the back tumbled in curves echoing her blonde curls. When I turned her upside down it was then that she cried "Mumma".

She was dressed like me and sounded like me and I wanted to see what made the cry, so I undid the press-studs at the back of her dress and took her clothes off and found a pierced circle on her tummy where, if I turned her upside down and back I could hear her call.

My house was one filled with secrets and my parents never spoke to me about why the things put away held value so it was curiosity that led me to explore the hidden that appeared so important.

When my mother found me, I knew I was in big trouble when she cried at the mess I'd made.

It's only now I understand that the ripped boxes and torn paper strewn around the room was devastating. How that doll represented her hard work; hours of standing in the shop serving customers, then home to cook dinner and look after her family. Her life meant bed late, and an early rise.

With experience, I understand how tired she must have been and how that doll represented her life and for someone who had suffered the cruelties of war, the loss of the doll had triggered too much emotion.

I still have the doll. It sits as a reminder. While I played with it when I first discovered it, I could never enjoy it after I watched my mother's devastation.

Christmas Fare

Everyone will tell you I'm not the best cook, in fact when it comes to invitations to dinner and my asking: what can I bring? – Invariably the answer is chocolate. I have a history of resentment where it comes to the kitchen that I think plays out unconsciously in the recipes I put together and all who know me have been subject to a disaster on the plate.

A new school and instead of the art class that I ached for, I was put into domestic science. My anger was barely containable. I was my mother's slave at home relegated to chopping, cleaning and washing up. I had no comprehension as to why the division of labour between my brother and myself was so unfair and so the resentment. Here again, in that class, I was curtailed by the domestic.

As I matured, I forgot my resentment and lack of sensitivity to ingredients and recipes, and when Christmas came around, would decide to make Christmas presents rather than buy them. I wasn't going to play into the commercial aspect, I was doing handmade.

It seemed that every Christmas I forgot the last year's disaster and ploughed on. A few years previously, I'd made chocolate truffles that unfortunately melted in the heat of an Australian Christmas, and so this time I wanted something substantial. Flitting through the collection of cookbooks I'd hoarded, I found a nougat recipe.

As my mouth watered at the sight of the well-presented photograph highlighted with a slight spray of oil to give the pieces an enticing gloss, I knew I'd found the gift.

Excited, I shopped for ingredients: rice paper, eggs, sugar, glucose, pistachios and cranberries; not a long list. This was going to be a piece of cake. A quick reread of the recipe and I was off to the kitchen buoyed by enthusiasm.

Preparation is the key, and so the biggest baking tray was at the ready, as I knew there were to be a large number of recipients of my homemade gift. My joy at what I perceived as a 'done deal' made me expansive and generous.

The heated sugar mixture needed to be poured into the beaten egg whites. Unfortunately, I'd missed a vital part of the recipe: the instruction about the temperature of the sugar syrup and its importance in relation to setting. But, I did remember that you didn't put the nougat in the fridge to set.

The hot sugar cooked the egg whites and the mixer's high pitched sound as it fought the stiffening consistency was a bit frightening and so in panic, I added the nuts and cranberries to find the beater unable to plough through the mix. Terrified the nougat would set in the bowl, I shovelled it onto the prepared rice paper and tried to level the blob. Putting on the rice paper top coat, I pushed the mixture into the corners of the tray. Relieved I'd managed to deliver what looked like shop bought nougat, I placed the tray on a wooden cutting board and into the dining room. And waited.

Things needed to be done in preparation for Christmas and so, on a mission, I cleaned and organised. But, every time I passed the dining room, I had to check. I

poked and prodded that white slab waiting for it to set. Day one: nothing but a soft set. The recipe did say it would harden at room temperature. Perhaps I was just too impatient.

Day two: nothing had changed and now I was anxious I wouldn't be able to cut the slab into bite size pieces to give my friends and family the delight of freshly made exceptional nougat. The label exceptional came from experience having eaten the remains that clung to the inside of the mixing bowl so I knew it was delicious.

The old anxieties were coming back. I'd screwed up again. But I had a cunning plan, one I'd used in similar disasters. The Salvation Army Hostel in the city seemed never to say 'no' to my culinary mistakes.

'Hi. I have some nougat and I was wondering if you'd be interested? There's a lot of sugar in it and I'm a little concerned there could be an effect on your residents.'

'We'd love the nougat and if there's a problem I'm sure the staff will eat it,' the voice reassured me.

The nougat soft and pliable now out of the pan, but on the wooden board, was driven at speed into town and delivered to the hostel. The routine was a known. Buzz the intercom and someone would open the gates and let me in.

As I parked the car, a staff member arrived at my driver's window; a happy and talkative soul who was genuinely surprised at the size of the slab that I handed her through my window. I was so relieved I'd dispatched another of my mistakes.

Standing talking to me with the nougat over her arm, I was happy to talk until I looked down and saw the rectangle slowly begin to bend and droop over her arm. A panic button was pushed. I needed to get away before

disaster struck and all that was left was an ooze. My imagination was in overdrive.

Driving home, I determined that the recipe was not to outdo me, especially since the taste of the nougat was head and shoulders above anything store bought. Back to the supermarket and this time, a thermometer was the addition. The temperature of the syrup was what set the nougat and that was where I'd gone wrong.

Back in the kitchen all confident, I started again but as the syrup hit 140 degrees anxiety struck and I let the temperature rise a little over, just to be sure. The process a known, I mixed the ingredients and waited. Although the prodding didn't stop, the result was different. Now a solid mass confronted me. I would have the gift I'd aspired to.

Next day cellophane bags and ribbons at the ready, I came at the nougat with the biggest kitchen knife I had, but couldn't cut through. Overnight the set was rock hard.

Oh no! Not again! This time I had no recourse to the Salvation Army and I was determined that this slab was going to be divided and presented as a gift.

Knife and hammer were the implements needed and I hacked at that white rock breaking off pieces and stuffing them into bags. Determination can make shortish work of any disaster. I wasn't going to let it beat me.

Finally, bags of sweet treats be-ribboned and labelled were dispatched to friends and family. But, every time I handed over a bag of my delicious homemade, preservative free nougat with pistachios and cranberries, I did ask if they had their own teeth and did they have health insurance?

Perplexed, is what I remember of their faces that Christmas.

Christmas Rituals

Christmas trees escaping from the penitentiary plantation
hitch hiking home to spend Christmas
with my family.

Frolicking roast lamb with tails. Suckling baby ham.
Cheeping meringue.

Christmas cards and imitation snow,
shops filled with temptation the list growing longer.
Commercial celebrations weigh down the credit card.

Frantic boxes of gifts; last minute entries.
Wrapping paper strewn through rooms
ignoring the death of another tree.

Trussed Christmas turkey
gobbling, gobbled, gone
Another hot introduction.

Prawns on the barbie, shorts and thongs,
kids and cricket, hot hazy day; slip, slop, slap.

Minced pies mouth watering delights,
fruit, sugar and calories;
weighing up a gourmand's delight.

Christmas pudding the ritual wrapped in muslin
drunken fruit and custard;
waiting for the coin.

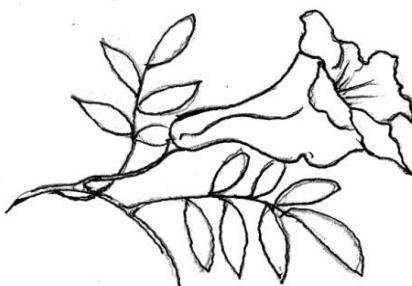
Sloshed on Christmas, undo the pants.
What's that? that's left!
Enough? No, no just another bite.

Maarten van de Loo

Having written, Reluctantly, my own war memoir, I read the occasional fiction story but that never matches my interest in memoirs and biographies.

After bilateral implantation of the Cochlear bionic ear was performed on me, I found Graeme Clark's biography one of the most interesting ever written. Why? He was the inventor of this device. Although cynics, top scientists and specialists the world over tried to convince him it could not be done, he persevered and succeeded. He restored the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, young and old; particularly the very young .The power of conviction that it could be done was the force that drove him to one of the greatest achievements of all time.

As a member of the Burnside Writers' Group I write my stories, 40 electrodes inside my skull, nicely inserted to align with the audio nerve on either side, making participation in meetings possible to a certain extent. Lip reading remains essential in a confined indoor space.



Jav

Hi there, my name is Jav. I have just landed from Mars by inter-global spaceship; the last bit by parachute for a soft landing.

I have come to see what you earthlings are up to and so far I have not been impressed by your intra-global tweets.

You have on this blot of the universe a pool of water, called the Pacific Ocean, and on either side a land mass with a loud-mouthed earthling on each. And they love throwing insults at each other.

‘Go jump,’ says the bloke in the East. ‘That global warming is a load of codswallop.’

‘Ha!’ says the bloke in the West. ‘We tricked you and you believed it.’

But around me you earthlings have to wear face masks to overcome air pollution.

‘So there, you can have it. But what are YOU doing about it?’ asks the earthling in the East.

‘Oh, sorry pal, we have just built more coal-fired power stations and jacked up our steel mills for more air pollution.’

‘Okay let’s have a trade war for a change and have a tit-for-tat,’ said the man in the East.

You earthlings are in fierce debate in Western Europe. You party, wine and dine to come up with the Paris Agreement. You then pride yourselves for having saved the globe. Never mind the billions of dollars you throw into the atmosphere through emissions. As long as the sun shines and the wind blows you think you are okay and it is only future generations who will pay the bill.

‘Oi, oi,’ says the chief-earthling of Down-Under. ‘We want to join you. We produce less than 1% of the world’s CO2 but will partake in your parties and have a good time too.’ And the earthlings Down-Under, stand in awe and admiration at such leadership.

But to be fair dinkum they must match their convictions with their actions and since cars and aeroplanes are some of the greatest polluters they must be avoided, they insist. Never mind that earthlings build more jet dream-liners than they can find pilots to fly them but need the planes when they go on their overseas holidays.

Never mind that they have three or more cars in the garage, they cycle to work and generate only their own CO2. It all makes sense doesn’t it?

I am on a steep learning curve. Earthlings must use too much lead in tooth paste.

On the equator and in the tropical countries you earthlings are burning your forests and generating megatonnes of CO2. And all that to generate other problems through the ensuing agricultural enterprises such as oil palm plantations, and the loss of habitat.

Hey, haven’t you got it? You need more CO2, not less, for agricultural production to feed an ever-growing world population.

Why am I being chased by earthlings? They look like they want my head on a plate. Do they think my statements are not politically correct?

What to do? The earthlings seem to be very politically correct themselves so why don’t I catch the next inter-global space ship back to Mars?

I've just got an inter-global tweet from my fellow Martian, Hal Vas. He was visiting the Land of the Long Cloud on this globe. What's he got to say for himself?

'The earthlings of the Land of the Long Cloud have got it. They realise CO2 is not a warming gas at all. It's methane that's causing all the problems. And they have the perfect answer: hang a bag at the rear end of the methane producers – they call them cows – to catch the stuff that comes out of them. Problem fixed.'

Hey aren't they clever. I'll think and meditate about this on the way home.

With a bit of luck I will be home for dinner

Friends Meeting

Two very-aged friends met unexpectedly.

'G'day old chap, long time no see, how *are* you?'

'Better than the alternative, my friend'.

'What do you mean, who is 'alternative'?'

'He is dead'.

'Why, how come, what has he done?'

'Oh well, he jumped off the Sydney Harbour Bridge and sank.'

'Why did he do such a thing?'

'You have to ask him.'

'But he is dead.'

'As I told you.'

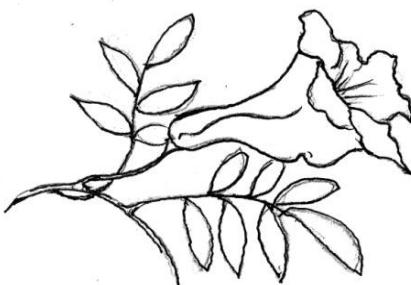
Gail Orr

I have continued to enjoy writing short cameo stories of times with my family and loved ones.

I often feel elated by a beautiful sunset or exquisite part of nature so I try to paint a picture in words. Other times I might be filled with grief or sadness and then I write.

Life is complex, and sustaining joy and appreciation is difficult at times. Like an archaeologist, I attempt to dig, dig deep into life and excavate an essence of hope and encouragement.

Through the process of writing, I often move to a different plane and emerge lighter and more grateful for my life.



Unpredictable

A story for Jack Colin

The day was going to be a busy one; Friday's usually were, and today proved no exception.

I left my home early and arrived at Cameron and Michelle's place with plenty of time for them to leave for work. Jack, my fifteen months old grandson, and I would spend the day together. After Cameron and Michelle left I began to pack my car with the necessities for the day. I looked at Jack and the various items we would need and made a start, thinking to return to put Jack in his car seat last.

Arms full I headed through to the front door. As quick as lightening, flashes of red and blue caught my eye as a small figure ran forward and with a firm push, shut the front door. Now I was outside and my charge for the day, one toddler, was inside, along with my handbag containing, of course, all keys and one brick-size mobile.

Great! Jack was locked in and I was locked out. Of course at fifteen months he didn't understand the dilemma nor did he look at all perturbed.

The family had just moved to this house and there were no spare keys outside, yet. So what were the options? I spoke to Jack through an open window and asked if he could drag a chair to the door and open it – no such luck.

I had to ring Cameron. I went next door to the neighbours' who were still in their dressing gowns. Remember, this is eight o'clock in the morning. They were happy to assist and showed me to the phone. I talked to Cameron about breaking a window or tearing the sash wire screen but these options were expensive.

Jack wasn't distressed so we decided to call a locksmith. Well, a locksmith at eight on a Friday morning was not guaranteed to arrive immediately. I kept Jack company talking to him through the window making suggestions about building with his Lego, pushing his train around the tracks and singing Nursery songs, desperate that time should fly, without Jack becoming distressed.

Forty minutes later, the only distressed one was Grandma. But relief had arrived and for approximately \$85 we released one baby boy who didn't really know he needed releasing.

Thank goodness all was well. Now we could get on with our day and for Grandma, an extra adrenaline rush to kick it along!

The Owl

Oh! Wise One
look out
the day races
quickly to meet the light.

Let's not whittle away
the delights set out
for each of us.

Hasten then, Wise One
to seek your own counsel,
for you know your life's
greatest joys and pleasures.

Here's the Code!

Tapering, pacing, loading, running per kilometre, nutrition, hydration, program, support, weight of shoes, distance, goals, training, the wall, the coach, official time, P.B. and tips.

Yep! You guessed it. I had a marathon runner – my daughter – in the house last week. The gear arrives as well as the guest. The food arrives and fills the fridge: the right protein, fresh veg and of course, eggs.

‘Please, please, lots of eggs. I eat my body weight in eggs,’ says my daughter.

She’s slight but strong and not running until the day of the marathon. But, that doesn’t mean lack of exercise – oh no! There is swimming, stretching and hot yoga to fit in. Arriving a day earlier than planned is to be expected, but by whom?

Race day arrives. By 6:15 am the runner has left the house. At least I can have a few hours before positioning myself at the finishing line.

My husband drops me in the city and I head for the Adelaide Oval. There’s no doubt that a Marathon is being run here in Adelaide today. I follow the music and the loud-speaker blaring announcements. I have to go into the stadium, to more auditory intensity, to view the finishing line. I venture in. I wait. It’s at least half an hour before she’s due to cross the line.

I text my grandson Jack who’s on a bus, on his way to the oval:

I'm in aisle 124 looking at the finishing runners. On entry head for the Drinkutonic stand, I'm in front of that, OK.

Second text:

Moving across a bit as runners are coming up aisle 122, once they are finished.

Third Text:

Moved again, aisle 123. I see Uncle Brett. I'm right at the front now, in that aisle.

His reply:

On bus still ...will find you.

Oh! It's so important that he's here; his mum will want to see him more than just me. Time's moving on...but don't panic.

My grandson arrives looking as stressed as I feel but finally we're in place to see her run over the finish line.

She ran 42kms in 4 hours 24 minutes. Wow!

And, what an effort by the 'runners' relatives'. We were there for the finish!

A Poem of Hope

If a tree stirred on an Autumn day
and through its tears
saw its golden leaves
tossed in the wind
could it? would it?
lift its branches
and with courage remember,
in spring new leaves
grow again.

Gail Orr

On the Plane

Suspended in time,
we walk on clouds
and climb rainbows.

Suspended in time,
fragilities fade
and we drift
in the moment,
making our peace.

Suspended in time,
we are taken
into the brightness,
filled with lightness,
and sunshine.

Seasons' Cycle

Winter

Cold winter winds
whip my window while,
inside my hearth – a fire flames
and fills my heart with hope
for spring.

Spring

Blossoms like confetti
blow about on the breeze,
softer days hold promise
of fragrance and fruit,
poignantly poised
spring is held within the season's cycle.

Summer

Through sun-drenched days
hot and humid,
we search for venues of relief:
on verandahs,
under canopies of variegated fern
friends share long
and languishing evenings,
sipping cold, cool liquids,
laughing through the season's cycle.

Autumn

Golden days of autumn
play content
as amongst the abundant colour
we stride, hand in hand
to the edge of hazy hills, where
we take in the days' crispness and
the season's cycle –
closes its eyes.

East – West

Look east, the mystery begins
as elusive shadows illuminate,
removing the void.
The sky is fused with softness,
hues of pink draw breath,
effortlessly the light births a new day.

Look west for resistance
as the diffusing light
moves to a close,
but, not before it spreads its wildness
across the panoramic sky;
majestic in its protest.

Hold in the Mind's Eye

Hold in the mind's eye –
the eagle,
soaring and swooping the skies
as he circles and embraces
his destiny.

Hold in the mind's eye –
the owl,
as by stealth his counsel
is held
in the eerie shadows of night.

Hold in the mind's eye –
the sparrow,
delicate and dainty
as she forages for seed
in the depths of winter.

Hold in the mind's eye –
the most preciously given,
our own inner heart-beat
and listen;
for the mystery
is in the stepping out
of our days.

Christmas

I move my legs periodically through the night.

About 5 a.m. I feel a heaviness of parcels and I hear wrapping paper crackle. It's almost light but I'm held by my mother's strict instructions not to move before dawn.

I loved Christmas as a child. So much excitement! My five younger siblings with their eagerness carried the magic.

We all woke like sparrows in a nest one after another. It was tradition to carry our Christmas stockings encased in a pillowslip from the bed into the lounge for the ritual opening of presents but who could resist a peek.

There were always small useful things from Father Christmas. Like new pyjamas, a hairbrush and clips, or a new beach towel and thongs for our summer caravan holidays in January. With much laughter, we finished exploring our stockings and, surrounded by discarded wrapping paper our parents were poised to give what was often referred to as their special gift. These were chosen carefully from the myriad of requests that seemed to come to their attention in the last months, weeks and days before Christmas.

I remember my mother's ingenuity at remaking and recycling certain things. One year to my surprise, a discarded teddy bear of mine was recovered in black bunny wool, an old knit of my mother's. It was of course new to my baby brother who was delighted at the face of a black monkey grinning back at him.

There were many memorable gifts especially the cuckoo clock. This delightful gift was given to me as a twelve year old. To this day I will stand waiting for that little

Gail Orr

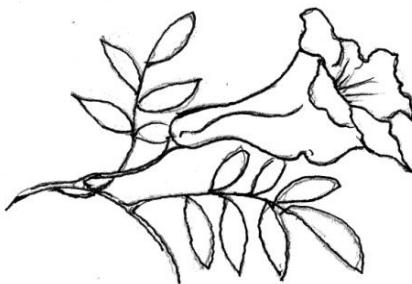
bird to come out of its house to chirp in the next quarter hour, half hour or hour.

Now shared, here are some happy memories of my childhood and Christmas, what about yours?

Christine Christopoulos

I have a million story ideas floating around in my head. Some have made it to scraps of paper on my desk, to note books, to computer files and now, thanks to the Burnside Writers' Group, into print.

My writing is not influenced by any one writer. I read prolifically over many genres (these days not fantasy or sci-fi or similar, though did in days long ago) and by osmosis would have been influenced by many writers. Helen Garner is a particular favourite. Steinbeck and F Scott Fitzgerald are other favourites. Going to Adelaide Writers' Week is always an opportunity to buy books and ensure that I read contemporary works too.



The Dolls

Dust swirled around the feet of the woman and the little girl. The storm had sprung up suddenly. Too far from home they had to press on to the big house. Soon the dust would be in their eyes and mouth.

Margaret, the little girl's mother, tried not to think about the clothes she had left on the line.

'C'mon.' Margaret dragged at Jane's hand.

'I don't want to go.'

'Course you do. It will be fun. Someone new to play with.'

That was not enough incentive for Jane. She pulled back again. Another tug from her mother and Jane had to run to keep up with her while, with her free hand, she clutched her doll to her chest.

Only a few days earlier the doll had been sitting under the pine sapling that masqueraded as a Christmas tree. Jane knew Santa hadn't delivered the doll. The floral doll's dress matched Margaret's apron and the calico body Jane was sure had been made from scraps of her old petticoat. And, the doll's woolly hair matched the skein of wool Margaret kept in her sewing box. Margaret had laughed at how clever Santa was. Jane wasn't fooled; especially when she looked at the stitches used to create the doll's eyes and lips. Her mother was an artist with a needle and thread. No matter, Jane loved the soft-bodied doll that settled comfortably in her arms.

They arrived at the gate of the house and climbed the few steps to the main door. A young housemaid opened the door. Jane's face flushed as she stumbled over the doorstep.

In the cool gloom of the foyer, lined up like a guard of honour stood two women and a girl about Jane's age. Jane clutched Margaret's hand more tightly. Her mother shook the hand which only made Jane strengthen her grip as her mother led her further into the foyer.

'Hello Jane.' The younger of the two women smiled as she bent down. 'I know your daddy. He drives my car.'

Jane pressed against Margaret's leg and buried herself in the folds of her dress.

'He said that you would like to come and play with Mary.'

'This is Mary, and this is Mary's mother Mrs Baker.' Jane briefly lifted her head to look at Mary who also was pressed against her mother's leg.

'I see you have a doll,' said Mrs. Baker. 'She's pretty.' Looking down at her daughter she said, 'Mary, why don't you show your dolly to Jane? She came all the way from Germany.'

Mary brought her arms from behind her back and thrust the doll in Jane's direction. The rigid doll had cupid bow bright red lips and pink cheeks. Under finely painted eyebrows, its eyes blinked as Mary rocked it back and forth, and from within the depths of the doll came a sound of a baby crying. The doll was dressed in a crisp white dress of satin and lace, tied at the waist with a pink ribbon. A soft white bonnet trimmed with lace and pink ribbons capped the head of the neatly plaited blonde hair.

Jane's eyes lingered over the doll's white socks and black leather shoes before returning to look at Mary.

Mary smirked.

Looking up and pulling at her mother, Jane's eyes pleaded as she whimpered, 'I want to go home.'

Duchess

You gave this photograph to me for my birthday the first we celebrated together; 1935, eight years ago.

Your soft brown hair is neatly curled around your ears. Eyes sparkle and your mouth smiles just at me. I miss that smile. There is a hint of your exquisite long neck lifting from the lace ruffles of your white blouse. How I loved to kiss that neck.

I will never forget the day I was walking through the brewery, past the fermentation tanks, towards the office to start work for the day. Someone said your name. I stopped and pressed myself against a tank and hid in its shadow. Another voice scoffed, 'You mean The Duchess don't you? Mrs High and Mighty'. They laughed then moved away. I stood silent, shocked, wanting to admonish them, to cry out, 'She's not like that. She's not!' But I stayed silent.

Maybe they, or more likely their wives, resented that you dressed impeccably. Even in the heat and dust of the wheat belt you would wear a perfectly ironed soft pretty blouse (the one I loved best had the little pink flowers all over it) and a smart skirt. And stockings. And shoes with a little heel – so that you would not be taller than me. A 'high and mighty' duchess would not have been as thoughtful.

But, you did look like a Duchess at the town balls – and I was so proud of you. Do you remember those balls? There were so many. The last one, the Brewery Ball, I remember well and is more precious now.

You looked elegant in that black dress. You said it had come from Paris. I am no good with details so the name of the material eludes me. The dress softly folded alluringly across your breast and the hem skimmed the

Christine Christopoulos

floor. It still hangs in the wardrobe. Sometimes I hold it, smell it and take in the fragrance of you.

That night I fastened around your neck a long strand of pearls; my birthday gift to you that year. We had such fun drinking champagne and dancing at the Ball – even if we were in the arms of others. We could laugh and smile and bear their touch because we knew that later, in the deep of night, we would wrap ourselves around each other and become one.

You didn't speak to the workers very often. There was no need. Your domain was the house, and theirs the Brewery. Remember the Brewery Picnics? You were always smiling at the workers and their families, stopping to chat with some of the women, and playing with their children. You went in the three legged race with a worker's little girl one year. Did you win? I don't remember. They were not the actions of a high and mighty duchess. Why were they so cruel about you, my love?

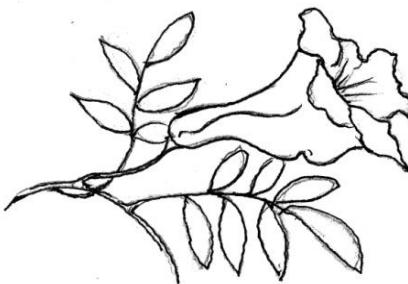
You have gone now and everyday my heart breaks a little more. I long to hear you whisper my name, to hear you say lovingly, 'Come here Alice, let me kiss you.' And I would eagerly give you my lips.

John Brooking

Nowadays I derive pleasure from writing as a hobby. In the past I wrote professionally, earning my living as a radio-scriptwriter, comedy writer and, in particular, author of children's radio serials. My first serial was put on air when I was fourteen.

The creativity of writing has always been one of the highlights and sustaining forces of my life. Tribute must be paid to authors alive or dead who've helped infuse and inspire in their certainty, energy and style.

When writing, I always try to pay strict attention to sharpness of delineation (especially of characters), originality, spontaneity, contrast, clarity and rhythm. These aims are my markers and the many authors who have populated my world have certainly helped induct me into my craft.



Once a Sorry Swagman

Just in case you don't happen to know, I'm telling you now that the winding road from Denver's Creek to Slowettville is a fair heart-breaker when you're walking on one of those sweltering, blistering hot days that we seem to specialize in up where I live.

It's not bush country, but scrubby, flat and parched land – that's the trouble.

Charley Mack and I had put in a pretty rough day at the Denver Mill; we'd had to hike it all the way back home. All we wanted now was a bite to eat and, more to the point, a bar to drink at.

Just near Slowettville, on the outskirts as you would say, we arrived at our first bit of shade. 'Some blokes,' said Charley, 'certainly have the life. Just look there.'

I looked, and, of course, I saw just what I expected: Old Scobie, the swagman, lying under a gum tree.

Now we hadn't ever had much time for Old Scobie. Nobody in Slowettville cared two straws about him. Rumors that you just couldn't shut your ears to went the rounds from time to time. He'd been in a fix with the police more times than a man could tell of. And the worst trouble of all, he'd stuck to our district for the last six months.

There was no shifting him.

'Here, here – look,' said Charley, speaking suddenly different. 'Wait a bit. There's something up.'

There was something up right enough. Old Scobie somehow just wasn't lying in a natural position. Charley had gone a bit white. I got a cold sort of shiver inside, the sun didn't feel hot any more.

‘He’s dead,’ said Charley, which I couldn’t really believe, so to make sure, I gently pulled Old Scobie over and felt his pulse. He was alive all right and Charley sighed like a gale with relief.

Old Scobie tried to speak, and couldn’t, so I supported his back; and Charley, thinking it wisest, unbuttoned the swaggle’s bit of old shirt.

‘Dead an’ buried,’ Old Scobie groaned. ‘Dead an’ buried.’

‘Enough o’ that talk,’ I said. ‘You’re alive all right.’

‘No, not me,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Sammy’s dead. I buried ‘im under this tree ’ere ... ’alf an hour ago.’

I reckon I’d’ve called all this ‘lunatic raving’, if Charley hadn’t bent close and whispered the answer:

‘He means his dog. He means his dog’s died, see.’ I put two and two together pretty quickly after that.

Scobie had had just one friend in Slowettville, a shaggy, half-starved whimpering mongrel terrier, with one pricked ear. Now the dog was dead.

You’ll be thinking I’m making this out to be a bit too pathetic when I tell you just how that old man carried on after we’d put him on his feet. He cried a good bit, and unless you’ve ever seen and heard a man you thought was tough, break down and sob like a child, you won’t really understand what a horrible sort of fright it gives you.

Then I saw there was a little earthy mound with a twig stuck in it, just by the side of the road, almost opposite the picket gate of the vicarage where Mr. Brempton lives.

And then, honestly, a dozen things seemed to happen all at once.

Mr. Brempton stepped out, came to meet us, and looked at the little grave, and we had to explain everything

to him, because Old Scobie was just sitting there moisty eyed and miserable.

School children came running up from nowhere. Our Mayor, Mr. Harrison, suddenly stepped out of somebody's car, and was soon making the gathering seem larger and even more bewildering than it was by interrupting everything the vicar was saying.

The upshot of it all was this, that Charley suddenly whipped his hat off and chucked some gold coins into it, and, holding it out, said it wouldn't be a bad thing if we let bygones be bygones with Scobie, and all dob in,

Which is exactly what happened.

Into that hat went my afternoon's beer money, a pound note from the vicar, and a swankily flourished five pound note from old Harrison.

For Scobie the Swagman you could see it was an overawing occasion. He looked stupefied with amazement at first, then he stuffed his ragged pockets with the money and insisted on shaking hands with us all.

For a moment then that small earthy mound with a twig in it caught his eye, and I thought he was going break down all over again; but instead he turned and said to the vicar, 'Keep m' little dog's grave nice – nice and tidy.'

He never came back to Slowettville.

He never intended to, never would have dared to.

There's never been a lynching in Victoria in generations, but by crikey, if Scobie the Swagman walks this way again I can promise you a real dinky-di one with a bloodthirsty mob, and Charley gone berserk.

Because it was my mate Charley who found, two days later, in an old disused barn, tied to a ploughshare, that half-starved, whimpering terrier with one pricked ear.

Good King Wenceslas goes to Canberra

Good King Wenceslas looked out
With a sense of grievance;
This was partly due to gout,
Partly to St. Stephen's.

I heard his lament:

'Canberra's Parliament soon will close
For the Christmas season,
Our pollies all are on the nose
And for such good reason.'

'Hither page and stand by me,'
Said the monarch curtly,
'We to Canberra must go,
Travelling covertly.'

King Wenceslas was so incensed,
'Pollies make me cranky,
Bullying that gives offence
And sexual hanky panky.'

'Now, Sire,' boldly said his page,
'This idea, just drop it;
This behavior is ingrained,
Even you can't stop it.'

'Tish!' the King said in a pet
'We are going to slow them
I've saintly powers of great renown
Bet you I can show them.'

Down to Canberra they went
Sage and page together
Never mind the Aussie heat
What's a spot of weather?

Mr. Speaker in his chair
Had tried to keep cohesion,
Simply had a hollow stare –
He had lost his reason!

Not a soul that spoke with care,
Some were cross and pouting,
Howls and curses flayed the air
Lots and lots of shouting.

Good King Wenceslas raised his arm,
Gave his benediction,
'Almighty keep you all from harm
And your irksome friction.'

So we end this moral tale,
While Aussies keep on coping,
Perhaps his effort will not fail
What's the harm in ho-o-oping?

King Canute

Old King Canute waved at the sea,
Refused to tame it utterly
As, balanced on his tilting chair,
He told his Bishop that he dare
Not now invoke the wrath of God
Who'd strike him hard with Aaron's rod
If He should see the intrepid King
The sea to stillness try to bring!

The Bishop, robed in scarlet bright,
He trembled then with much affright
And quavered that his flattery
In saying his Leige could halt the sea
Was as a true test not intended,
I'faith – the least said, soonest mended.

The sea rolled on, the King retreated,
And soon upon dry land was seated
While courtiers crowded at his side
And heard him call out with much pride,
'I'm living still – I have not died,
But I have drowned a Bishop's pride.'

The Lament of a Gallery Guide

At an Egyptian exhibition

Many are the Gods of Egypt
All their names are hard to spell.
Even if we can pronounce them,
Then I think we're doing well.
Names of Pharaohs aren't much better,
All we do is make a guess,
Ptolemy a silent letter?
Ramesses a double 's'?
Ra is Re or is Re Ra...?
Ba is Ka or Ka is Ba...?
Weirdest words that you could meet,
Nearly throw you off your feet.
Nut and Mut and Nefertiti
Seth and Isis... Lord have pity!
Ptah, Anubis, Hathor too,
Don't think I can see it through.
Swirling dimly down the ages
Words that fill my addled pages:
When I tried to spell papyrus
My computer got a virus.
Falcon wings and Horus eyes,
Crumbling fabrics, faded dies,
Mummies tightly bound and painted,
Mother looked at one and fainted.
I'll say only one thing more:
Perhaps I am unsuited for
Mouldering resin, blackened tars,
Cartouches and canopic jars,
Sarcophagus, sarcophagi,

It's all too much for Little I,
It's all too much for my poor head,
I'll do the Elder Wing instead!

Heartfelt

I sing of life and laughter
Of common things and rare,
Of poems I make, and William Blake,
And yes, my favourite chair.

I love my meditation
When I am on my own,
It catches worries by the heels
And lifts my feeling tone.

I sing of marvellous melodies,
And music everywhere,
Symphonic sounds or choral rounds
Life's deepest moods lie there.

One little round 'tween dark and dark:
One lifetime's moment clear,
To give true praise for all the days
Of those whom I hold dear.

Philosophy that airs my mind
And literature like gold,
I read the minds of others
Inside the books I hold.

And if I crave unworldly awe,
And marvels greater than
Religion's 'miracles of yore',
Why, there's the Cosmic span.

Where whirl those spiral cosmic rings
With force and power unmeasured,
Let's probe Creation's wondrous things
Where truth and science are treasured.

The only source of truth I know,
No other can I find,
Comes in the feeling in my heart,
Of calmness in my mind.

Christmas Crisis

Veronica, aged seven, hovered uneasily in the convent school's playground. She had just been peremptorily spoken to by Sister Grace, who had misunderstood the little girl's attempt to explain that another child's teddy, which had turned up in her desk, had arrived there purely by accident.

'You are telling the truth, I hope,' said Sister Grace, wagging her finger at Veronica.

Tears ran down the little girl's face: she had never told a lie to anyone.

'And you must,' said Sister, 'never tell a lie.'

Musing on this sad conversation, Veronica saw a group of little girls huddled in the playground, looking white faced and alarmed. With them was a tall, bony, cranky girl named Mary Nash, and she was insisting, 'I tell you, there is no Father Christmas. It's really your Dad.'

Howls of alarm and protest came from the five or six little girls. Mary Nash, noticing Veronica, immediately called her to join the group. 'Now,' said Mary Nash. 'Veronica will tell you. There's no real Father Christmas is there? Isn't that right? It's only pretend!'

Veronica said, 'Yes,' for she knew she had been told by stern Sister Grace never to tell a lie, just as she also knew – she had discovered last year – that her father was the red robed gift giver!

The little children, weeping, rushed up to the first adult they could find. It happened to be Sister Grace.

They cried out in unison, 'Veronica said there is no Father Christmas.'

Sister Grace's face darkened. 'Come to my office Veronica,' she demanded.

John Brooking

This indeed was a Christmas crisis. If only seven year old Veronica had had the mind of an adult, what might she have not said about Father Christmas, knowing the dreadful ramifications of telling the truth?

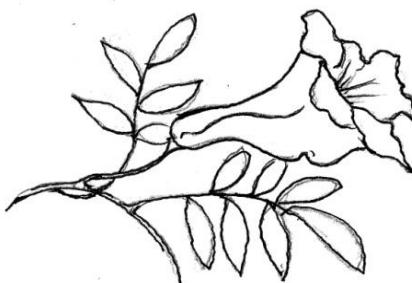
Nell Holland

I enjoy watching life express itself with angst and absurdity, and find this the richest source of writing inspiration.

Writing has been part of me since I first held a pencil and invented a story, and as blank pages beg to be filled, I know there is no limit to what images and emotions words can create.

I enjoy the works of many writers but two who influenced me are Charlotte Bronte and Monica Dickens (great-granddaughter of Charles Dickens). Both were disenchanted with what the world expected of women and defied convention. They imbued their books with integrity and a strong social conscience, leaving behind stories of pathos and humour.

The sum of my writing is my own story unconsciously told, with embellishments and imagination, and the delight discovered in allowing thoughts to create pictures will long endure for this intermittent scribbler.



Sweet William

The stocky little boy had cheeks chapped red by the elements and a hair-cut that spoke of his father's lack of expertise with kitchen scissors. This was William Honey, universally known as 'Sweet William' by everyone at the English village playgroup because of his perpetual grin and good natured approach to whatever happened in life.

He was the youngest of four sons from a Kentish farming family. His father had struggled to hold farm and family together since his wife's death six months earlier, relying heavily on Trudi, the competent Dutch au pair running the household. Trudi would drop off William daily at the playgroup and was emotionally close to all the Honey boys whom she dubbed her 'trencher-men' because of their huge appetites. In return, the boys adored their indefatigable Trudi who supplied welcome femininity and order to their all-male household.

One hot summer day Trudi arrived at the playgroup wearing a skirt and 'boob tube'; a garment popular with young women that year. While William raced off to find his favourite pedal car, Trudi sat on the floor with some children making 'play-dough' shapes. One little boy placed a hand on her ample chest and solemnly asked, 'Do you have a bust in there?'

Before she could answer, William raced past in his car, and mishearing the question called over his shoulder, 'I've got one of those at home, but mine's a double-decker!'

It took about three seconds of silence before Trudi and the playgroup helpers realised how funny the comment was and began to chuckle.

Nell Holland

William stopped in his tracks, misunderstanding the cause of the merriment and shouted back to Trudi, ‘It’s not a funny bus, Trudi. It’s red with flashers and a hooter!’

It would be many years before William worked out why his final comment reduced the women to tears of helpless laughter, and why Trudi thereafter referred to her ‘boob-tube’ as her double-decker.

Scottish Snow Roads Scenic Route

Over the years we’d toured most parts of Scotland, including the islands, but had never managed to drive along the 90 miles of road known as the ‘Snow Roads Scenic Route’. This was probably because (unsurprisingly) quite often the ‘Snow Roads’ are covered by snow, and unable to be driven on!

However, this last year we determined to try our luck as we’d heard so much about the natural beauty of the region, and we were not disappointed.

The Cairngorms National Park found in the north-east was only established in 2003, so it’s a fairly new addition to the long list of attractions Scotland has to offer. Driving through this wonderland made us feel as if we’d stepped away from the world and found ourselves in an historic land of make-believe. Not a bad way for a weary traveller to feel after negotiating the motorways of Britain! One day we were stressing about traffic and speed limits, and the next we were in the largest national park in the British Isles.

Nell Holland

When we saw the elderly man striding out along the road, complete with walking stick and a bonnet adorned with a feather, the scene could have come straight off a postcard. He raised his stick in greeting as we passed and his kilt flapped over weathered knees as he carried on without breaking his stride. We pondered where he might have come from and where he was heading, but his walk was full of purpose and he seemed in no doubt at all about his destination.

Speculation about the walker was forgotten as we passed through rugged glens and saw snow-capped peaks full of endless possibilities for intrepid walkers and climbers. Unfortunately, we were limited by time so traversing those hills will have to wait for another occasion, but the dramatic Highland scenery had us spellbound.

My companion did most of the driving and while I continually interjected with, 'Did you see that?' and 'Look over there!' he was heard to mutter comments relating to the steep climbs, blind summits and sharp twists and turns that he was negotiating on the road.

Needless to say, because of the terrain this is one of the slower driving routes, providing time to enjoy a gentle pace while soaking up the many extraordinary views at vantage points, which are a photographer's delight. It also meant that the driver could be as awed by the scenery as I was and we could stand in mutual, silent admiration looking at the natural wonders spread before us.

Whisky distilleries along the way include Royal Lochnagar and Dalwhinnie, so I sampled a local whisky at the end of an impressive meal of local venison, and got to know the natives better. Everyone had their own favourite *uisghe beatha* and couldn't wait to share their knowledge with

Nell Holland

us. My driver was abstemious, but took away a couple of small bottles of the golden amber so he could enjoy a dram before bed-time, and diluted with equal quantities of the local water, he declared it was well worth the wait and a good end to a great day.

While driving, we decided that finding a fairy castle was a priority, and made a detour to the isolated castle called Corgarff. Built in 1550, it filled our needs in its wild and lonely spot at the head of Strathdon, but after paying the entrance fee and immersing ourselves in its history, we decided it was all a bit too isolated for us. We headed due west from Corgarff and experienced another 20 miles of breath-taking scenery before reaching Aviemore., a busy and popular tourist destination loved by ski-ing enthusiasts, but we were more enthralled by a hotel's good scotch broth. There was no time for us to ski but all the travelling had built up an appetite and Macdonald's Highland Hotel (no association with the other McDonald's of golden arches fame) ticked all the boxes for these hungry travellers.

En-route to finding our very own Macdonald's, we passed the high northern slopes of the Cairngorm plateau. As the highest point in the British Isles the plateau often "boasts" a climate that can only be described as Arctic! Fortunately, the plateau was much kinder on the day we visited and we were able to enjoy some gentle sunshine.

During our adventure along the Snow Roads we never had time to climb the famed Munros (mountains over 3,000 feet), enjoy a pony trek, follow a mountain-bike trail or share in a husky race. All those delights will have to wait for the next visit. What we did enjoy was the opportunity to see reindeer, cascading waterfalls, ancient native trees and a part of Scotland undiscovered by most but boasting some

Nell Holland

spell-binding heritage. We'd heard that this area was described as the ultimate Scottish road trip and have no argument to offer that will negate that. It is an exciting journey with many easily accessible detours and all accentuated by a stunning backdrop.

Like us, you can enjoy this gem of a place at your own pace and go away with lasting memories of a unique location. And if you see a man wearing a kilt, and sporting a feathered bonnet pass by, please ask him where he's heading as it might be somewhere that we missed!

If you want to get away from it all, the Snow Roads are calling.

Ageing Heart Throb

They'd had a long and serious discussion and now they leaned over the table towards each other; coffee mugs cradled in hands and grey heads close together.

Tom stared at his drink, 'I tell you mate, I'm exhausted. She won't leave me alone and even wakes me at night for it. Just when I try for a bit of shut-eye in the day, she's there again making her demands. God know what the neighbours think about all the palaver and just because she found me with that widow from the retirement complex.' He sighed, 'I'll admit, we were having a bit of fun in the park but I never thought Barb'd react like this. She's wearing me out!'

John said encouragingly, 'Come on; give her what she wants and wait for the fire to burn-out. You've been married over 50 years so you know she can't keep it up forever.'

Nell Holland

'It's alright for you,' Tom said, 'but I'm not the man I was and bits of me are just about worn out with this malarkey. She might be able to keep it up, but I can't!'

John rose from the table and fumbled in his pocket. He pushed a small blue packet to Tom saying, 'Try these; they just might help.'

Tom glanced at the contents. 'Thanks. That's great stuff. They're a boost when I'm flagging, and I have to confess that I've used them a lot recently.'

John met his wife, Sue, soon after he left the café and described Tom's situation.

Looking unsympathetic she said, 'Well, he's only himself to blame. He used to be a heart-throb with his singing in the sixties, but he hasn't sung for anyone for years. Then he goes off and serenades that hussy! Barbara's right to make him sing when she feels like it. She'll keep it up 'til he's got a sore throat, you know.'

John looked with amusement at his wife's cross face. 'He's got one already, but I slipped him some throat lozenges.'

Sue hesitated then asked, 'Does she really make him sing *It's Now or Never* in the middle of the night?'

John's lips quivered and he nodded his head before starting to chuckle at the idea of Tom being woken up to sing to a vengeful Barbara.

Sue joined in the laughter and eventually the two of them were shaking with waves of helpless mirth.

Finally wiping away tears, Sue managed to choke out the words, 'What do they say about there being no fool like an old fool?' But, before John could answer she'd started to laugh again.

Nell Holland

Romance

I've been romanced by the best and worst, but never mistook it for love. Romance is fun without responsibility and everyone should at least once have the opportunity to bask in the heady feelings it engenders. It's excitement and flattery making you glow with omnipotence, particularly when you're young and in the middle of creating memories to last your lifetime.

How could I forget the boyfriend who called me his 'apple blossom' because of the perfume I wore the night I danced wearing a pink dress? Or even my laughter when one boy played Bob Dylan's, *I Want You*, and another countered him with a second song, *You've Got a Lot of Nerve*. It was all fun, froth and bubble and lifted me out of the sepia of everyday life and up to a technicolour glow of magic. In the sepia world I was ordinary but in the magic land I felt extraordinary.

Romantic moments are unforgettable. They make you feel desired, and who couldn't wish for that? But, love offers loyalty and commitment and asks that those feelings are reciprocated, yet still freely given, even when the road becomes bumpy and clouds threaten to turn the vibrant landscape back into sepia.

Romance makes us feel alive but love gives us the reason to live. Romance and love taken separately are both a delight, but gentlemen please remember, when the two are combined life can be magnificent for everyone!

Nell Holland

Forgive Her

Forgive her if her hair's unkempt, and her nails need a good manicure.

Don't look too close at her uneven hem, or the shoes that have no allure.

She doesn't remember yesterday or what she drank or ate, but she knows all about the man she loved, and the other who sealed her fate.

She was pretty and young and her head was turned by a fickle, callow lad

who wined her and dined her before she discovered that he was merely a cad.

Decades ago she was just like you, until problems crowded her way.

Then her husband left and the money ran out and the kids just wouldn't stay.

Self-esteem ran away, like the wine she drank to provide a reason to breathe;

but the bailiffs came for her furniture. That's when she decided to leave.

Life on the streets was hard every day, and harder still at night

when the shadows hide many terrors, and to live means having to fight.

She's weary now and feeling old and looks more ancient than her years,

but the Salvos found her a place to sleep and wiped away all her tears.

She no longer looks in the mirror or bothers with the month or the day.

She only exists for each moment in time that gives her the chance to say,

‘Lady, don’t do what I did. Don’t let love come along, then depart.

This body is broken and battered but I still keep my dreams in my heart.

I’ve no-one now to care for me or take my hand with affection,

although once I felt I had everything, and my life was near perfection.

I had twenty years of wonder and another twenty of pain.

What wouldn’t I give to be young once more and have all my loved ones again?

I’ve got no one to smile or hold me, and no one will stop my fall

into the sad-bitter thoughts of what might have been. That’s all.’

She died and this cold world kept turning, not missing a beat at her death.

She just quietly lay and closed her eyes – his whispered name on her breath.

Nell Holland

Buddy

I remember him well; he was my ‘Buddy Holly’ boyfriend. When I first introduced him to my friends, one of them said he was a ‘brown eyed, handsome man’ and the nickname stuck.

I was twenty one at the time and he was a year older. When we met at the 1965 Christmas party we never stopped talking and it felt as if we’d known each other forever. Sometimes life makes all the little pieces of existence slot into place at the right time; and this seemed like the right time for both of us. He was funny and clever; making witty comments about people around us that had me laughing helplessly. Though I never actually considered him truly handsome, he was a charmer with more confidence than anyone I’ve ever known. I’d just ended a relationship with one boy and wasn’t ready for another. But, Buddy made the world sparkle with his easy manner and clever conversation and was in possession of that most seductive of attributes – he made me laugh.

Studying engineering and obsessed with cars, particularly racing cars, he recognised them by the sound their engines made. When walking in the street he would turn around at the ‘vroom’ made by a car that he liked. I only knew that some cars were bigger and some went faster, and he was appalled that I wasn’t impressed when he drove me in his ‘souped up’ Mini Cooper, that I referred to as a ‘little car’. He called me a Philistine, but later made amends by putting *Pretty Flamingo* on the juke box because I wore a crimson dress. We danced and laughed oblivious to anyone else, but feeling that the little country pub, at that very

Nell Holland

moment, was the hub of our world. His confidence gave me confidence and we were in a bubble of happiness.

Later, he pressed a note into my hand when he kissed me goodnight. I opened it when I got back to my room and it said, 'My Darling Philistine. I love you, and I'm yours until brussel sprouts'. It was the silliest romantic letter I'd ever had and made me laugh and cry at the same time. We were luminescent with love.

By summer, he was offered a job in a prestigious engineering firm and I'd applied for further training that would take us to opposite ends of the country. Many of our friends were getting engaged to be married but neither of us wanted to commit to any arrangement that felt conventional or expected. We were both so young, with aspirations for our individual careers, and believed there was time enough in the future for plans that would permanently tie us together.

Looking back down the years, I feel it's sad how time can blur emotions and memories, and relegate what was once pivotal to the place we call our past. We were so sure of each other in our togetherness, that unaware of the chasm we were creating, the ribbons of passion gently loosened and freed until we were no longer bound and were once again separate beings.

Years later, I was told that he'd died but had followed his dream of involving himself in the racing cars he'd loved, and a trophy was given yearly in his memory. His occupation had been what he'd always wanted and had paved his way to glory within the racing industry.

The acquaintance who told me, suddenly stopped and said, 'He became quite a celebrity but didn't you once know him well?'

Nell Holland

I was still trying to process her unexpected information, and deal with my confused emotions. Shards of brilliant, deeply buried recollections flashed within my mind as I gave a pensive smile and said, 'Yes...I did...I do. I remember him.'

The Pantomime

A pantomime is a style of theatre, or a play traditionally performed at Christmas, in which a story is told with jokes, songs, and dancing.

It was Christmas Eve and our daughters had given us an early Christmas gift; front row tickets to a show that was running in Adelaide. The show was wonderful and as it came to an end, enthusiastic cheering filled the Festival Theatre. Eventually, the cast ran on stage for the third and last time to rapturous applause from a standing audience. As the company bowed in recognition of our appreciation, the handsome male lead let his gaze sweep over the crowded house and for a brief second I thought our eyes held. Was there a spark of recognition? Did he remember the last time we'd met?

Paul had then been two decades younger and one of my youngest daughter's earliest romances. He was the Year 12 boy that all the girls wanted; the one who had it all: good looks, charm, athletic talent, acting ability, academically bright and voted unanimously as Dux of the school.

My youngest daughter, Anna, was just like all the other girls who yearned for the chance to claim him, and when you're only 17 that's an awful lot of yearning!

Nell Holland

Unfortunately for Anna, Paul already had a girlfriend – a long-limbed blonde goddess who fitted the image required by a young idol, and their relationship appeared set in concrete. My petite brown haired daughter felt overshadowed by the seemingly sophisticated ‘golden girl’, so she was bowled over when Paul ditched the blonde and asked Anna for a date.

Wary of my innocent youngest being hurt by some conniving, experienced Lothario, I was cautious when she announced him as her boyfriend, but to my relief he appeared even more enamoured of her than she was of him. Anna thought he was wonderful. It seemed he absolutely adored her with an honesty that even thawed my husband’s ‘daughter-protective heart’. There was nothing that Paul would not have done for her and perversely I now began to worry that perhaps **he** would be the one that would end up hurt, and not my baby!

The idyll lasted several months until the ex-girlfriend threw a party and invited Anna and Paul along with the rest of their final year. His ex, although seemingly unmoved by her new status, had told most of her friends that she would get Paul back come Hell or high water and found her party was the perfect venue to make this happen. Strong liquor from Daddy’s drinks’ cabinet combined with dim lighting, slow music and a clinging, sexy dancer, made it inevitable that she would get the kiss that she wanted – in full view of everyone.

Let me explain something here. Paul was used to being worshipped, and really thought that Anna would be as accommodating as all his other girls had been. For after all, as he told her many times afterwards, the ex-girlfriend meant nothing, and the kiss meant nothing. The fact that it

Nell Holland

had been witnessed was unfortunate, but should be forgotten. It **was** nothing!

Anna was made of stronger stuff. Brought up to believe in her own worth, she found it impossible to not feel offended that her boyfriend could humiliate her so publicly. One casual, careless kiss was all it took for her to decide that the god had clay feet and golden girl could have him. Ten years later, she might have viewed the situation with some amusement but at 17, most things are black and white and this event was definitely underlined in black.

After proclaiming to everyone at the party that Paul was yesterday's news, Anna calmly returned home alone; pride wrapped around her like impenetrable armour. For the next few weeks, Anna was bombarded with letters, phone calls, flowers and even Paul's friends who tried to speak on his behalf. At first repentant but confident, Paul soon became confused and depressed. This was not the way that romances were supposed to progress for him. After all, he'd apologised for something that seemed so minor, and he was becoming aware that his persistent pursuit of Anna was leaving him open to ridicule by his friends.

The goddess hovered hopefully nearby, but he was oblivious. Like many young men before him, what now appeared unobtainable suddenly became everything he wanted and he looked thoroughly miserable on the few occasions that he risked turning up on our doorstep.

Like a Lady Macbeth scenario, the unhappier he became the more Anna blossomed with renewed self-respect, and a steely poise showing great dignity.

Gradually the attention eased, and Anna was once again your average teenager with a failed romance behind

Nell Holland

her, but looking forward to the future. Time really is a great healer.

Unfortunately, Paul was not at that point. Perhaps for the first time in his life he was truly aware that having your cake and eating it, in reality isn't often an option.

One Sunday at 2 am, a drunk and emotional Paul tapped on what he thought was Anna's bedroom window in a last attempt at apology and reconciliation. Unfortunately he'd picked her parents' window and my husband was definitely not amused!

I'll draw a curtain over the conversation that followed, apart from saying that Paul struggled unsuccessfully to sound coherent and pretend he was sober, but my husband was not in the mood for beer fumes wafting over him when he should have been asleep!

After a painfully embarrassed exchange, Paul left us looking desolate and never showed his face again. It was evidence of how far Anna had moved on when my still furious husband related the night's events at breakfast the following day, and she laughed aloud at the story.

I commented sometime later, that perhaps history had conveniently wiped out all memory of my husband's own interesting youth, but as he was quick to point out – it was different in those days!

As the cast left the stage, I turned to my husband and said, 'That was a great way to start Christmas. What do you think?'

He gave a wry smile as he watched Paul exit and said, 'Do you remember that night he tried to convince me he was sober and said his car had broken down, before he wobbled off down the road on his bike?'

I laughed and said, 'How could I ever forget?'

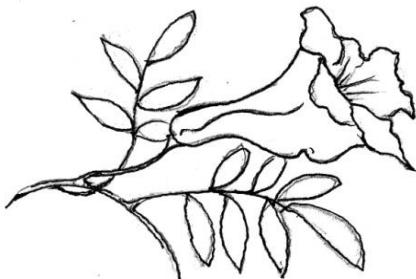
Nell Holland

Still looking at the now empty stage, my husband remarked ironically, 'I've got to hand it to him. His acting's got better.'

Georgette Gerdes

Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper.
Ray Bradbury WD

I try to capture the world around me drawing on life experience as a mother, GP and musician. I write prose and poetry and love the writing process, exploring ideas and the congeniality of the Burnside Writers' Group. Influential authors include Ian McEwen, Sebastian Barry and Vikram Seth. I'm grateful for being included in this anthology and hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have writing for it.



Georgette Gerdes

The Knicker Stealer

‘Happiness is a warm puppy.’— Charles Shultz (cartoonist, *Peanuts*)

I nestle my face in his soft curly fur. I can smell him. An earthy smell. I close my eyes and feel his heart beating. I can hear his quick breaths, panting as his tongue flops out and quivers. His golden coat glints in the sun’s luminous brightness. His floppy ears twitch like question marks as he looks at me hoping for food.

Sammy is a darling. He curls up on my lap, snuggling his chin against my arm. I lie down on the cool grass and manoeuvre the warm furry water-bottle onto my chest. I’m immersed in euphoric chemicals. Basking in a radiant glow, I feel calm and tranquil. It’s the oxytocin flowing through my veins, the same hormone that’s released during breast feeding, nature’s Valium. It’s proven that dogs lower blood pressure, quell anxiety, ease depression and make you feel relaxed and simply lovely.

I look at Sammy. His chestnut eyes are obscured by fuzz. He’s badly in need of a haircut or I should say groom, (a doggy coiffure - an expensive exercise that can set you back ninety bucks in the posh part of town!) His black nose wriggles and sniffs. He is a princess puppy; a dog who wees like a girl.

Times like these are worth all of his less welcome habits, like the mess he makes. Sammy delivers into the kitchen: twigs, leaves, dirt and grass from the garden, he drops decapitated and half chewed toys, he empties bins, shreds toilet paper and finally, he steals knickers. Sammy surreptitiously waits while you have a shower and once you’re under, he grabs your knickers and skulks guiltily away

to suck them or to sleep with them in his bed. The garden is strewn with dirty underpants from this thieving rogue. Sammy also does the occasional poop in the house, always my daughters' room. He can get into difficulty if his little poos become stuck to his fur. The rectification is an unsavoury process that my other daughter thankfully addresses. He suffers some indignity in the process.

Sammy has quirks. He doesn't like passing motor cyclists whilst travelling in the car and whimpers when anyone momentarily leaves the vehicle. He is terrified of the vacuum cleaner, mouse traps with peanut butter (the result of an unfortunate meeting) and big dogs like greyhounds that run after him thinking he is a rabbit. He has a fear of water. He scuttles away from waves at the beach. Most harrowing is the infrequent bath. He starts to shiver, shake and cry as the water is poured over him. He scratches his way up the sides of the bath and manages to jump out if you're not holding onto him; a terrified, scrawny and pitiful drowned rat.

Sammy Sammykins as my daughter calls him, has an obsession with food, all food, but especially bones, chewed muddy things that he buries amateurishly under leaves. Bones are a prized possession he guards with his life. He's a socially unacceptable dog, who sits patiently whilst you are eating, then when no one is looking jumps up onto the table. He once stole my husband's salmon dinner. He was not a popular boy.

Unlike many dogs, Sammy isn't fussed about walks. Once coaxed out of the house, he likes to follow scents and mingle with small affable dogs – sniffing and examining their bottoms and getting them to chase him. He also loves to pursue ducks and magpies, which he could

Georgette Gerdes

never catch in a million years. Sammy's most prolific activity is to snooze, anywhere, any time. He favours my bed, nestling and rummaging in the quilt to make a soft, comfy cave. That mutt loves to sleep – much like his owner!

His honey coloured curls are littered with leaves and prickles and I scratch his belly. He lick, lick, licks my hand with gratitude. He's always there. Like a shadow, alert, ready to follow you from room to room, pottering along with his knotty tail wagging. He's familiar and comforting, happiest of all just being near you. When I return home I'm delighted to see his furry silhouette in the front door. He waits expectantly, ecstatic about my reappearance, even if it's been only five minutes. He scurries around the house like a lunatic, leaping and grunting with enthusiasm. He then scoots away with a sock in his mouth.. My heart bursts. How can you not be in love with such a cute, fluffy boy?

Dogs are amazing. Natures' astonishing creation. The most perfect of gifts for humans. A gift that shouldn't be taken for granted. Dogs are truly man's, or should I say, woman's best friend.

Dedicated to Sammy the Cavoodle and all of his doggie counterparts; may they live happy fulfilling lives with loving owners.

Georgette Gerdes

Drowning Not Waving

Caught in a trap
the delinquent;
his paw squashed under cheap wire.
Notorious for his nocturnal scurrying
scaring husbands making cups of tea.
Villain, disease carrying breeder.

Wriggling, writhing, panicked,
he fights for freedom,
to scurry, scratch and scatter
debris of walls, furniture,
cornflakes and fridge insulation.
Kitchen carnage lies in his wake.

Little mouse, you are a pest but look so cute.
So pitiful. Suffering but hopeful.
Survival instincts prevail.
Perhaps he is a she,
wanting to get back to her babies?

Wait a moment,
this is...
a widespread propagator of brown ovoid poos,
an eater of all except stainless steel
a brown blur that scampers
over feet in the night,
scaring the beJesus out of you
and
there is never ONE.

My friend and his snare are lowered
into the bucket of water,
struggling, squirming, jerking.

An interminable wait.
A conscience-stricken executioner.

Twitching no more,
the furry body
still.

Mouse Murderer!
Guilt follows killing.
Squeamish or compassionate?
How can people be cruel
to animals or humans
and remain
unscathed?

Kindness should reign.
Only empathy will ensure
survival of the planet.
Remorse is good.
Even for a mouse.

Georgette Gerdes

House in the Hills

Curtains open
outside, darkness envelopes blustery trees
as shadows stretch
across bedroom walls.
Imposing shapes linger,
sinister silhouettes by lamplight loom.
My Heart thumps.
Bed clothes are clenched against clammy skin.
The body quivers can't sleep.

Thick, menacing lines haunt
like pulsating sinister hills,
endlessly bounding, tormenting,
race towards me.

Eight year old self
lies awake, eyes wide, trembling.

A threatening soundtrack,
consorts with the ominous patterns.
Roaring crescendo
assaults childhood ears.
Neither music nor machine.
Jack hammer brain.
The discordant thud,
deafening,
thunderous, booming, explosive,
coming closer, faster, nearer, unbearable.

Fear of fear
night after night:
nightmares.

Georgette Gerdes

Christmas Musings

Christmas is fab. I love it. I think this comes down to all the eating and parties! I'm a hedonist at heart. There's a license to just pig out. Food, life's sweet pleasure, is integral to the celebration and to the memories. Christmas is evocative of times past – childhood excitement, family rituals, loved ones lost and happy times. It can be bittersweet. I've come full circle.

Childhood Christmases were heavenly: the tinselly *pinus radiata* branch from the garden dropping needles and going slowly dry and brown in its bucket, the presents wrapped in second hand paper under it; the anticipation of Father Christmas' visit. The Christmas pageant, riding on Nipper and Nimble, the rocking horses in John Martins magic cave and peering in at the displays in shop windows of elves and fairy tale characters in a busy but festive Rundle Mall. It was magical.

My Mum and Nanna (who came over from NSW) would be baking months ahead – a labour of love. Christmas pudding, (my great grandmother's recipe), Christmas cake, mince pies, white Christmas and Scottish shortbread. They would preorder a huge turkey and wrap the leg of ham in a sheet, make prawn cocktails, drink 'pink ladies' made from cherry advocat and dry ginger ale and spend hours cooking in a hot kitchen on the warm summery day.

There would always be a lazy Susan laden with glacé fruit, nuts, chocolate covered sultanas, and marzipan fruits to add to the beautifully iced and lovingly decorated cake. It would be smooth and white with red icing flowers, ribbons, holly and gold cursive writing. My Nanna was an avid cake decorator.

Christmas Day was golden, a day of Christmas carols and the obligatory Queens speech. Wrapping paper

Georgette Gerdes

was strewn about amongst pillowcases once filled with toys. Fun times.

Unfortunately, my feelings about Christmas changed. Both my parents died in their 50s and then my Nanna died. Christmas Day became a source of pain and loss. Something was missing. I became a coeliac and couldn't eat all the *glutentastic* food anymore. I had my own children and began to find Christmas very stressful. I used to hold a big Christmas party: make handmade cards with long letters, decorate the entire house, and spend hours Christmas shopping looking for presents for family and friends and post last minute gifts. The pressure was on to get everything done in time. With busy work commitments, it was a struggle. Someone in Ireland told me Christmas was only for children and men. I believed them.

Now things are different. We emigrated to Australia. The initial pattern of consuming Christmas continued then my husband stepped in. We simplified: no travelling, no big Christmas party with weeks of preparation and cleaning, less Christmas cards and only a few presents for my kids and the nieces and nephews.

No relatives on Christmas Day – just the four of us together with fish, prawns, white wine and later a walk on the beach. Now I can sit back and enjoy the children's enthusiasm and glee; their planning and dreaming. Together we love decorating the plastic tree with pretty lights, hearts, stars and cute things the children made at school. I collect a few decorations every year. The kids arrange the ornaments and I with my OCD rearrange their handiwork afterwards.

We see my sister's family on St. Stephen's day, or Boxing Day as they call it here, along with old family friends too elderly to cook or who live alone. My husband cooks a simple chicken dinner in his Weber. There is a big commotion of children and lots of wine. We are all squashed together in rooms too small. It's lovely.

Georgette Gerdes

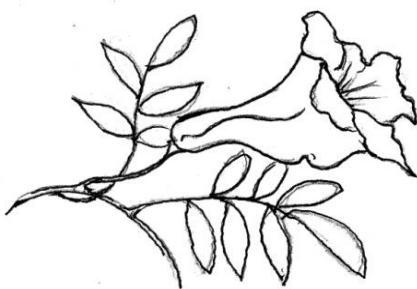
I have come to find the true meaning of Christmas despite the commercialism and consumerism. It's a time for reflection, appreciating what and who we have in our lives, and thinking of those less fortunate than ourselves as was Jesus' example. I omitted to mention attending mass at Christmas and inspecting the crib and baby Jesus with the children. They are encouraged by my husband to steal the hay for safekeeping. An Irish tradition passed on from his father, who used to make my husband and his siblings stand in the nativity scene in order to take photographs.

So it goes on, making memories and family traditions for our own children. To those who don't celebrate Christmas because of the hype or cynicism with religion, I say bah humbug – simplify, find your own meaning, volunteer at a homeless shelter, love your annoying relatives, reconnect with your humanity and eat, drink and then have a nap.

David Hope

David Hope

I joined the Burnside Writers' Group because I wanted to write a book. That was a limited vision. I have been inspired to write on any topic; to write dialogue; to write humorous stories; to write poetry in various styles and to write non-fiction in a narrative style rather than the technical papers I used to write. I am sure the group will inspire me to greater heights and it is such fun.



A Metaphysical Introspection

“I wandered lonely as a cloud.” Really, Mr Wordsworth, you wandered like a cloud. Have you ever seen a cloud wander? Clouds don’t wander. They might get blown around by the wind a bit, but there is no way that can be categorised as wandering. They might change direction if the wind changes, but they don’t wander off on any trajectory that takes their fancy. Not that they have any fancy, but we will come to that. They go where the wind blows them. Or they circle the eye of a hurricane. Or they whirl within a tornado, descend as rain or snow or mist or fog. But they don’t wander. They are not random, performing some ethereal drunkard’s walk that lets them flit hither and thither.

And, Mr Wordsworth, clouds are not lonely. Why this need to humanise inanimate objects? Okay, they change shape – maybe a lot. So, they appear animated. But clouds are just water vapour or ice crystals or unburnt jet fuel or even exhaust gases; hydrocarbons but with no life force. Clouds don’t have feelings so they can’t be lonely. There may be only one in the sky, but it is not lonely.

Seriously, Mr Wordsworth, get real! You were wandering around in a daze, not thinking about too much. You know, thumb in bum, mind in neutral and you tripped on a bunch of daffodils. This made you cranky and you said some harsh words to those daffodils: needlessly harsh and, totally unnecessary from every perspective. Then you realised you were being mean and thought you had better re-attune your mind with some lovely thoughts about daffodils.

That’s what this poem is really about, isn’t it, Mr Wordsworth?

David Hope

The Abortive Field Trip

I left about an hour and a half later than planned, which had an impact the following day. Once out of the suburbs and onto Highway 1 it was easy driving, making good time, travelling at a steady 100kmh.

About 50 kms before Port Augusta there was a police car parked on the left-hand side of the road and after driving past I watched my mirrors and, sure enough, it pulled out behind me. But it went speeding by and I gave it no more thought.

Driving along I realised I had forgotten to pack a couple of things, so a visit to a supermarket in Port Augusta seemed to be in order. I was taking a case of wine to my friend and colleague Rodney, who was doing some consultancy work for Bulloo Shire Council headquartered at Thargomindah. I thought I would give him a ring and see if he needed anything else. I did not have the Council number so I needed to stop and consult Safari.

Before I could stop, a car came towards me flashing its lights. A couple of minutes later there it was, the police car in a side-track. Shortly after I noticed a rest area and pulled in to consult Safari, ring Rodney and get his shopping list.

Finishing the call, I pulled out onto the highway and continued on towards Port Augusta. Almost immediately red and blue lights were flashing in the rear view mirror. Okay, I wasn't speeding and it's broad daylight so I don't need any lights on! But, I pulled over to await the police visit.

I watched the policeman get out of his car and walk towards me. He had something yellow in his right hand and I assumed it was a breathalyser.

David Hope

‘Slow news day,’ I said to him as he arrived at my car.

To my surprise he said, ‘No, you were acting suspiciously, getting off the road.’

‘I stopped to consult my phone and make a phone call,’ I replied.

‘Oh, well done! What’s your last name?’

‘Hope,’ I said.

‘David Thomas,’ he added.

I started to ask him how he knew that, but swiftly realised that he must have checked my details in his computer, using my trailer registration.

We then had a discussion about breathalysers.

‘The last time I was breathalysed, in NSW, you just spoke into the machine 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5,’ I said.

‘We’re not so technologically advanced in South Australia. You still have to blow into the machine, but not as hard as you used to.’

It took me four attempts to get the right level of breathing, then it was on to Port Augusta and the supermarket for supplies.

Using the self-service checkout, I bagged up my things and paid for them. Bagging up Rodney’s items I discovered that a bag of peanuts was split and while waiting for a replacement the supermarket’s fire alarm system went off. The staff started herding people out of the store so I quickly paid for the items telling the shop assistant not to worry about the peanuts.

Driving I realised I’d already scanned the peanuts, paid for them without getting them. Karma, as I’d not scanned the supermarket bag depriving the store of 15 cents!

David Hope

The plan was to get to Lyndhurst by evening but the late departure put the kybosh on that. I opted to stop at the caravan park at Quorn. As it was very hot I decided not to use the camper trailer but get a cabin. I wanted to have a comfortable night's sleep in air-conditioning. This later proved to be an error of judgement.

I was up early and on my way. I stopped at Leigh Creek to get more water, make sure I had enough in case I broke down. Then off to Lyndhurst. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in Lyndhurst and discovered that the roadhouse was shut and I needed fuel. There was nothing for it but to turn around and head back 33 kms to Copley and fuel up there.

"When did the Lyndhurst roadhouse close?" I asked, as I paid for the fuel.

"It closed six weeks ago. They found water in the fuel tanks and decided it was not worth the expense to repair them."

Fuelled up I headed for Lyndhurst and the Strzelecki Track. I turned onto the Track and got another surprise – a sign saying the Lyndhurst hotel sold fuel! My trip to Copley was unnecessary. Ah, well! Only 473 kms of dirt road to Innamincka. What I discovered was there were six to eight patches of sealed road varying from five to eight kms that at least made the journey a bit more comfortable.

After a while, I noticed the high visibility stop light normally attached to the rear window of the canopy on my four-wheel drive was dangling in my rear-view mirror. Poor job of gluing that on, I thought. Wrong again! Next time I stopped, I realised it was the window that had become detached from the stop light. I had thrown up a stone that bounced off the frame of the trailer and shattered the rear window into a million pieces. This gave me two problems –

David Hope

no security for all of the things in the back of the four-wheel drive and a thick layer of dust over everything. Nothing to be done for the time being except to keep on going.

Eventually, I reached Innamincka and headed straight for the store and fuel outlet. Ready to re-fuel I put the nozzle into the tank and waited for the pump to start. And waited. And waited a bit more. I needed to ask for the pump to be turned on.

The door to the store was locked. The notice on it said, "Open 8:00 am to 5:00 pm" – office hours! It was 5:24 pm. My late departure the previous day and my lack of knowledge about fuel in Lyndhurst came back to bite me. Not that I was driving any further that evening, but I always like to refuel on arrival, so I can leave on my schedule, not the roadhouse schedule.

I drove to the Town Common for bush camping beside the dry Cooper Creek river bed. Setting up the camper trailer, I find another problem – the winch which raises the floor back onto the top of the trailer was not working. This was a serious problem, as I no longer have the strength to lift the floor on my own. I could've found this out in Quorn, if I'd been less worried about the heat. Nothing to do until morning as there were no other campers in the vicinity. Who goes to Innamincka in the heat of February?

Listening to the news, the weather forecast predicted extreme heat lasting a week for the part of Queensland where I was heading. Perhaps this trip was not meant to be?

In the morning, refuelled, I said to the storekeeper, 'I have a problem with my camper trailer. My winch is broken and I can't raise the floor.'

David Hope

'I'd like to help, mate, but I'm on my own and can't leave the store. Maybe the publican next door can help you?'

But there was no one there! I drove around the town. Couldn't find anyone, although I did see a water truck drive out of town. Back I went to the store.

'You and I are the only two people in Innamincka today,' I said to the storekeeper.

He laughed, 'Find the water truck, the driver will help you!'

I went looking for the water truck and found it on a road a little out of town. I explained my predicament and asked the driver for thirty seconds of his time to help me. He said he would come by as soon as he delivered his load of water. I went back to the camper trailer to wait for him. He came by shortly and helped me put the floor back. But by this time half the morning had gone.

Dirty and dusty I headed to the public showers. They were closed. Lack of water! Back in the car; turning east towards Thargomindah and its caravan park and a hot shower. 413 kms away, but this time mainly bitumen roads even if they are single lane. Not a lot of traffic anyway!

Thargomindah is a typical Queensland rural town, streets wide enough to turn around a bullock dray. Well maintained and no hint of litter. All helped by lots of grants from the State Government to the Shire council. The caravan park is neat and tidy with excellent cabins and lots of hot water.

After a long hot shower, and feeling much better, I head off to see Rodney, have a beer (or two) and tell him the tale of his missing bag of peanuts; he wanted three, but I only delivered two. As the day cools off, we walk to the

David Hope

pub for more beer, an excellent steak dinner, a reasonable red for country Queensland and pleasant conversation.

I realise this field trip will have to be abandoned. The plan is to go home to Adelaide, via Tibooburra and Broken Hill and attempt the trip again later when it will be much cooler. I'll do other research in the meantime. So that's what I do; up early the next morning and on the road after some breakfast.

Leaving Thargomindah I don't see another vehicle for about 175 kms – Sunday morning in outback Queensland. On to Tibooburra, a place I've always wanted to visit, but not when it is 44 degrees Celsius! Lunch in Tibooburra; then down the road to Broken Hill. Overnight Broken Hill, and then home the next day to plan the trip again, but for August.

David Hope

The Jigsaw Puzzle

Ilsa sat, her brow furrowed in concentration, scanning the remaining pieces of the jigsaw. She had, she thought, carefully separated out the various elements of the puzzle. The border, the pieces with sea, the pieces with land then, the pieces with both sea and land; all of which would make up the map of Australia, the subject of the puzzle.

Ilsa loved doing jigsaw puzzles. She found it both an intellectual and a creative challenge; mildly creative, but the sense of satisfaction she felt on successfully completing a puzzle, fuelled her creative urges.

She had tried jigsaw puzzles on her iPad, but it was not the same. She enjoyed the tactile impressions of the pieces in her hands as she separated them out before beginning to solve the puzzle. Sitting, rolling a piece through her fingers as she decided where to fit it, gave her a sense of engagement that was not replicated by pushing pieces of a puzzle around electronically. And, the final emergence of the completed puzzle on a screen did not match the glory of a large completed puzzle on the table.

Ilsa kept scanning the remaining pieces, looking for that last piece she thought would complete the land. It was a piece with both land and sea but she seemed to have used all of those pieces already. It must have only a sliver of land on it and been put with the sea-only pieces.

Ah, there it was – she picked up a piece that looked right and yes, it fitted!

Land complete, now, on with the harder sea.

David Hope

Changing

Leaden clouds followed
by warming lengthening days:
winter into spring

Love's Awakening

Like a gentle breath is Love's awakening;
It invades the soul, infuses the mind;
Body, blood rapturous, a new beginning;
Love caresses all hurts and Love is kind.

The world, brighter, clearer, a warming place;
Like a tapestry awaiting its first thread;
Anticipating bliss and perfect grace;
Light and laughter, abundant, quickly spread.

Love vanquishes misgivings, doubts and fears;
Not heedlessly, but giving serenity, hope;
A future, perhaps, of joy and happy tears;
New places, friends, delights, plans – vast in scope.

To love is to grow in self, in another;
Learning, living and loving – together.

David Hope

Reflections on Christmas

I am not a religious man – quite the opposite. I side with Karl Marx in the belief that religion is the ‘opium of the people’. But it would be wrong to deny the comfort that religion, despite its manifest failings, brings to many people. For this reason alone, I can tolerate religion and accept that hundreds of millions of people of various faiths have deeply-held beliefs.

I respect the right of believers to follow their faith, practice their rites and celebrate their religious festivals, even if I strongly disagree with their beliefs. If I partake in Christmas, Easter, Hanukkah or Eid celebrations does this make me a hypocrite? Does it depend on my definition of partake? I don’t ‘partake’ in religious rites.

Does it matter if I am a hypocrite? After all, it is clear from historical evidence that the major religions have in their holy writings and festivals adopted earlier mythologies and festivals into their ‘new’ religions to attract the followers of existing religions. Is that not the greater hypocrisy?

Do I believe that Christ was born on December 25? No, the evidence is strongly against that date. Was there such a person as Christ? Probably!

So what does Christmas mean to me?

As family time, it is the most significant time of the year. The greatest Christmas present is the warmth and joy of being with family, a family that makes every effort to be together at Christmas. The shared meals – preparation and feasting, the conversations of many hues and topics, the rediscovering of shared memories, laughing at jokes, old and new.

David Hope

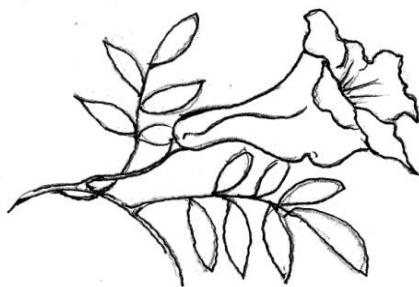
Oh, the laughter, the laughter – a glue that binds.
The feelings we have towards one another, unity and love,
satisfaction and contentment, pride and affection. Nothing
beats it!

Thank you, Jesus.

Karen Agutter

Karen Agutter

I am an historian by trade however, more recently I have been motivated to exchange historical argument, facts, and footnotes for experimentation with more imaginative styles of historical writing and creative fiction. At the beginning of my journey, I am very much a work in progress.



The Red Button

My hand hovered, hesitatingly above the small red button.

I sighed and a voice in my head demanded impatiently, 'Well, are you going in or not?'

One small red button. The key to a world hidden away, separated from society. A place where people existed in multiple dimensions. Relived pasts, real or imagined. Where feet shuffled, fingers endlessly plucked and phrases were repeated incessantly, their meanings long ago lost to semantic saturation. A rarely changing scene where, despite the best of intentions, the aroma of institutional food and incontinence always lingered. Where existence had triumphed over life.

'I don't know, I just don't know,' I whispered to myself. Tired. Uncertain. Drained.

The voice, more understanding this time, forgave my hesitation and encouraged me, 'Walk away. No-one will ever know.'

With one long deep breath I replied softly, 'But I will know,' and I raised my hand to push the red button.

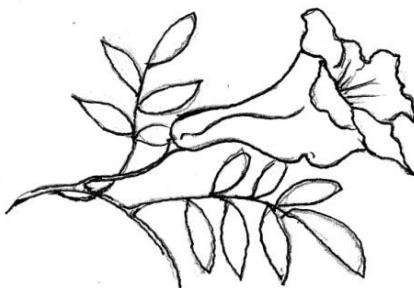
As the automatic door swung open I could see her. Sitting in her usual chair, hugging and fussing over her baby. Rocking it backwards and forwards. Clucking and singing softly. As always, strangely comforted by the half-dressed doll. She did not acknowledge my presence, I was a stranger to her. I sat beside the familiar figure. The physical being of the woman who now lives only within my memory. Taken from us by dementia. My mother.

Don Sinnott

My writing journey included a professional life in science and engineering, for which the universal language of mathematics is called up. Symbols, rich in meaning for my community, but meaningless to most peppered my manuscripts. My writing in that arcane style of learned journals was devoid of colour or emotion. Later I became a manager, for which different writing rules applied. But again, the prose was stilted and dead.

Now in my semi-retirement, I have been able to rediscover the joys of creative writing! To explore feeling, nuance and colour – in texts free of equations. I've been able to ghost write a book for a Sudanese refugee that challenged me to adopt a style that might plausibly be his. Next was a much more formal book: a dual biography, *Radar Men*, now achieving modest sales.

Where to from here? Do I have the imagination to write fiction? This would be a challenge, but isn't that what a writing life is all about?



Don Sinnott

The West Highland Way

It can't have been 15 years ago. But it was: one of our earliest long-distance walks along Scotland's West Highland Way. Baulking at a do-it-yourself plan with heavy backpacks, we booked with a tour operator who arranged accommodation at appropriate intervals, with bag forwarding so we carried only day packs.

The official 160 kms walk runs from Glasgow to Fort William but we skipped a day of walking through drab suburbs of Glasgow and caught a bus to the first official overnight stop. The Scots to whom we spoke about this manoeuvre that first evening fell silent – the West Highland Way is an iconic end-to-end pilgrimage and surgery is sacrilege. We ceased mentioning our start point thereafter.

The first few days of walking took us along the banks of Loch Lomond. Far from bonnie, the banks were slippery mud, infested with tree roots intent on sending the unwary hiker to an icy doom. Some shaken fellow walkers spoke of almost losing one of their group on this section. On most days, there was intermittent rain so rain-coats were donned and stowed at frequent intervals. Yet Rannoch Moor, an expanse of peat whose evil moods, we were told, can deliver fierce wind-driven sleet, was benign: we strolled in shorts with the sun on our backs.

At each day's end there could be a welcoming pub, with a promise of a pint or wee drachm and a snug bed. Or sometimes a stern B&B landlady demanding removal of boots, coats and packs before treading her hallowed hallway to find our cold and sparsely furnished room.

It was a great walk. Memories of mud and rain, lung-busting climbs and cobbled lanes that wrench weary,

Don Sinnott

blistered feet fade, overlain by the glories of misty lochs, glens and mountains, the warmth of country pubs and the sense of achievement on arriving at Fort William. Let's walk some more!

The Lives and Times of Ischer

Pets are given some curious names. Our early-twenties daughter Ali's choice of name for her kitten defied any attempt at probing its origins. Her ball of fluff became Ischer, who joined our family as an ever-playful member, claiming any bed or couch as her own, exploring every accessible cranny in the house and yard – and some that might have been considered inaccessible.

It soon became clear that Ischer was a cat with an expectation of the nine lives some claim for the species. She came into our lives as a replacement for our first cat, which had come to a sticky end on the road. While little more than a kitten, Ischer seemed destined to follow her predecessor's ill-advised paw-prints. A late-night screech of brakes outside heralded bad news but Ischer survived this first encounter with a car: a broken jaw and a permanent droop to the end half of her tail did little to quell her enthusiasm and Ali quickly forgot the monumental vet bill that had restored her pet to her.

A little later the vet was called in again, this time to remove most of Ischer's ears, which had turned cancerous. We learned that light-coloured cats who spend a lot of time outdoors are liable to sun-caused cancers on their ears, just

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as humans are. Post-operatively Ischer was a curious sight: no ears, inverted-V tail and an odd sliding gait, but her enthusiasm for life seemed undimmed.

Worse was to come: this time it was Ali herself who, late one night, ran down the incautious Ischer in the drive-way. It looked terminal. The mark of the car tyre tread could be seen right over Ischer's body as she moaned pitifully on the blanket where she was placed. Was she to die?

Not a bit of it! More vet bills, a fractured pelvis that miraculously set itself and, after a short period of inactivity, the cat was back.

And so, the life of Ischer went on. She lived to thirteen without further major injury and her end came as a painful decline into senility was ended by some final expensive veterinary intervention. Nine lives? Not quite, but a good attempt at it.

Delhi Without a Guidebook

Our flight from Singapore arrived at 10 pm, peak hour at Delhi International Airport. After long delays through immigration we staggered into the arrivals hall, bags in hand and looking for transport to our hotel.

This trip, in 1993, was not our first visit to India. On a previous travel agent-planned trip, we had been met at airports or railway stations but this time, with what turned out to be misplaced confidence, we were to be more adventurous: mix it with the locals on public transport and

Don Sinnott

wing it with accommodation. The sights, sounds, smells and tastes of India had enchanted us on our previous trip, but we had chafed under the eye of the ever-present tour guide. This time we had planned our own free-wheeling itinerary taking in some exotic North Indian places. We checked the address of Nirula's, the hotel booked on Lonely Planet's recommendation for the one night we were to spend in Delhi on this leg of our travel, spurned the taxi rank outside the airport and headed for the town bus.

What a bus! No glass in the windows, unyielding seats, an army of people clambering aboard. There was a good deal of sectarian unrest at the time of our visit to India and the sign on the seat-back facing us was concerning.

Look under your seat – there may be a bomb.

Raise the alarm. Report to the authority.

You will get a reward.

Mercifully, there was nothing more than dirt and grime under our seat.

Told of our hotel destination the driver took our two rupees, nodded sagely and said the bus would leave 'when we are full'. 'Full' seemed to mean every cubic centimetre occupied by a crush of sweaty bodies, spilling over us as we sat, bags on knees, the only westerners aboard. There seemed to be inordinate delay in leaving, as fuel levels were checked and rechecked using a measuring stick thrust into the tank, tyres were kicked and the driver engaged in earnest discussion with what we took to be airport officials. Only later would we realise the reason for delay: an elaborate scam was being set up for this sole

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western couple foolish enough to take an Indian bus at 11 pm.

Eventually the bus set off, lurching along dark roads through what we assumed were the outskirts of Delhi. After ten minutes the bus stopped and the driver called us, 'Nirula's: you get off here'. Spat out was more like it – bags passed aloft over the heads of passengers as we pushed through the throng onto the roadway. Now what? The bus lurched on, leaving us on a dark road, with no buildings visible and no sign of life. It was a cold mid-December midnight and we were stranded somewhere on a Delhi roadside, lightly-dressed from our last port of call, Singapore. What was going on? Where were we; where's the hotel?

As if on cue, out of the blackness appeared a motor-rickshaw driver. 'Where do you need to go?' We were gradually coming to appreciate that we were the subject of some sort of scam but at least this was transport. Told our destination, the rickshaw driver set off, with us and our bags crammed into his tiny vehicle. We shivered in the cold air washing over us.

Even in the blackness we could tell we were on a round-about route. We sat in growing alarm, finally relieved when we stopped outside an establishment with a neon sign, 'Nirula's'. Made it! But no! Three men in elegant business suits met us as the rickshaw rolled to a stop. One spoke: 'Are you from the airport?'

'Yes.'

'There has been trouble in the city and the hotel manager has asked us to redirect you to another hotel, as he has had to close the hotel.' As he spoke a figure inside the 'hotel' (which we later found was a cafe of the same name)

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walked to the locked glass doors and hung up a 'Closed' sign.

We remonstrated but to no avail. 'We will escort you to a similar class hotel. Your rickshaw driver will follow us.' The three men climbed into a late-model black vehicle and the rickshaw driver did as instructed, keeping close to our new-found friends.

The first two attempts failed: 'hotel is fully booked' stated one of the suited men who had gone in to check, not allowing either of us to make inquiries. The third had a vacant room. In fact, it had plenty of vacant rooms, as it was only part constructed. We were escorted into a lobby smelling of damp concrete and littered with construction equipment, with a scruffy attendant behind the desk. A key was proffered, and our three escorts led us up the stairs to the first-floor room that was to be ours for the night. Once our bags hit the floor the point of the exercise was revealed: the tariff was \$US100, about four times what Nirula's had quoted, payable in advance. 'You have no alternative, sir', said a fourth be-suited man, waving away my protests with a slight air of menace as he drew a receipt book from his pocket. I duly paid the man and the group left us with a cheery 'Good night, sir and madam'.

We surveyed the scene and reviewed our ill-considered plan for arrival in Delhi. The chilly room was without glass in the window but there was bedding, and the bathroom was functional, though without towels. A call to the desk – surprisingly, the phone was connected – brought the desk attendant up with towels. The water was hot so we were able to shower, then jammed a chair against the door to give some security and spent a restless night in these unanticipated surroundings.

Don Sinnott

Our plan was to rise early, get out on the street and find a taxi or rickshaw to get us to a more tourist-friendly part of the city. But it was not to be. Our rickshaw driver of the previous evening had spent the night in the lobby and was to take us to the 'travel agency' that would help us from this point on. Again, we felt we had no alternative but to go with the man.

The 'government-approved travel agency' was a small room with posters on the wall attesting to its status. Whether the office was as it sought to appear we never learned. But we were able to negotiate a chauffeured day-tour for a reasonable price (US dollars in cash, of course) and gratefully sank into the dusty back seat of an ancient asthmatic Ambassador taxi in the charge of an elderly driver who, we were surprised to find, was cooperative and helpful. He had a standard tourist itinerary but we had another, designed to include only areas of the city we had not seen on our previous visit. He dutifully took our instructions, including stopping for lunch at a place chosen on his recommendation, and at the end of the day deposited us at the airport for our onward flight. Our Delhi adventure had not gone quite to plan but had ended well.

Don Sinnott

Photo Phreak

It is the deepest magic. The white sheet of paper slides into the developing tray and, ghostlike at first, an image builds. But wonder cannot stand in the way of action: there are other trays the print must pass through in strict time sequence. Then there is washing, drying and glazing and, finally, the monochrome print, your creation, is in your hand.

From a young age, with a steady expansion of my suite of darkroom equipment, I was absorbed by photography and monochrome processing. I studied the chemistry and understood the processes and yet, being in that moment when the image appears in the developing tray is more than chemistry – it is an experience of wonder, a privilege reserved to those who have laboured long under a miserly amber light, breathing fumes of photographic chemicals.

My first camera was a box brownie. I devoured a photography text book borrowed from an uncle and haunted a photo shop. My first dark room was my bedroom: I spread newspapers on the carpet before setting up trays of chemicals on the floor, but there were always errant splashes. Fortunately, the carpet's brown pattern obscured the evidence from anything less than the keenest parental examination.

I could produce only contact prints at first but in adult years I could buy an enlarger and more adequate equipment. Many years later, with kids abed, I was able to lock myself in the family laundry, temporarily repurposed as a functional darkroom with black-out covering on the window, swing-down benches for chemical trays and an

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orange dark-light. The enlarger sat on the washing machine top.

Colour photography changed all that; a converted home laundry can't handle the chemistry and temperature control required. And digital photography tolled my photo-chemistry death knell. With a heavy heart I put out with the hard refuse my enlarger, trays, glazer... Yet the magic of that moment, when an image appears in a developing tray, is not so easily disposed of.

