Tales from the High Country and Other Verse

Laurie Webb

Published by Laurie Webb
adress
email

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an expanded edition published in 2019.

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published 2023.

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FOREWORD

Introduction to the fourth edition.

It's 20 years since the first edition, yet I think the foreword below still stands up well. I still have the same people to thank, especially Debbie Squires for once again putting this book together. It seems I am now a proper poet, I perform at festivals not just around campfires. I am the current state champion for original, performed verse. I have just won the "Blue the Shearer Award" for best poem at the 2023 National Folk Festival, Canberra and I run workshops.

You can find what I do and teach at www.laurencewebbbushpoet.com. My life experiences have made me more humble and grateful just to be alive.

Please enjoy my work.

Laurie Webb

If you roll up to a campfire far enough from the city, there's a good chance you'll be welcomed, as I was, all over the Victorian high country. If you've taken the trouble to learn and share a bush poem, chances are you'll be appreciated. The, if you can lend a hand the next day, and apply persistence even though you're completely useless at what, to the locals is a simple task, and if you can keep your mouth shut, you might hear something. Keeping your mouth shut is pretty useful anyway, because you probably know very little that's of importance to them. It took me years to find this out. Eventually, I began to hear stories that illustrate Australian bush life today, where quiet heroism and triumph over adversity still mark these people from the ordinary. I have written their stories in verse so they too, can be shared at the campfire.

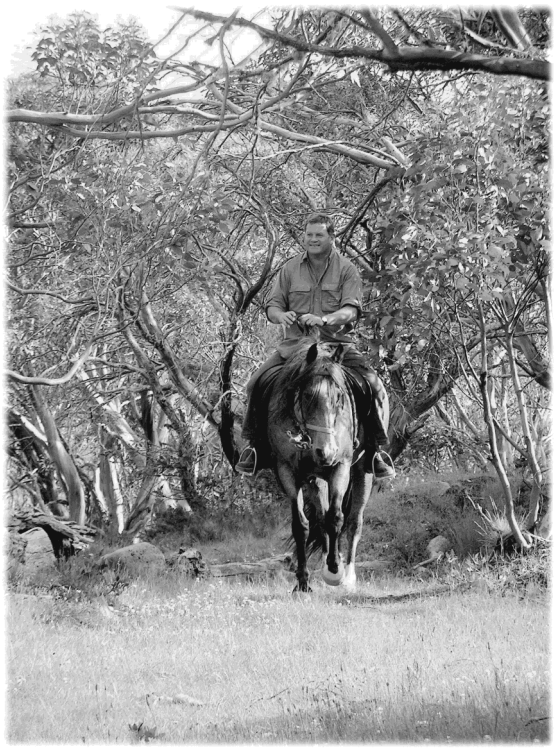
The Chapter 1 poems tell some of the history of the mountain cattlemen from 1997 to 2008. Many of the photos are of the actual events that took place. It wasn't planned that way, it's just been events I've happened to come across, as some cattlemen became my friends, employers and riding companion. These included the Stoneys, McCormacks, Lovicks, Connleys, Treasures and their staff. I thank them for their friendship, help and encouragement. This was a time of change. The Old Grey Mare *tells of the last Great Mountain Race to be held at Sheepyard Flat; the race itself died out five years later.* When Gippsland won the Cattlemen's Cup *and* The Runamuck Cup *happened at the 1998 Cattlemen's Get-Together at Gibbo Park - now part of Lake Dartmouth.* Beloka Dawn *and* The Last Pioneers *tell of the 2003 bushfires and their aftermath. However, whilst Bruce McCormack did do a muster from his four wheel drive after breaking his pelvis being bucked off an unbroken horse (delivered by mistake) the rest is a fictional ribbing of my then boss and a great bloke.* The Cattle are Back *tells of the defiance in the face of the loss of grazing leases in the national parks. Kimberley, my then fifteen year old daughter, joined us for the ten day ride.* Waiting on a Fire *is from the 2006 fires, and* Where the Water Runs Upstream *is about the incredible resilience of the cattlemen, rebuilding their mustering huts after their lease has been lost.* What the Cattlemen Taught Me *was written by my nine year old stepdaughter Emily Tuffen with my help, about her experiences in the Cattlemen's protest ride through Melbourne, and riding into the 2009 Get-Together at Buttercup, Merrijig. As you can see, there's a generation growing up who are being inspired by the continued activity of the cattlemen and their love of the high country.*

Chapters 2 and 3 are verse inspired by an eventful life; sometimes life seems to imitate poetry.

Finally, I have special thanks to the people who helped me with this book. Debbie Squires gave me the idea of combining poems with photos through her work on Voice of the Mountains, *and she has applied her considerable skills and contacts to create this layout. Wendy and Graeme Stoney hosted me at Stockyard Creek in the Howqua Valley to put this collection together; it's also where many of these poems were written.*

Laurie Webb Stockyard Creek December 2010

This book is dedicated to my family and my fiancée Dianne.
Thank you for all your patience, support and riding the high country with me!



Laurie Webb on Mt Howitt, 2005

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FOR THE OLD GREY MARE

When they made The Man from Snowy River *film, they used the mountain cattlemen as the "cracks" for the hard riding scene - some said because they were the only ones skilled and crazy enough. When they finished the film they couldn't agree who was the best rider, so they held a race at Sheepyard Flat in the Howqua Valley - and the race was as tough as the men who raced it with their stockhorses. It became the* Great Mountain Race*, and over the years Gerald Egan, the stand-in for Tom Burlinson in the film, and Chris Stoney both won three times and retired. In later years, thoroughbreds from the city challenged the stockhorses. When Chris returned from a long stay away he saw his beloved old mare, who turned lame after his first win galloping along the flat. He declared he would race one more time, for her sake. "I'm sorry mate," they replied, "She died while you were away, that's her foal, grown up."*
"Well, I'll race him for her sake," he said, and this is the story of his ride ....

A hammer of hooves and a billow of dust, as the triallist gallops by,
his time for the mountain race to make, his mountain horse must fly.
To Sheepyard flat from a far and a wide, they'd heard of a legend's call,
they've come for a glimpse of the final twelve, top mountain horsemen all.

New riders made the cut-off fast, and the cracks from years gone by
had spared their mounts, for a lesser cup tomorrow they would vie.
Of the three time winners from earlier years, Egan would start the race,
and Stoney, back on an untried horse, had missed out on a place.

That night bush music rolled over the flat, and under a shining star
country four step met the city beat, and a hell of a crush at the bar.
Then – a horse with colic, and a rider's out! Bring on the first reserve!
And a crowd rolled home from revelry, to give last chance Stoney a serve.

Old Froggy, by the fireside, said "He won in '88, on a grey mare, brave and true
but when next year came she pulled up lame, and on my grey he won two.
And now he's back to ride her colt - he's never raced him yet,
but a cooler head when the riding's hard I swear I've never met."

At sober dawn he stared at the coals, and I asked him how he'd fare.
"I really shouldn't ride," he said, "but I'm here for the old grey mare.
I raced her too hard, years ago, so young I didn't know,
but when I saw her colt grown up, I had to have a go."

Rain stayed to grey that morning sky, and from a flooded track
there were two riders in Mansfield hospital, before the main race starting crack.
Then from the whip, a dash to the swags, and the old hand running wide
got off with twenty yards of start, his mountain grey in stride.

But Marshall came through on his thoroughbred, he fair blazed past them all,
he led them up the mountainside, at a pace to make lesser men pall.
Then a mad descent to the Howqua's ford, twists and jumps spread out the pack,
but all the way it was Marshall first, with Stoney at his back.

At the last river cross and it's treacherous bank, that mountain grey let fly;
sure footed, as his breed can be, but like he knew it was do or die.
To the final bend on a treacherous track, and Stoney's line was bolder,
their horses clashed - and he shot up the straight, from an equestrian hip-and-shoulder.

As tired horses steamed the dismount yard, two riders shake hands, we saw.
those mountain horsemen are sporting bred, and they were two brothers in law!
But they both looked lost on the winners stand, bereft of their horse-borne flair.
"I didn't ride for the prize," he said, "but I rode for me old grey mare."



CHRISTMAS WITH ROPER



The silver green carpet of Bogong's high plain
lay shrouded in mist ushered in by the rain,
and the views of the valley in distant blue haze
to a ten metre spread without the sun's rays.

United by hope that a guide pole they'd find,
and soaked to the skin by the climbing's hard grind;
two Alpine Track walkers skirt the sheer rocky rim,
from beauty to wild terror, at the Mountain God's whim.

As they prayed for respite from the storm's lashing hail,
there loomed a dim outline of fence-post and rail;
midst twisted, warped snowgums where horses once tethered,
gaunt frame of a building, rough humble and weathered.

For sixty years past Ropers cattlemen's shelter,
now a Christmas day haven - home from the rain's pelter,
a thin whisp of wood smoke, raced by the wind's blow,
uplifted their spirits, they'd find a fire's glow.

A creaking old door and a flickering fire,
showed a hand-carved old table – tin pots joined by wire.
On a battered old trunk wearing moleskins torn,
snored a bearded old bushie, in riding boots worn.

Strange grey eyes flickered wide as he bid them good day,
said he knew they'd be coming, poured tea, puffed away,
he'd the face of the mountains, rough, weathered and lined,
and spoke in quaint phrases, old fashioned and rhymed.

Though with scarce food for two, and starved, "say the least,"
they shared it all out, as a Christmas day feast.
A two inch steamed pudding, and some dry packet meal,
hare stew from his billy, and contented they feel.

Told him tales of the city, above the wind's bluster,
he, intrigued and curious, told them tales of the muster.
Wet snowgum logs hissed, the storm raged on above,
they huddled for warmth, the stranger comfy enough.

Pale dawn showed a fire lit, door wedged from inside,
but no sign of the bushie, and no-where to hide.
She polished a brass plate, to see words in it cut,
"In memory of Tom Roper, he built this hut."



THE TRAIL RIDE ROMEO

Through mountains where the brumbies roam and snows sleep into spring,
the voice of Cash, the trail ride boss, would make the ranges ring.
As he led the city riders out from the Bluff to Omeo,
there rose a legend of a man, the trail ride Romeo.

He'd try his luck with any girl, with honey voice or cackle,
he wasn't much to look at, but he was famed for his riding tackle.
And if he suggests a private ride one thing you need to know,
don't be deceived; it's the mating call of the trail ride Romeo!

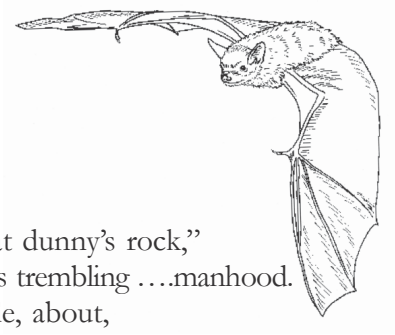
Before he took you for a ride some things he'd need to know,
to match your nature to a horse that's slow or hot to go.
D'you like a ride that's hard and fast, or soft and easy, say?
Can you grip tight and pull back hard, and can you go all day?

He'd ask you, "If your seat was good?" and "Could you prove your worth?"
And, to see if you've experience, "Would you like to check me girth?"
And though he'd check your stirrup length and never make a pass,
you knew, as you rose from your seat, he's checking out your …. class!

All day they'd ride the mountains till they made camp at the Bluff,
and scudding clouds brushed tangled gums by stockyards worn and rough.
Round the old bush hut and campfire they'd roll out sleeping swags,
and horses munched in quiet calm when he'd looped on their nose-bags.

With dinner done, the bottle passed around the fire's warm glow,
and he told them tales and poetry above the soft winds blow.
Then when the girls were snuggled up and listening to the snores,
he'd come and say, "I've lost my swag, so can I please share yours?"

Rebuffed and beat he made his way to the dunny behind the shed,
and gazed in drunken stupor at the bright stars overhead.
When all at once he gave a scream, "Oh Lord, now help me please,"
and he raced down to the campfire with his trousers round his knees.



"I'm bit!" he wailed, "You'll find a snake beneath that dunny's rock,"
and sure enough two bite marks oozed at the base of his trembling ….manhood.
"No antivenin, and the nearest town's a four hour ride, about,
the only way to save my life is – suck the poison out!"

Now here's a side of womankind he really didn't know,
for all the girls he'd charmed and pleased, they wouldn't have a go.
And all his mates turned pale and sick and said they couldn't lie,
"If those sweet girls can't help you mate; you're going to have to die."

To hide from their predicament they shot off to the dunny,
and one bloke came back smiling, like he thought the whole thing funny.
"I can't tell you the species mate, but it's here inside me hat,"
and with calm panache revealed a snarling blood soaked bat.

They matched the fangs against the marks and "Look," they said, "it fits,"
and the biggest sigh came from the girl that had the biggest … .lips.
His mate turned pale and said, "You'll live but at terrible cost,
the bat's disease will turn it black and the whole damn thing drop off."

"But wait," said Jed, "there's worse to come, that's a vampire bat all right,
and when it drops off it'll stay un-dead and prowl around at night."
So in grim pain he rode next day his saddle cut down the middle,
they asked if he felt bat wings grow last time he took a piddle.

And even now his closest mates don't know his terrible fate,
the truth is worse than horror films you may have seen of late.
So when you're camping out at night and feel the evening chills,
remember there's a part of Cash still roaming in these hills!

So zip your swags, lock up your daughters, close the windows shut,
for there's a flickering shape against the lonely cattlemen's hut.
And coming at you through the trees a sight to make you sick,
it ain't no Vampire, it's a flying bat-winged bloodsucking p..p..piece of Cash!

Note: Laurie is adamant that this is a true story (apart from the bit about the vampire) but refuses to name the parties involved.

THE CATTLEMEN'S CUP

The drought sat hard on Gippsland, for three long dusty years,
many that lived upon the land had left with nothing but tears.
Those that stayed with dying stock toiled on because they must,
maintain their family legacy and not betray their trust.

The football teams were failing, the stalwarts worn right through,
they'd always turned to timber but the mills were closing too.
Yet Gippsland folk had one small spark, to win them back some pride
they sent a young slip of a girl, in the Cattlemen's Cup to ride.

That race held in the mountains is a test of rider and horse,
steep bush and river crossings mark a tough and dangerous course.
The bushmen train stockhorses droving cattle through the scrub,
the hardest riders in the mountains come race the Cattlemen's Cup.

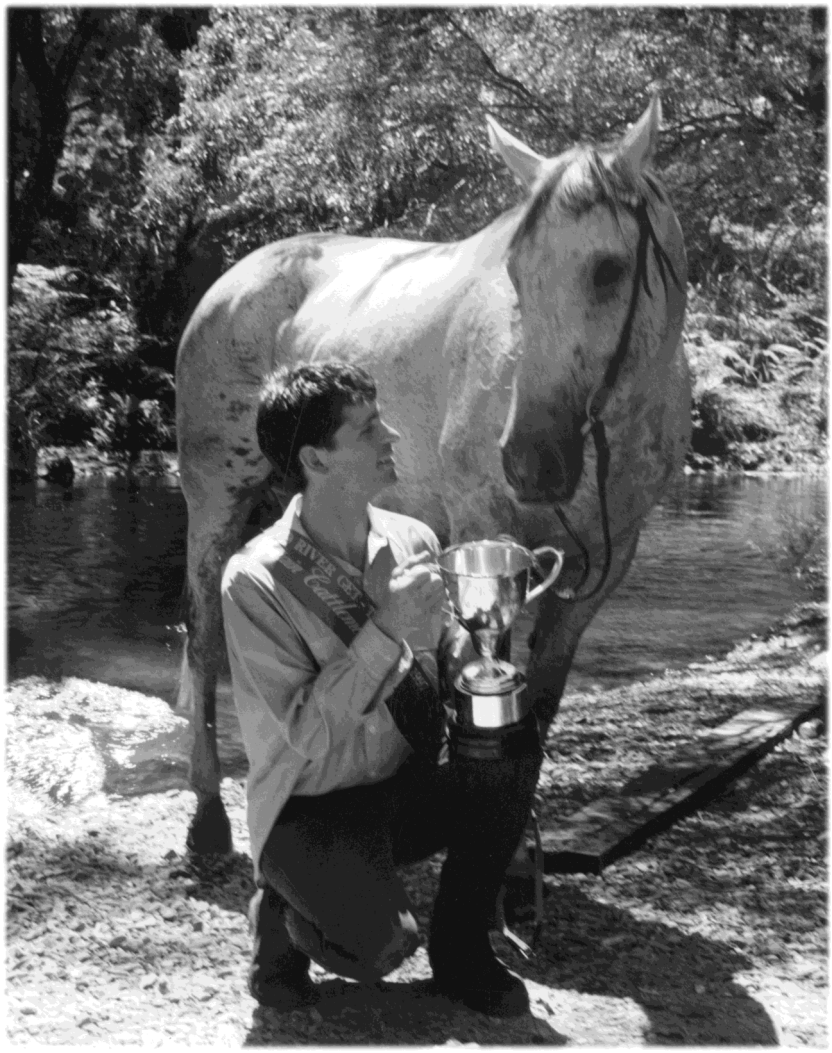
She rode a horse called Monkey, a legend to the last,
they bumped and knocked and shut her out, you must be tough and fast.
Despite the odds she carried through, brave first across the line,
but cheers died when they changed the rules, for a woman it wasn't time.

Next year she raced as a jockey, to prove what she could do,
won her first three starts with ease and raced the season through.
At her last race in the country, she was leading when she fell,
the whole field raced right over her and kicked her body to hell.

For seventeen days in a coma, her life held by a thread,
her close friends held a vigil, and prayed she wouldn't end up dead.
They said she'd never ride again as in a frame she lay,
yet a young man by her bedside swore she'd hold the Cup one day.

Though the greatest prize she ever sought was out of reach for good,
her cheerful courage inspired us, more than winning ever could.
Next year she was at the Cup, wheelchair bound and wracked in pain,
not for pity did she show, but to cheer for her mates again.

This time Gippsland hopes sat on that young man, tall and raw,
he'd mustered cattle since a boy, he longed to settle a score.
The race ran fast through thick dark scrub, he rode like a man possessed,
held his way to the final strait, eyes burning to win his quest.



The crowd roared out a mighty cheer, they wanted him to win.
but he dismounted teary eyed then gave the girl his grin.
They pulled him to the winner's stand, still cheering long and loud,
his eyes never left the smiling girl and said, "My God, I'm proud!"

"It's hard to keep our hopes alive with paddocks of dust and black,
it's things like this that give us heart to grin and not turn back.
We're battling just to keep our schools and field a cricket side,"
"OK," they said, "we understand, now come and take your prize."

He walked back down the stairway without his prize or Cup,
came back holding in his arms the girl that wouldn't give up.
"You'll not give this Cup to me, it's time to right the past,"
with trembling hands and glowing smile, she held her Cup at last.

THE RUNAMUCK CUP

A blazing white sun lit the old Gibbo run,
swirling ghosts raised by dust from the utes.
Kelpies guarded their swags; bright-eyed kids led their nags,
parents dozed in their hats and their boots.
'Twas the final communion, of the cattlemen's reunion-
welcome break from that summer's hard luck.
'Fore headin' back to the drought, stood their mates one last shout,
and ran a race called the Runamuck cup.

First the atmosphere warmed, as the syndicates formed,
to bid a horse for their gang's star rider,
and the Mansfield mob did a hell of a job,
signing ten Cooks and half of Benambra.
'Twas their crack rider's task – check the horses for class,
to ensure that they bid for a speedster.
Took his place with a grin, in the auctioneers ring,
with a jump jockey ready to ride her.

Then the bidding went brisk, as a new horse they'd whisk,
to be knocked down for less than a ton,
and the boys turned to pray as in came the big bay,
that she'd be the racehorse they won.
But jaws dropped in surprise, as before their glazeded eyes,
the bidding went past the five hundred!
For the gelding they vied, but the owners voice cried,
and out bid 'em – and with eyes closed they shuddered.

For the last horse led in, and their last chance to win,
she had spirit, and strength in her carriage,
but the syndicate wept, for what could you expect,
from a Shetland and Welsh Pony's marriage.
At a proud ten hands high, who could do more than cry,
she's no match for the gelding or bay;
then a figure stood tall, and them hushed with his drawl,
"I can ride her to win, there's a way."

'Twas Dave Stoney no less, that made this bold jest,
with his long legs as tall as the pony.
"'Tis no ordinary race, and we'll lose on the pace,
but there's a chance for the tall and the bony."
So they mustered their steeds, and the last bets were seized,
as the starter brought his motley field up.
Then off and away, 'cross the freshly cut hay,
raced the cattlemen, for the Runamuck Cup.

Fast the horses broke rank – a wild dash to the bank,
with Dave last and forlorn on the course,
as they churned up the stream, we heard one wag scream
"That's the plan, Dave, you spare your horse!"
In a wide sweep they rushed – he was lost in their dust,
as they circled the scrub thick and rank,
for halfway on their run was to round a tall gum,
then tear back to the river's muddy bank.



But Dave's pony ran straight, like a bull at a gate,
and his bold plan began to unfold,
he cut under the bush, spun around in a rush,
then splashed mud into the streambed cold.
Now, each rider must scrag a pile of stones in a bag,
which Dave on his steed could do mounted,
while the field splashed on foot, in waters muddy as soot,
he led onto the straight when it counted.

Well, a fifty yard lead is all most horses need,
and those little legs pounded like crazy,
but the gelding and bay, they were pounding the hay,
and he soon ate their dust, thick and hazy.
Now first past the post will win races most,
but brave Lightning galloped third in their paths,
but they poured out the beers and we heard his mob's cheers.
"No, we won, 'cos we had the most laughs!"

BELOKA DAWN

Rusty Connley was a bushman, a cattleman and most of all a gentleman. He had a love of the bush and environmental values that anyone calling themself a "greenie" could well aspire to.

He rolls the cow at daybreak, as a pink glow trails the sky,
she's held to life for five long weeks, he's given up wondering why,
the last of half the herd to go since bushfires flamed the park,
but she won't give in, and he won't give up, and he rolls her after dark.
He lost them in explosions before the raging bushfire's path,
He saw them die of shock and lack of feed in the aftermath.
They perished deep in winter snows, too weak to fight the cold,
they were paralysed at calving, and wild dog took their toll.

His eyes raise to the ridges, grey and wasted as the moon.
Then he gazes at the grassy flats where he aches to take them soon.
The finest feed in thirty years, but the grass will waste and die,
they locked him out before the snowmelt with a scientific lie.
Before the thaw revealed the grasses, those advisors far away,
had predicted desolation, and they banned him, come what may.
But the fires have roamed these ranges now for thirty thousands years,
the bush responds as it always has and defies the expert's fears.

For fifty years he's mustered stock to mountain summer feed,
and roamed it with his mattock, to dig out briar and weed.
He helped the first bush walkers find the shelter of his hut,
and guided rescue parties finding tourists out of luck.
If he's locked out, the rest of us will lose sights we've never seen,
for he alone knows all the tracks, the valleys and the streams.
But now his cattle eat the paddocks out along the valley floor,
first muster missed in fifty years – will he muster any more?

He owns a swathe of valley land that's never felt the plough,
a bushman's quiet nature reserve, he'll have to fence it now.
It's pull and shift the burned out fence, four days of sweat and strife,
but every tea break underscores the gentle rhythm of his life.
He listens intently to the bush for every creatures call,
he'll know if they've survived or died, he cares about them all.
You learn a lot from pitching in and sharing someone's toil,
but I reckon I learned the most while we watched the billy boil.



He used to spray the blackberries to give native plants a chance,
but now they clog the gullies and no more the wildflowers dance.
His granddad lit cool autumn fires, crept slow along the ground,
but now litter lines the forest floor and hot fires leap and bound.
Both banned by city officials, living fifty years apart,
a legacy of bush ignorance, that tears and breaks his heart.
He feels a bitter anger at the mismanagement at hand,
for in a strange way like the Koori, he is wedded to this land.

A mournful bellow wakes him, it's that cow that must surely die,
his face turns to the mountains where his spirit will one day fly.
And he remembers the pain and heartbreak that his forbears came to know,
when they were taxed for crossing borders and their shorthorns died in snow.
But they gamely battled onward, and overcame their loss,
for it's fighting city officials spawned the spirit of the Southern Cross.
So he rolls the cow at daybreak and she rises, gamely, to her feet.
For love, persistence and stubbornness are bloody hard things to beat!

THE OLD GENTLEMAN

Twenty-five years ago a young man lost his life in a timber cutting accident. He willed his only possession of value – his guitar, to his sister, Cathy Culligan, to help make her dream come true. This is her story…..

"Have you written of love?" She asked, by the fire,
and I didn't know quite what to say.
With her eight year old smile, so free from all guile;
said "I can tell you, I've seen it each day."
"It's the love that lasts a whole lifetime through,
and stays on with the ones left behind.
My mother can tell you, 'twas a love that she knew,
just ask her, I know she won't mind."

Angry rain hammered hard on McCormack's hut;
lustrous bush glimmered green all around,
She laid down her camp oven, and with eyes half shut
sank wearily with us to the ground.
"Yes, he passed away, six months to the day,
as the Old Gentleman he was known".
And she told me a story spanning twenty-four years;
of a girl, and a horse of her own.

"My dreams were so real, so true in the night;
I'd wake up, rush out in the dawn.
My own little pony, bathed by pale morning light
but walk back, my hopes dashed and forlorn.
To be one of eleven, in a bush town like Tolmie,
not much of a chance did I stand,
but when my brother died, his guitar came to me
and his place in my dad's country band."

"Every Friday night in the Merrijig pub,
smokey Saturdays in Mansfield town,
I played that guitar and a fortune saved up,
a thirteen year old's dream for to own.
Then at last, at cattleman bought a Palomino in;
he said he hadn't had to look far.
For they swore black and blue that the horse rode to him
while he drank at the Mount Buller bar."

"Then a freedom I found on the old timber tracks
while the wind fanned out through my hair.
For whatever my troubles, on old Pal I'd relax,
without worries, without fear, without care.
And my best friend and I, what adventures we'd share;
rediscovering old tracks in the bush.
In a cool tranquil clearing, for our horses we'd care,
then eat lunch, squashed to sausage-cake mush."

"As I grew up a woman, my workmate he'd be
taking kids out for rides after school.
Sometimes five on his back, tying ribbons with glee,
always trusted, always safe, always cool.
As a wife, I rode him in three of our homes,
he godfathered all of our foals.
As a mother, he taught my three children to ride,
as their best friend, their keeper, their Rolls."

"Then I'd seldom ride my old Pal any more
just at Christmas, as a reindeer dressed.
He was the childrens to ride, and they rode him with pride,
over thirty, but to them, still the best.
Three weeks 'fore he died we had one last fling,
took me back to a time without care.
To be just for one moment that thirteen year old girl
with the wind fanning out through her hair."

"Now I'll never see my old Pal stand again,
in the paddock, for his morning feed.
With the frost in his whiskers, sun filtering his mane,
and walk back, all refreshed and relieved.
But I've a lifetime of memories to treasure inside
and my children will tell their children too,
as they visit the place where he peacefully lies
and to the Old Gentlemen, say thank you."

McCORMACK'S FOUR WHEEL DRIVE MUSTER

The muster rolled like surging flood 'neath mountain ash and gum,
as sixty hand picked heifers led the mob out to the run.
The kids yelled at the breakaways, racing ponies through the scrub,
and cousins called the kelpies down on calves that pushed and shoved.

It's an old Australian custom six generations now have shared,
in the springtime, take the cattle out to the mountains up ahead.
The whole family comes together as they come from near and far,
and the children learn bush skills and sleep in swags 'neath shining star.

White dust rose like a mist spray that clothed and choked all near,
and hid the source of all the barking that was coming from the rear.
For grandma followed them up the hill then home to get some peace,
and left her son her three legged dog whose yelping would not cease.

It was the first time in his lifetime he hadn't mustered with his Dad,
but it wasn't the responsibility it was that dog that drove him mad.
He chose the pace, he called the shots from his station at the back,
'twas the others who showed their stockhorse skills for he never left the track.

When they dropped from the mountain's shoulder the path was narrow and steep,
it takes nerve to drive the cattle down tracks that would scarcely take a sheep.
But no-one stopped or faltered, the mountain horses held their way,
as they sat and slipped a four legged slide they trust them come what may.

But he stood alone above all them perched atop a rocky knoll,
for there's a time you get left behind when your mount is a Nissan Patrol.
Yes, our hardy mountain cattleman who rode in *Man from Snowy River*,
had bucked one colt too many and got split up to his liver.

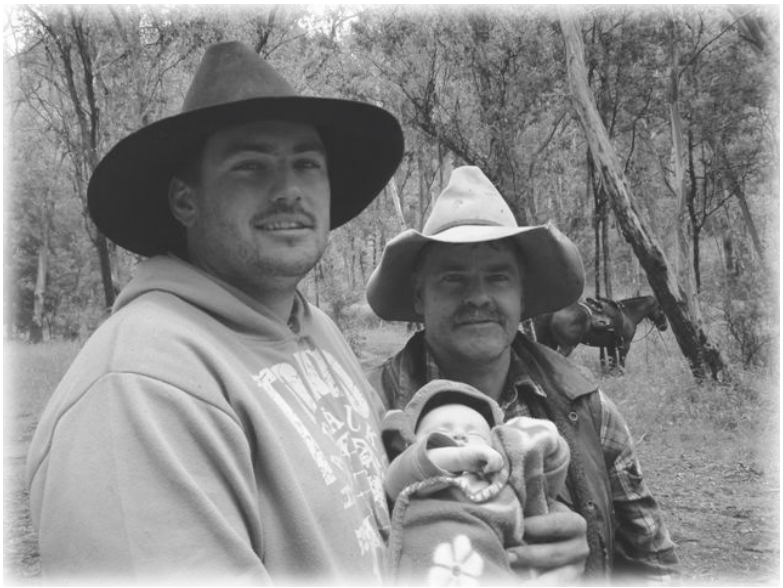
They shared in his frustration, you're no use mustering in a motor,
but they said that he went a step too far when he traded in his Toyota.
Still he knew the hills and knew the trails and the cattle's cunning ways,
and he drove to the flat to block a track down which might come some strays.

And sure enough, he knew his craft, down the track came half dozen,
but they showed as much respect for his Nissan as his Toyota loving cousin.
He ran to save his new machine but slipped, to his shame and horror,
those new boots for the Nissan's carpet would have to be cleaned by tomorrow.

He fell hard on his back as his stockwhip cracked and wrapped the leg of a cow,
who ran off in shock, dragged him over a rock and he furrowed the flat like a plough!
Then angry yelps filled the air as he lay in despair and saw his faithful small terrier friend
drive them back with a snarl and a bite as the cattle shot back round the bend.

That three legged runt had saved the day and he came to his master with pride,
but some pretty girls came over the hill and he threw him in the truck to hide.
For a cattleman has to look the part, and said when they asked "Where's ya dogs?"
That his Kelpies were somewhere behind the truck, sniffing drop-bears out of logs.

They ooe'd and sighed as he told them tales, cracking his stockwhip with ease,
and he left the truck as he showed them the tracks where he'd just roped and tied a beast.
Then the dog drew the brake and put paws on the wheel, looking droll,
now he's back on a horse, since a three-legged dog drove off with his Nissan Patrol.



Adam, Bruce and Jaxon McCormack

THE CATTLE ARE BACK

The creeping weeds are claiming back the well-worn stockyard path
as he strides with restless energy to the Bluff Hut's warming hearth.
It's fifty years since first he axed the timbers for the beams,
and packed the tin up for the roof, five thousand feet from the stream.



His horses' snorts are carried through the crisp cold mountain air,
and enter the hole in the rooftop, reminding him why he's there.
Though it saved his life from storm and snow he's forbidden to fix his hut;
the government's thrown the cattlemen out, and the National Park gates are shut.

He lies in wait for his neighbour as the dawn's pink blushes the gums,
he was rivals and worse with the father, hard men on neighbouring runs.
But adversity always enjoined them, he was saved when his stock stuck in snow,
once more they're in strife to their eyeballs, they must face it together they know.

A cattle camp is stirred to life, men rise from their swags with a yawn,
soft whump of a saddle and clank of a girth; the cattlemen ride with the dawn.
The eager stockhorse pricks his ears, faint hoof beats thud on the track,
it's the Merrijig crew and would you believe, they've bought the cattle back!

Yes the cattle are back in the mountains, the drovers unite with a roar;
and they swear they'll be back every year, 'till the mountains are shared once more.
They're droving from Heyfield and Dargo to meet in the high countries' heart,
where the valley is locked in by mountains only stock routes and rivers should part.

They're teaching the youngsters the lessons that only experience can teach,
how to guide the stock through Hells Window, when the outside world's out of reach.
It's the essence of being Australian, resourceful and tough when alone,
so the pioneer skills can live onward, for every Australian to own.

The cattle may all be impounded, it's happened before long ago,
yet they've vowed to meet in the valley, so across the high plains they go.
To be outlawed for living as your father - a human rights issue some say,
but country folk speak with their actions, and they'll laugh with the rangers one day.

The cattle run down the valley, to drink at the clear cool stream,
the weary horses earn their rest, while the riders reflect and dream.
Five days, and one more stage to make, they mount up without hesitation;
they come together and shake their hands, by the old Wonnangatta station.

The northern track is cut once more, as the country dries and changes,
you've got to know your watering points to cross the Barry Ranges.
The bellowing stock are pushed along, the stockwhip earns its place,
a dry camp they are watched all night, for fear they'll rush and race.

At Rose River valley the tall grasses wave, their families wait in the heat.
The hum of insects and people, where they've all come together to meet.
The children's cries rouse up the parents, their heroes raise dust on the track,
they've crossed the high country and would you believe, they've bought the cattle back!



WAITING ON A FIRE

The sluggish breezes barely stir the soupy, smoke tinged air,
the hazy sun is like a moon that shouldn't still be there.
The family sits in quiet calm, or so they'd have you think,
and say inconsequential things, and pour another drink.
The drumming of Grandma's fingers beats the droning of the flies;
the phone-calls answered, "Yes, we're great;" the people telling lies.
They've worked and farmed here all their life, you'd never call them liar,
so make allowance for them today, they're waiting on a fire.

The winds have waved erratic fronts from lightning's scattered pyres,
the local pub displays the map that marks the line of fires.
They've all joined up to make a ring from Tolmie to Jamieson town,
and waiting for their final move, we bring the cattle down.
They should be mustered up today to snow fed mountain streams,
but sweet green grass and drought relief are this year only dreams.
The mountains that were refuge from their paddocks brown and bare,
are nurturing a firestorm 'neath clouded wreaths of grey despair.

The hoses spread upon the grass, the mops and tubs in line,
are tried and tested once again, to pass the tensing time.
The pumps are checked and plans rehearsed in strained pretending calm,
apologies in advance are made for tomorrow's lack of charm.
A radio plays the ABC, our lifeline through the hours,
it names the spots of greatest risk, and then it mentions ours.
If you believed the papers, Mansfield town is vacant now,
but stubborn people joke, as Johnny Lovick herds his cows.

The media ask, "Why don't you leave?" They jut a defiant jaw,
"We've farmed here a hundred years, 'n' we'll farm a hundred more.
If we lose this place we're finished, there's nothing else we know,"
and the fire is brighter in their eyes than any a bushfire's glow.
Tomorrow may bring a cooling change, and soothe our waiting fears
but the TV predicts a firestorm, the worst in a hundred years.
So tonight we're laughing at the pub, with a spirit you must admire,
we're scared, but wouldn't be anywhere else, than waiting on a fire.

No one slept much here last night, the bark of every dog
and neighing horse and moaning bull, you can't sleep like a log.
The cloying smoke smells wakes you up, your heart is beating fast,
you rise and check for embers, of for spot fires in the grass.
The morning brings the hot north wind, the smoke is whipped away,
we yard the cows and bloody swear, 'cause it's too late to pray.
And finally it's coming; there's a grey-brown plume in sight,
my stomach knots up angrily, like I'm going in to fight.
Uncle Donny pulls his boots on, and snarls, "I hate a bloody fire."
We start the pump, and board the ute, we drive down to the wire.

But now the wind is at our backs, the change has come through fast,
the fire backs off to somewhere else, we breathe a sigh at last.
For though it's like a furnace with the dial at forty-one,
we've played at wind change lottery, and today looks like we won.
Tonight my swag is someone's home, someone who didn't win like us,
tomorrow the lottery starts again, but no-one makes a fuss.
The weeks go by, the fires spread, the stakes keep getting higher,
the strike teams back-burn every night, thank God they never tire.

"It's eight weeks and you're back", said Gran. "You ask if we're alright?"
"The fires have stalked this rim of hills, I've seen them every night.
They fought alone in the Howqua hills, with just experience and a mate
we smelt their smoke each morning, but all we could do was wait.
I've sent children up for cattle when the snows have come in fast,
then waited up for their return, when dusk had long since passed.
I drove a dying herd in eighty two, down dreary roads when things were dire
but the longest days I ever knew, were waiting, on a fire."

WHERE THE WATER RUNS UPHILL



It lies among the snowgums in a lee beneath the Bluff,
its posts aren't smooth and polished; they are freshly sawn and rough,
yet it sits the quiet clearing with a presence old and sure,
for fifty years the traveller's given thanks to reach its door.

Before the hut, their shelter was a windbreak built with stones,
where centuries older campfires are marked with shards of bones.
It's building, a trial of manhood for a lad of just fifteen,
taking tin by packhorse, five thousand feet above the stream.

This hut held many stories, some you wouldn't want to know,
and every year it mustered stockmen and their horses, from the snow.
It marks a deep connection with this place, as strong as blood and tears,
that spans the generations, and the ravages of the years.

The fire consumed the Bluff hut as they fought in smoke below,
a final blackened epitaph; a tough year's final blow.
Yet it didn't consume their spirit, friends came forth to help them on,
but why rebuild your cattlemen's hut when your cattle lease is gone?

One families' driving passion rose rekindled from the ground,
one son's creative spirit, and a drive inside him found,
one store of family knowledge and the will to pass it on
to teach a modern dreamtime story to the growing grandchildren.

Man's connection with this land is an ancient cultural dream,
passed down through generations as the secrets of hill and stream.
The early stockmen caught it from the drifting tribes and tales,
which helped them find the pastures, and the winding mountain trails.

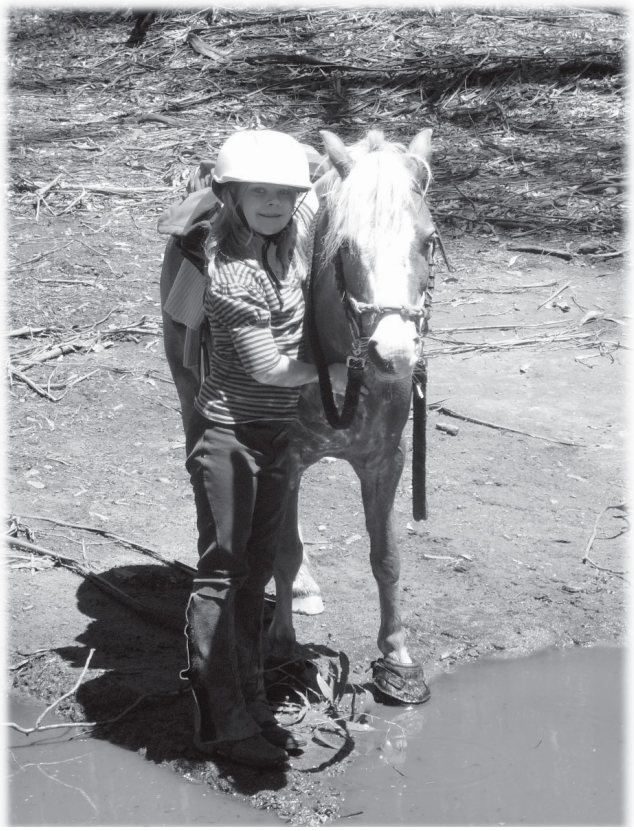
Our annual cattle muster to the high plains in the Spring,
perhaps was not much different from a far, far older thing.
It's ironic we can't own the mountains just like those before,
and our leases, like their freedom, were removed by government law.

Spring flowers are framed by timber rails, the packhorse still can pass,
and the children's falls are cushioned by the waving mountain grass,
for they're bequeathed our spirit and we can show them still,
that special glade beneath the Bluff, where the water runs uphill.



WHAT THE CATTLEMEN TAUGHT ME

by Emily Tuffen



My pony's name is Patchy, my mother broke him in for free,
we rode the city protest ride when he was only three.
The horses shied from funny sights, screeching trams instead of snakes,
but the worst bit was Jim Treasure who used my pony's bum as brakes!

I begged my mum to let me ride to help the cattlemen's cause,
they shouldn't lock the cattle out with stupid city laws.
I've seen the bush come back to life after a wild bush fire,
it's better where the cattle were, I swear I ain't no liar.

I rode here from the Howqua, on the winding packhorse track,
the one Fred Fry's horse took when he was drunk atop his back.
Graham Stoney was my age when he first came through with cattle,
but the packhorse bolted home spilling all his food and tackle.

We camped last night at Stockyard where the magic horse yards are,
that filled themselves with cattle which had come from near and far.
They took them through the national park, my mother was a drover,
hid the cattle on Mount Howitt, when they searched it misted over.

They caught mum with the cattle, she said the parkies were elated,
but they couldn't fine the owner 'cos the cows were all donated.
They raced the horses for the TV when they reached the Wonnongatta,
but after we saw mum on the news, they sent a troopie in to get her.

The ranger caught her with the cattle and stood tall upon a log,
'till she pointed out their four wheel drive had sunk into a bog.
She solemnly swore to take them home if they would only let her,
and she met me at Rose River at the Cattlemen's Get-Together.

Last night we stopped at McCormacks 'n asked Bruce where to get some grub.
It's rightly named as Lovick's lane 'cos it leads straight to Merrijig pub!
So this is my fourth cattlemen's, one day I'll be a drover,
we'll outlive the greenies and once more we'll drove the mountains over.



THE LAST PIONEERS

dedicated to Pete McCormack

Did you miss them droving cattle down our stock routes long and wide?
When dusty man and beast were tested by a fierce, dry countryside?
Do you wish you'd seen the Clydesdales hauling furrows 'cross the flat?
Or straining bullocks bellow wool in from a flooded outback track?

We stand a still young nation; our past is near yet much we've lost,
of the pioneering families who blazed the trail, and paid the cost
and became a different people, shaped by hard and ancient hand,
made dryly tough and independent, to love this withering land.

We have tamed the mighty distance, now the highway not the track,
our helicopters muster cattle out across the far outback.
We have cleared the land and fenced it, and old, hard days are out,
but we haven't tamed the mountains, and we still need them in the drought.

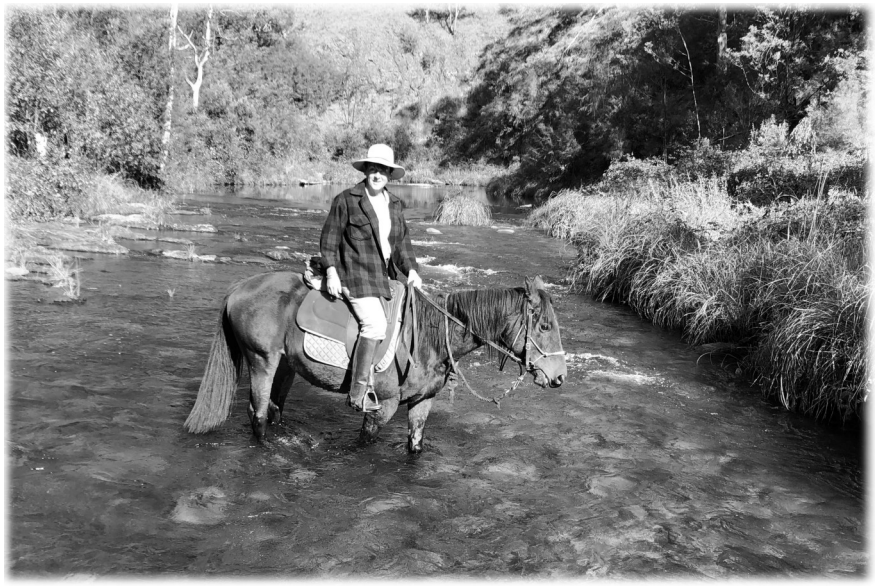
For there's one link to the droving days still living on the range,
which automation can't replace, or economics grow and change.
Where the cattle still are driven, slowly stringing up the track,
and the stock horse and the cattle dog's nostrils flare at the stock whip's crack.

Where tracks carved by generations guide a tradition unchanged,
for we still have mountain cattlemen, who ride upon the range.
Still they muster through the autumn, tailing strays until they drop,
for the early snows cause havoc if the stock are caught "up top."

Of the leases in their hundreds, scarcely fifty now are left,
the Caledonia fires closed three, and the greenies got the rest.
A hundred and fifty cattle, a five thousand acre lease,
it isn't economic, and it ain't a life of ease.

But if you're lost in our mountains, find a mustering hut to hide,
when only bushman's skills can find you, pray once more the cattlemen ride.
Then spare a thought for a way of life with its future so unclear,
and pray that we don't lose for good, our last pioneers.

IN THE SPRINGTIME



Can you smell the mountain heather where the fleet wild horses go,
can you taste the tang of springtime from the crisp, white melting snow?
Can you feel excitement stirring when a wild mob comes in sight,
will you share your days adventures round the campfire that same night?

Are you happy without houses, just a swag to call your home,
can you feel the bush around you, so you're never on your own?
Remember riding 'cross the high plains without comfort, fear or care,
did the freedom sit upon you, can you see yourself still there?

I have missed the mighty musters where they split the big mixed mobs,
I have wasted years in cities with a plodding office job,
but I haven't lost my wonder or the skill to ride a horse,
and the high plains are still waiting, they draw me back, of course.

There's that lee beside Mount Howitt where we made the cattle yards,
the Herefords grazed content with twisted snowgums as their guards.
We'll cook from that same campfire as the sun sinks low and round,
and we'll stare at freezing, blazing stars 'till dew is on the ground.

For the love of bush is in me and I'll never let it go,
and my love for you grows deeper than the deepest drifts of snow.
So think of me this winter while the hot coals slowly glow,
we've a track to take together, at the melting of the snow.

A FRIEND IN THE MOUNTAINS

The clinking of the hobbles as they rattle on the pack,
tells you someone else is up here, someone coming down the track.
When you're riding 'cross the mountains far from road or four wheel drive,
when the wind is driving in your face and you know that you're alive,
the blokes you meet are special, and they've bushmen's skills you'd pride,
to get their horse up here alone, you know that they can really ride.
It's a three day trek from Sheepyard Flat, it takes a special breed,
and if you met up with Trevor, he'd have a packhorse on the lead.

There's some you nod and pass on by and some you have a yarn
some you're glad to leave alone but none that'd cause you harm.
You learn a lot about the bush from those that love it too,
for the ones that pack the Howitt Spur are very, very few.
When his grown up children join him to roll their swags beneath the star,
a man will know he's passed a love to them that nothing else can mar.
Of those you welcome to your campfire, those who never make a boast,
it's fair to say that I remember Trevor like that the most.

When the camp is made in snowgums and the horses settle down,
when the fire is smoking dinner and sunset wears its purple gown,
when misty tendrils float the stream and birdsong calls the evening chills,
there's a magic for the very few that ride across these hills.
When you're fixing broken stirrups with some string and rusty wire,
then you think about the bushmen who you'd like to share your fire.
If my stockhorse pricks its ears then maybe someone's riding late,
and if I hear hobbles clinking, I'll be looking for you, mate.



WILL YOU WALK WITH ME?

Will you walk with me where the wild winds blow,
Where the mountain goat makes its track?
Will you sip the dew from a high rocky ledge,
up country; to the far outback?

Will you wake with me to the Kookaburras call,
as the bush hums to life with the dawn?
Will you bathe with me against stream cooled rocks,
where the platypus hunts in the morn?

Will you rest with me at the peace of the dusk,
while a red glow farewells the sky?
Will you lie with me as full moon sails the night,
and the shooting stars burn, then die?

Will you share with me the simple things I love,
in case some of them stir you too?
Will you open your heart to the beauty around,
and let in something tender and new?

There's a million trails your life can walk down,
many days to be filled 'fore they've done,
and if you walk with me where the wild winds blow,
I will give you the taste of just one.





AT THE STATION

At the station where I met her nigh on twenty years ago,
there's a peaceful hush that settles with the dusk.
The breaking yards are quiet, men and horses part their ways,
and a clearness comes with settling of the dust.

It's that clearness I see now yet I search for something else,
as my stockhorse clears the final wall.
For I've come back on a mission since that letter from me mate,
which he wrote when he took his final fall.

We'd both been mountain riders from as soon as we could walk,
and at fifteen done a muster on our own.
We thought we knew it all when we became station breakers,
and me the one who bought the brumbies home.

But it was Annie taught us manners, how to dance and how to read,
she tamed our wild young spirits with her grace.
But she couldn't stop us showing off as rivals for her hand,
until the stallion threw me lifeless on me face.

It was me mate who dragged me out between those flailing hooves,
to the hospital, a long and lonely stay.
I even missed their wedding when I feigned my illness worse,
and when they returned I'd ridden far away.

But now I'm back from Queensland to the hills round Corryong,
this time I won't let down me mate.
For he's left behind five children and a widow at the station,
my God – that's her – she's standing at the gate.

WITH YOU NEAR ME

The darkling skies draw down the hill and change the greens to dun,
they send a cool wind through the trees once warm with evening sun.
They set the shadows deeper over buildings rough and rude,
and with all at their disposal bring to me a sombre mood.
For it's lonely in the valley now the people have all gone,
and the grey mists rise upon the lake by moonlight pale and wan.
They all conspire to bring a chill and tinge the dark with fear,
but all their efforts come to naught; they can't, for you are here.

Six months have passed since fading sun last lit your golden hair,
and sunsets light an empty space above your empty chair.
The homestead creaks and groans alone without your soft firm tread,
your horse still looks up sharply when there's movement up ahead.
The stream is burbling stronger and frees the water wheel from weed,
and lush green grass fills paddocks where the cattle munch their feed.
And though the drought is broken and I shouldn't feel despair,
it hangs around me like a cloud, but lifts when you are here.

I felt you when the horses splashed and panicked in deep snow
as sunshine found the southern slopes, to share its springtime glow.
I felt you on the summit when the view went on forever,
and ridges rose to distant peaks with purple flowers like heather.
But most of all I feel your love when tired and all alone,
half the meal I cooked is wasted and there's silence on the phone.
Sometimes it's lonely in a crowd, they talk and I don't hear
but by a lonely fire at sundown I feel peace, because you're near.

Soon I'll climb out this deep valley where my spirit has withdrawn,
to mend itself and gather strength and stronger be reborn.
I'll reach the light beyond the hill and face the trials and strife,
then I won't need your presence though I'll love you all my life.
One day you'll be remembered 'cause of change that we'll push for,
and no man claim provocation to escape the murder law.
And I'll move on and love again when all of that has ceased,
but for now I'm glad you're with me, here in spirit still, at least.

A TIME IN THE DAY



There's a time in the day for holding hands,
I think it's 'tween dusk and last light,
as the stream gently winds
and the breeze strokes the vines
and the day settles down to the night.

There's a time in the day for sharing.
how you feel now your tasks are all done,
the scents that you smelt
and the feelings you felt
holding hands cements a good days done.

It may be you're there with your one true love,
or an old love renewed to the sun,
who knows it could be
someone new, wild and free
at the sunset, hold hands and be one.

There's many a chance that we don't get to try,
many seen, but we passed them by
at the end of the day
who can wonder what may
just hold hands, say you gave it a try.

So whatever your rush with its madness and haste,
to the one that you're with, give your trust,
take their hand without fear
just be glad they are near
and rejoice you are living, not dust.

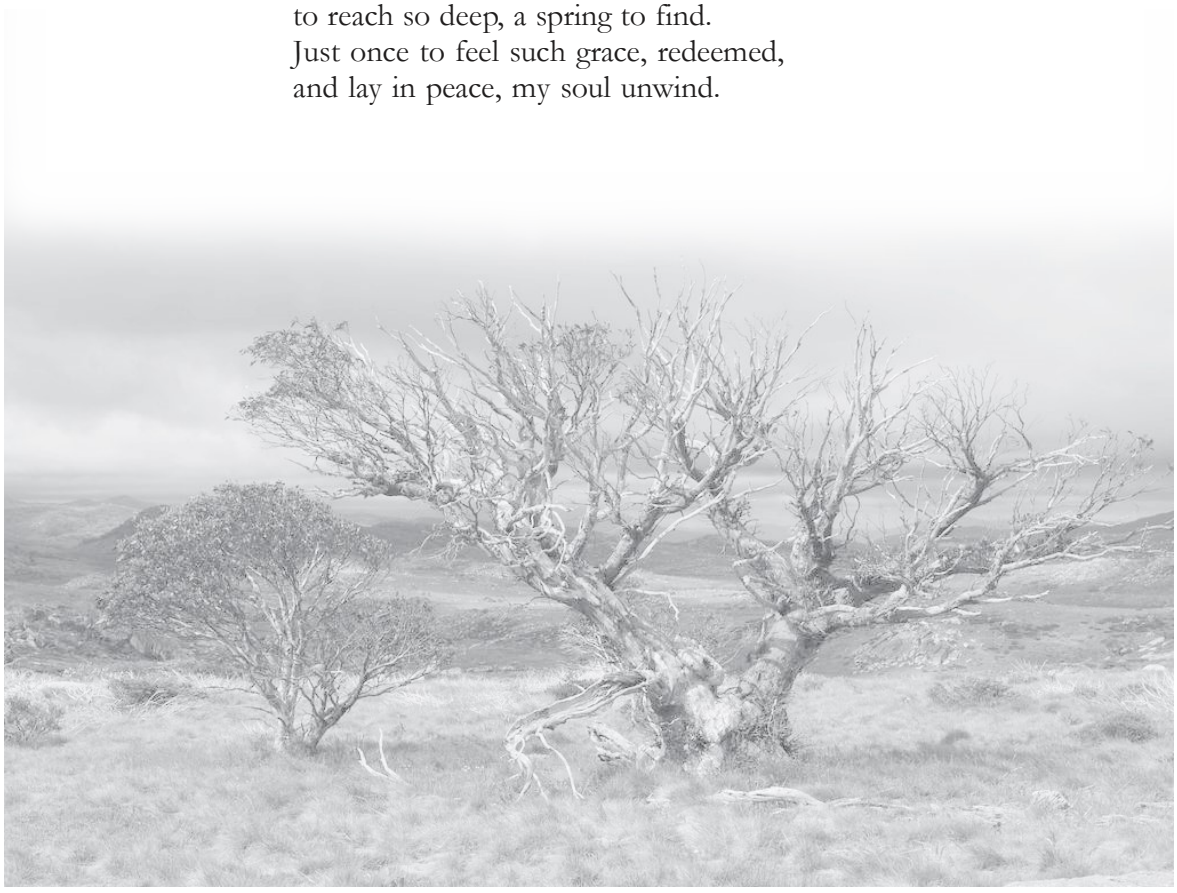
REDEEMED

Through greying cloud, through clinging mist,
the searcher climbs and climbs again.
From elusive shadow, from soft foot fall
his heart beats louder than the rain.

A sudden squall and all is lost,
the mountains remind him who is king.
And stumbling here and stumbling there,
his hoarse cries make the ranges ring.

Through sweating rage, through hope still-dashed,
a calm upon the range is cast.
And all revealed and all concealed,
the seeker finds himself at last.

I did not mean to walk so far,
to reach so deep, a spring to find.
Just once to feel such grace, redeemed,
and lay in peace, my soul unwind.



A YEAR WORTH WAITING

I saw you first from horseback, by the show jumps, drinking tea,
when I limped off grazed and bleeding your tender smile glowed into me.
Your golden hair brushed softly as you picked the gravel out,
and your soothing voice distracted me as I tried hard not to shout.
Soft autumn sun lit on your face, as you laughed "I'll do no harm!"
and as you leant in closer I felt goose-bumps on my arm.
I wasn't seeking romance; I'd a road to take alone,
but your caring made it easier and I took your warmth back home.

I saw you in the winter; you bought the jumping saddle round,
in the vain but valiant hope that it would keep me from the ground.
Wind raddled rain swept past us as you stood there in my door,
and we planned a group adventure while our drips met on the floor.
You glanced in to the embered fire, the cottage filled with warm,
and looked at me with words unsaid, your mouth could not quite form,
You wouldn't come inside to chat and share the fireside glow,
and only left your charm with me when you turned and chose to go.

I saw you in the springtime, the Howqua gurgling its delight,
your green eyes matched the valleys' calm in rainfall softened light,
as you rode beside me gently, mindful of my tender knee,
which you'd bandaged only yesterday when I whacked it on a tree.
I watched you laugh as toddlers toiled up dripping from the stream,
you sent them back in warm dry clothes, which they promptly paddled clean.
You stayed to clean the homestead so I wasn't left alone,
and I wished with wistful envy a girl like you could be my own.

I saw you at the summers' end; we rode across the mountains,
the only one to smile, it rained till streams turned into fountains.
Stirling's mountain ash gave way to misty snow gums bowed with sleet,
at Craig's hut for icy lunch you laughed despite your freezing feet.
Glistening bridles dripped with oilskins through an air so cool and clean,
and you sang the green King Valley down as our track became a stream.
It was you that passed the hot soup round to counter the evening damp,
and asked me for a poem, by our fire, at the cattle camp.

I saw you in the autumn, when I jumped and didn't fall,
you were standing by the practice ring, you hardly moved at all.
You had that same look on your face, this time out the words had flown,
and spoke out my good fortune, told me you're now on your own.
I looked into your eyes and saw you scared as never before,
and realised the courage it took, I felt in a kind of awe.
My mind was slow my lips all dumb like a boxer after a bout
I took a mighty breath of air and finally, asked you out.

Now I've seen you on a hundred rides and smiling in our shed,
we've watched the sunsets, swam at dawn, left not a word unsaid,
your children now can ride to school, my daughters are your friend,
we've built a home together where Meander makes its bend.
And looking back it dawns on me, my good fortune, I was slow,
to see you were always looking after me, and only now, I know,
and I rejoice at all the things we share and love as one through life,
and this Autumn, with our friends around, I'll see you as my wife.



AN EMAIL TO NARDOO

Nardoo station was gripped by drought in 2003. They'd been feeding out cotton waste to two mobs of sheep one hundred and fifty kilometres apart for six months, so husband and wife had hardly seen each other. They were only back together because one mob had to be sacrificed as the feed ran out. They badly needed a holiday. Still, this fourth generation family provided great bush hospitality to a visiting poet. The next day I was astounded at the difference with Canaervon Gorge national park, and its waist high grass. So I penned a holiday invitation……

To the crew at Nardoo station it's time to quit the drought,
Canaervon Gorge waits cool and still, so best you come on out.
The creeks are flowing crystal clear, green grass up to your waist,
you might forget ten thousand ewes that died out on your place.

Now some would load the ute up with a picnic and some hams,
but I advise the road train with a thousand starving lambs.
They must all need a mighty feed; this park here's short on stock,
and without you they'd all flounder and the bushfires burn the lot.

There's a hose down stop at Roma, you can wash the sheep 'fore bed,
the fleece round here are clean and white, not outback dirty red,
shampoo and blow dry dripping lambs if you want them to fit in,
all sleek and fat's the go 'round here, not flyblown, drawn and thin.

Tie marker flags upon their backs and try to watch their track,
they keep the grass so thick and tall, you'll never get them back.
Hold hard the Kelpies by the mob so the changes won't surprise them,
or they'll go muster goats instead 'cos they won't recognise 'em.

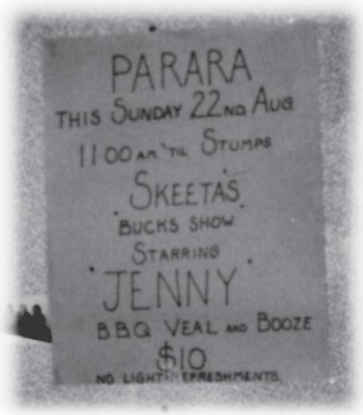
The water here is funny 'cos it's lost that sulphur smell,
and it don't feel soft and slimy, so bring lots of soap as well.
And after just three minutes, don't throw people out the shower,
the locals swear it's legal here to soak for half an hour!

Here comes a might thunderstorm - you remember heavy rain?
It's the stuff that shifts your topsoil to your neighbours place again.
So don't dance naked in it or you'll make the tourists stare,
just grit your teeth and looked relaxed as if you couldn't care.

Then when its time to head back home, you'll need a second rig,
two groaning road trains just to hold your lambs as fat as pigs.
If they disdain they dry Paroo, and ask how they'll stay fat,
the boys will all be wethers soon and that will fix up that.

Now you're the ones with fancy sheep, the wheel it has full turned,
the shearers wryly smile and ask "will that be cut or permed?"
Those ewes so spoilt will hate the dirt, the muster will be taxing,
and when you think the crutching's done, they'll want bikini waxing!

SKEETER SMITH'S WEDDING



Skeeter Smith the grazier was known for far and wide
as a small man with a mighty thirst, which could not be denied.

He was left at the bar after footy games, a beer mat on his livery,
that read: "Ardrossan, South Australia, promise cash paid on delivery."
One week he missed the next home game; the landlord's daughter was keen,
he stayed at the pub, and to pay for his grog, sold three sheep, sight unseen.
All the boys were soft on Skeeter, 'cos he was so very small,
he'd wander by, take a beer from the fridge, an' no-one worried at all.
When big Pat caught him with his wife upon the kitchen table,
he said "D'you mind, we've got to eat off that, so clean it – when you're able!"

When Skeeter heard the landlord say he'd buy him a barrel of beer,
his eyes lit up, he licked his lips, he gave an almighty cheer.
But the landlord hadn't finished, and went on, to his dismay;
"The day that you get married!" And Skeeter slunk to cut some hay.
For Skeeter Smith the grazier was a bachelor through and through;
between the tractor and the bar there's only so much a bloke can do!
And all the girls drank at the bottom pub where he seldom sent at all,
a man of habit was Skeeter, but the writing was on the wall.

For the news flew round the country town, the challenge was laid down,
it filtered into the bottom pub where dwelled a drinker of renown.
Just the talk of all that free beer sent young Helen all a-quiver,
and she's heard that Skeeter, although small, was a man who could deliver.
So she changed her choice of pub that night, the two went head to head,
and what went on at Skeeters place is better left unsaid.
They'd known each other since schooldays, so Helen claimed they tarried,
but it only took a week 'fore they announced they're getting married.

The bucks turn was a classic show, 'twas held at the shearing shed,
and the boys raced EH Holdens round a track of dusty red.
The hat went round for a special turn they'd bought down from the city,
Her name was Jenny, rumoured a stripper, exotic and pretty.
The boys were pretty plastered when she was bought in behind a sheet,
anticipation building as they howled and stamped their feet.
When Skeeter was taken backstage the act was looking shonky,
the sheet was raised, Skeeter was naked, and tied on to a donkey!"

The droning of the blowflies woke the boys up from the dead,
then some joker drove a mob of bleating sheep into the shed.
"Don't show your face in town you blokes, you'd better stop away,
for the annual flower festival was being held today.
They've all been tramped and eaten, Jenny's left you in the lurch
she was grazin' with a naked rider on when the girls rolled up to church."
Well Skeeter and Helen finally wed, the last to leave their own reception,
but their donkey home has a nosebag on and it knew the right direction.





NOAH'S ARK: THE BUSHFIRE RENOVATION

Our place is south of Kinglake – well – south of where it used to be,
we've made a tranquil bushland from a farm of rabbit and blackberry.
The machinery shed's on the hilltop, it's roof gives a ripper view,
but on Black Saturday we learned it can give you a bad one, too.
The smoke rose straight a thousand feet, like some grey-white mountainside,
the southerly change blew to eerie red, that glowed down the Great Divide.
My wife cooked dinner for fire-crews, glad we were all set to flee,
our fire plan was like a popgun, against the firestorm's artillery.

The phone rang hot all next day long from Strathewen to Arthurs Creek,
they'd fought and lived and cared for mates – could some stay here next week?
At dusk we both looked around our place; two minds with one thought shared,
if we're staying on and sheltering friends, we'll need to be better prepared.
Now we love our greenie council that sends inspectors round,
we catch our strays before they do and send them to the pound.
But they're deadly keen to get you cutting trees in fire breaks,
they check the aerial photos a lot more than the rates.

You have to get an arborist in before you touch a tree,
it takes six months to get them round – tied up with council, you see.
Then you apply back to the council, and they are busy too,
so the trees keep growing closer, and there's nothing you can do!
My brother in law arrived with the dawn, a chainsaw on his hip,
I showed him the trees, he grinned ear to ear, said "Beauty, let it rip!"
I said, "It's green wedge conservation zone with special overlay,"
when I turned around, he's chain sawed our shade, yelling "Can't hear what you say!"

"Ah stuff it," I said, "North wind's due in four days, it'll burn down every tree."
He sang "We haven't had that spirit here since nineteen eighty three."
The front garden went leaving just one rose looking sad, bereft and forlorn,
when I got back from clearing the firebreak he'd concreted over our lawn.
"I crushed all the trees down the driveway to get in the dozer and bin,
it meant I could bulldoze the garden beds and fill the wetlands in."
"It's a shame about the veggie patch, the orchard's no loss, it looked dead,
and I've blue-boarded all of the windows, it looks more like a fort than a shed!"

I listened to chainsaws on the breeze and breathed that sweet welding smell,
with the bushfire still burning just over the hill, the place was looking like hell.
There's corrugated iron across the front and wherever he could wire it,
I won't surprised if the Hells Angels rang and ask if they can hire it.
What was once our peaceful bush retreat, a haven of green and still,
looks like a government detention centre, on bald, bare hill.
But when the kids let our animals two by two into it's cavernous dark,
we had to smile, 'cos they'd realised, we've rebuilt Noah's Ark.

THE BARCOO RESCUE

Clean night without a whisk of wind to flicker the firelight's flame
the squatter dozed from a days hard work and his wife asked was I to blame.
"I heard you tried teaching old Des to swim 'neath the gums by the Barcoo pool,
and were your efforts met with a win? For he came back and swore like a fool!"

"I barely survived myself," I grinned, "He sank in my arms like a stone,
surfaced white as a sheet after strangling me, how's he take that boat out alone?"
"Last year these stars shone bright," she said, "but a breeze set the embers aglow,
for the Barcoo had stirred from its slumber deep and the still waters started to flow."

"For hundreds of miles to the North the rains had pelted for days on the plain,
and a mighty big flood was headed down here, to the green channel country again.
We shifted our stock to the higher ground along with their feed and our gear,
for we could be waitin' six weeks or more before road or air-strip were clear.

All night water rose with muted roar, then swept 'cross the plain like a tide,
an hour before dawn the radio called, from the woman on the other side.
"My man's away droving out West," she cried, "my kids to the rooftop I've borne,
but the water is washing the house stumps away, the place will be gone by the dawn."

"Then a saddle slapped hard on our Clydesdale's back, and a snort as the girth pulled tight,
Des kept the old boy for billy tea rides, but he'd do more than that, tonight.
The pair walked down to the floodplain edge, thick black waters gathered them in,
my light showed them swim to the bank for boat, tied onto a red gum limb.

There he left the old horse and his boat burbled on, as great logs bore down all around,
he twisted and dodged and bumped on through, until their veranda he found.
The Clydie held on for his owners return, as the waters rose over the bank,
till he swam to keep up his place on the lead, he wouldn't leave Des till he sank."

"Then the generator died and the light's last glare lit the boat, tied back to the tree,
but midst the swirling suck of the waters no sign of my man did I see.
Alone in the dark, I walked past the edge, strong current pulled hard at my legs,
then a monster splashed up with streaming snout 'twas the horse, two kids, Mum and Des."

Quietly she sat and sipped at her tea, while her man snored away at her side,
the fire flared up and I saw that she shook, but one final question I plied.
"So what of the TV and paper reports, children saved by a man who can't swim?"
"We don't call that news, just helping a friend, and tomorrow try not to drown him!"

ON SOLDEIRS ROAD

"It's only an old pile of stones now," he said, "the fruit trees are all that remain,
it's rocky hard ground, but there's room for a dam, and the power lines run down the lane."
"This Soldiers Road sale has some good blocks for grabs, there's town water to the main road.
You can even get onto the internet now, 'cos the telephone network has grow'd."

So even a humble bush block today, civilisations web birds like glue.
I lifted my eyes to the far great divide, would those mountains get plugged in too?
A light swirling breeze fanned the tangled grey gums, red dust from cattle feet fled.
Will it be the same bush we wake up to tomorrow, with the radio news in our bed?

In the shimmering heats' white daze I walked, woke by crows cawing news vaguely ill,
to find at my feet these two rocky mounds, side by side on the brow of the hill.
But too small and forlorn for a couple they seemed, and I wondered what mystery their story,
and of the bush folk first to build on this block, him returned with his soldier's grim story.

She held on for letters that came, oh so late from Gallipoli, Flanders and France.
Praying her school love would come back a man scarce sixteen when he took that bold chance.
He'd aged ten years more, marching back into town with the pitiful few that weren't killed.
But he'd bought her back a gold wedding ring, and a soldiers block on which they'd build.

"It's only a pile of stones now," he said, "but it'll be our homestead right soon,
we'll plant your fruit cuttings brought in from the town, and a garden we'll have in sweet bloom."
"A verandah will catch the Divide's cooling breeze, with the wild untamed range for a view.
It's not so much now, but forever a home, when you bear forth our own little two."

KALABANCORO DAWN



The softest sluicing of the bucket as the water well is drawn
betrays the haunting sense of stillness that precludes the break of dawn.
Languid wailing calls the faith to prayer, cock crows slowly drift away,
spice from cooking fires wafts upwards and the donkeys' in it's dray.

Dust from countless sweeping brushes rising proud their patch of ground
coats the giant red disk of the sun 'till it breaks free, full and round.
A lilting bowl of dishes floats high along the mud brick wall,
an open door reveals the woman below, smiling, colourful and tall.

THE TRACK LESS TRAVELLED

You can smell the mountain heather where the fleet wild horses go,
you can taste the tang of springtime from the crisp white melting snow.
Your face will numb and eyes will run, till at your campfire you arrive
for spring rides through the mountains and you know that you're alive.

Could you be happy without houses, just a swag to call your home?
Could you feel the bush around you so you're never on your own?
Would you ride across the high plains without comfort, fear or care?
Would the freedom sit upon you, could you see yourself up there?

I have missed the mighty musters where they split the giant mob.
I have wasted years in cities with a plodding office job,
but I haven't lost my wonder or the skill to ride a horse,
the high plains are still waiting, and they call me back of course.

There's a lee beside Mount Howitt ringed by twisted snow-gum guards
and I'd love to share it with you, while our horses steam the yards.
We can drink the purple sunset as the sun sinks low and round
and stare at freezing, blazing stars till dew is on the ground.

For the love of bush is in me and I'll never let it go, and now
my love for you grows deeper than the deepest drifts of snow.
So share a dream this winter as the hot coals brightly glow
and let's take the track less travelled, at the melting of the snow.



BALING

We drove the Yarra Valley with our daughter, float and horse,
we couldn't believe the tall green grass, we'd found a magic source.
They'd slashed and left the grass to rot, there's more than they could use,
in places it was past waist high, just saved for kangaroos.
"You're letting it go to waste," we said, "you ought to bale it up."
So many grassy places, you could bale to Koo-Wee-Rup.

We got home to our dried-up place which looked a bloody failure,
then, we loaded fifty head of beef, a slasher and a baler.
No more we drove them upward, to mountain summer feed,
it's just another kick in the guts we really didn't need.
So we're coming down from Dargo where the earth is hard as rock,
the springs and dams are all dried up, we're ready to shoot our stock.

We baled the Princes Highway, grass that no-one seemed to own,
and when we reached Traralgon, we let the cattle roam.
We baled around the cricket grounds and up some fancy drives,
our camp spots dwelt in deep green grass, the cattle seemed to thrive.
We sent trucks of hay bales homeward time and time again,
got kind of used to greenery, and even used to rain.

The Council came and saw us 'cos the word had got around,
then they offered to pay us as their contractor broke down.
Our machinery was struggling from all the wear and tear,
a mechanic's a two hour drive back home, but here they're everywhere.
We baled our way past factories where the air was rank and gritty,
then we had to do some thinking 'cos we'd run into the city.

We baled along the Yarra but just baled litter and weeds,
then we baled ourselves some brown snakes that were hiding in the reeds.
We baled the Parliament gardens, 'cos the pollies were away,
till we finally had to face it, all the grass was turned to hay.
So we offered to bale up gardens for a very modest fee,
we baled azaleas and lavender and were offered cups of tea.

We had to send the cattle back, all overweight and sick,
been a thunderstorm back home, they'll get some good green pick.
At last the baler gummed right up, it's time to head for home,
we hope you like our handiwork, and the baler's up for loan.
If next year we're still in drought, we'll come back on a mission,
and if drought relief's too late again - we'll bale a politician.

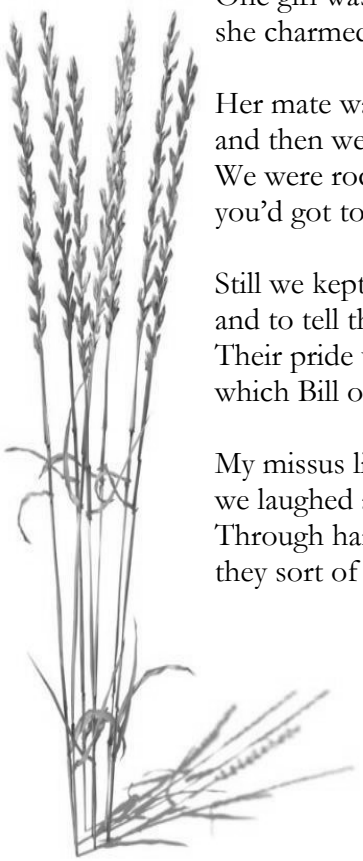


A LETTER TO FITZROY NORTH

You can tell our town's tradition by the silos standing tall.
Rupanyup's a wheat town, but now there ain't no wheat at all.
And what's a bloke to do all day when there ain't no crop to cut,
when drought sits like an overdraft and your only pub is shut?

The shutting of our grand old pub was like the tolling of a bell,
the heart's been ripped out of our town and most of the liver as well!
We keep on keeping on because we know no other way,
instead of bagging grain we're baling sorry looking hay.

Then glad news was spread about, more blessed than the rain,
two new women reopened our pub, we could socialise again!
One girl was from the city and she's as pretty as a peach,
she charmed the cockies from the field and grace and manners teach.



Her mate was strong and worked backstage, she once moved props for thespians,
and then we got the bombshell, our blokey pub was run by lesbians!
We were rocked down to our holeproofs by the scandal about town,
you'd got to admit for gossip it was hard to put it down.

Still we kept on keeping on because our pub is still our pub,
and to tell the honest truth they served some pretty decent grub.
Their pride was Chicken Parma. Garlic Prawns, it had the lot,
which Bill ordered as "Cholesterol with more cholesterol on top!"

My missus liked the pretty barmaid, she knew I didn't have a chance,
we laughed as blokes from out of town got led a merry dance.
Through hard work and perseverance, which we all related to,
they sort of won a place with us, a place that's held by very few.

We got to meet their funny friends who came up from the smoke,
we shared a different language but we could always share a joke.
Even the arch conservative, a battered old cocky called Hogan,
was proud to say his new best friend was a pierced nosed, cropped haired bogan.

I guess we knew our look on life was staid and kind of narrow,
we could do with more broadacre view instead of same old rut and harrow.
That dismal drought was broken, by a three-foot flood of rain,
and all our bales of crappy hay went floating down the drain.

They say that bad things come in threes and we were out of luck,
to follow drought and flooding rain our bloomin' pub went shut!
For a business run on partnership is only as strong as the pair,
our barmaid fell for a city chick with a BMW and purple hair.

So now we're just a poor wheat town bereft of charm and culture,
Bill said the food at the footy club would scarce attract a vulture.
So when you read this letter put our sign on walls and stairs,
in trendy North Fitzroy where girls we want all sit in pairs.

It says "Wanted, two good lesbians, we won't take anything but,
to bring taste and life and culture back to our pub at Rupanyup!"



UNDER THE SHADOW AND OUT TO THE LIGHT

Sunday – memorial service

Under the shadow of the towering smoke,
the Arthurs Creek gathering laugh and joke.
Helping strangers and cheering their friends,
live testament to those we won't see again.
The fires that raced through now lurk on the hill,
a hundred houses, now thirty stand, still.
Red bands on their wrists and hearts on their sleeve,
the survivors of Strathewen are a special breed.
The end of the valley and far from the crowd,
shy of the media and stubborn and proud.

Thursday

Under the glow of the red sun setting,
on the oval we gather in memory fitting.
Children sing of life and brighter days,
volunteers and service crews are all praised.
A fire twice intense as Ash Wednesday's black day.
Nothing anyone could do, it just happened, ok.
Many are in a dark valley of pain,
we'll come out together when the bush greens again.

Saturday 13th

Under the dust and smouldering ember,
they carried a journey that we should remember.
Bulldozers and backhoes, utes and fire crews,
a valley to enter, to find a living few.
They chain-sawed and pushed on through
while their houses burned they did what they knew.
Into the night and through to the dawn,
till each survivor was found, tired and drawn.
That path they blazed in the heat and our hearts,
leads us out this dark valley, we all play our part.

This account of Black Saturday comes from the writer's personal experience.

ON THE MOUNTAIN

Down the dusky glades of sundown, where golden colours leave their glow,
you can hear the quietness settle in the valley far below.
Soft winds slow to weary languor as the bird calls come to light,
their soothing tones draw us to slumber as they warble in the night.

The flies have finally found a tree to rest as cooling peace is sinking down,
beneath the red glow of horizon shines the heather's purple gown.
As the campfire boils the billy and there's no more work to do,
you can breathe in sweet redemption; a greater force looks over you.

Like the animals around us let your mind still with the night,
with no net or television it feels tranquil and quite right.
Let your heartbeat slow and steady… feel your racing mind let go,
and you may find that inner peace…. that all the bushfolk know.



EASE OUR BURDEN

"Come and share the log, my friend, and sit down by my fire,
like your mob did down Walgett way when things were kind of dire.
I was just a new chum then; I couldn't hitch a lift.
The town and water were 40 ks, I faced an all-night shift.
Two black boys walked on by, they stopped and had a yarn,
I shared the last of my water, washed a sore on the young one's arm.
They treed a Goanna and roasted it with a pair of emu eggs,
found some water in a tree-fork, filtered and drank the dirty dregs."

The moon rose high as we tramped across a flat and stoneless plain,
criss-crossed by dried up gullies, we talked of drought and rain.
I was English, dumb and curious, I knew only Goolagong and Ella,
they were locals, guarded and wary, yet helping this whitey fella.
We got along like people do, I thought it nothing strange,
I hadn't yet learned the racism the whites bring to the range.
They lived with Grandma, showed respect, and shared the old bark hut.
She said I needed learning, found a swag and my eyes shut.

It's thirty five years I'm here now, I'm Aussie as a stump jump plough
as are my daughters and my grandkids….but I'm a racist now.
I learned new ways from my country mates, with their guns and dirty grunge
and had some bad encounters with some drunks that call me Bunge.
We've all got those same stories, of how we wasn't treated right,
we've put up our defences to stem the hurt we feel at night.
But then, my grandkids play with your grandkids and put us all to shame,
if we want our country like our campfire, maybe we're the ones to blame.

We whites talk about ethnic cleansing, how it's such a terrible thing,
and civil war and civil strife, thank God we've no such thing,
how the Germans and Japs did such bad things in the war;
and they never really said they're sorry so like you, we keep the score.
But what about the arsenic laced to kill the young and old?
The massacres and the poisoned wells, things we were never told?
We were mass murderers and worse when we first came to this land,
we need to ease that burden; we need you to help us understand.



"So have a cuppa from my billy mate, tell me what's on your mind,
for me, I want a clear conscience, to take people as I find.
We're lucky on this Island, on the continents the races aren't few,
but now at last the Pom's have gone it's just bloody me and bloody you
and let's agree that we don't understand each other's point of view.
To ease our burden we must say sorry, for our sake, not just you
then just sit down at a campfire, and sing our dreamtime song,
for bloody you and me is Australia, and it's time we healed the wrongs."

BLONDIE

She lights the room as sunlight streams behind her golden hair,
warm earthly tones of laughter that can take you unaware,
To cross the road takes thrice the time your rushing mind had thought,
but she just helped a sad one smile, cheered another who's overwrought.

She lies awake at midnight thinking of him, again,
he's snoring at his own place, thoughts ranging 'cross the plain,
she worries if he'll be ok, he's lost in dreamy sleep,
she worries because she loves him, he's no idea how deep.

A man can know all kinds of things, do many of them well,
she brings out sweet best in him, he works like bloomin' hell,
He thinks that if he does these things then she'll be happy too,
but does he think to say he loves her? That part is up to you.

A man's unknowing; he weighs his work, and money earned,
and puts them on some massive scales to see which way they turned.
Yet if she dropped in one tear of love, she shed for him last night,
the balance might finally dawn on him and he might see the light.

She cries once more at midnight, her thoughts a hopeless quest,
all she wants is to be loved, from one man not the rest;
but he is snoring deeply, careless what he receives,
dreaming still of doing things to help and more to please.

For she brings out the worst in him as well as all the best,
but his thoughts are on the footy or on the latest test.
If he don't change he'll lose her soon, that much is plain to see,
then will he shed a single tear, or will he shed a sea?



FIRE SEASON'S END

November fires in New South Wales, a nervous fire season to come,
"A horror year," calls the CFA chief, we planned when to fight, where to run.

Now it's almost over, a band of rain is crossing the land with a storm,
but before rain cometh the wind, from the North, hard and warm.
Gentle burns that all night trickled on, now waken to life, smoke and light.
One last fire season finale, and the mountain may yet burn tonight.

Morning shows fire trucks in mournful wait, out of place in the pouring rain.
Twenty eight stayed all night to keep us safe, as they do again and again.
Wisps of smoke from dying fires interlace with clouds drifting white
we're safe but we were a wind-change away, from maybe worse than a fright.

The cool has come back to the mountains, with it's companion, the soft soaking rain,
and we can uncouple the fire tank from the farm ute again.
The fire danger sign points to low, at last, lets light up a fire for mulled wine
for the fire season's over, the cold wind returns, lets drink to soaking rain!



MY CAMEL POEM

"To Windorah and beyond", she said,
we were going beyond and more.
Our third outback stop and we flew to the clouds,
to the desert, and camels at our door.

It's the last pack camel trip in the country,
last of hundreds that opened this land.
A vanishing outback experience,
and it's here in the palm of our hand.

The camels are camped in a dune lined swale,
a flood life spreads from the dried out creek.
A yellow green swathe like an elysian field,
not the desert we expected to seek.

The Aborigine left with the federation drought,
just their tools and the cameleer remain.
He shows us camel lines, packs racks and seats,
tomorrow we lead cross the plain.

Our patient slaves of the desert
are loaded with seats racks and box.
Some gurgle and groan in protest,
but they rise, slowly plod cross the rocks.

Each footfall a soft careful sinking,
each stride a slow stately advance.
Your life's pretty simple when it's all on a camel,
we follow their ponderous dance.

The camels train sways the Simpson desert
through Spinifex and Coolibah.
The singing of the herders
wafts over dunes and far.



Our heads are cleared and calmed,
minds grow still with the passing days.
Much more than what we say or do,
is the change that we feel on the way.

The cameleer crew, picked for their patience,
surfing camels gently down the swale.
Like ocean waves surfing across the plain
the camels train sails as a ship at high noon.

He worries about leaving the desert,
where everything's simple and clear.
The city has so much complexity,
he knows that he'll soon face that fear.

But today he's our last pack cameleer
who knows which way the future will pan,
but the desert still holds a firm grip on him,
and he does what he loves, while he can.

GRATITUDE JOURNAL



I'm grateful for a Summer's day, I'm grateful for my bed,
and I love those little butterflies that fly inside my head.
I'm grateful for a smiling face, I'm glad I can smile back,
and I love life's banana skins that land me on my back!

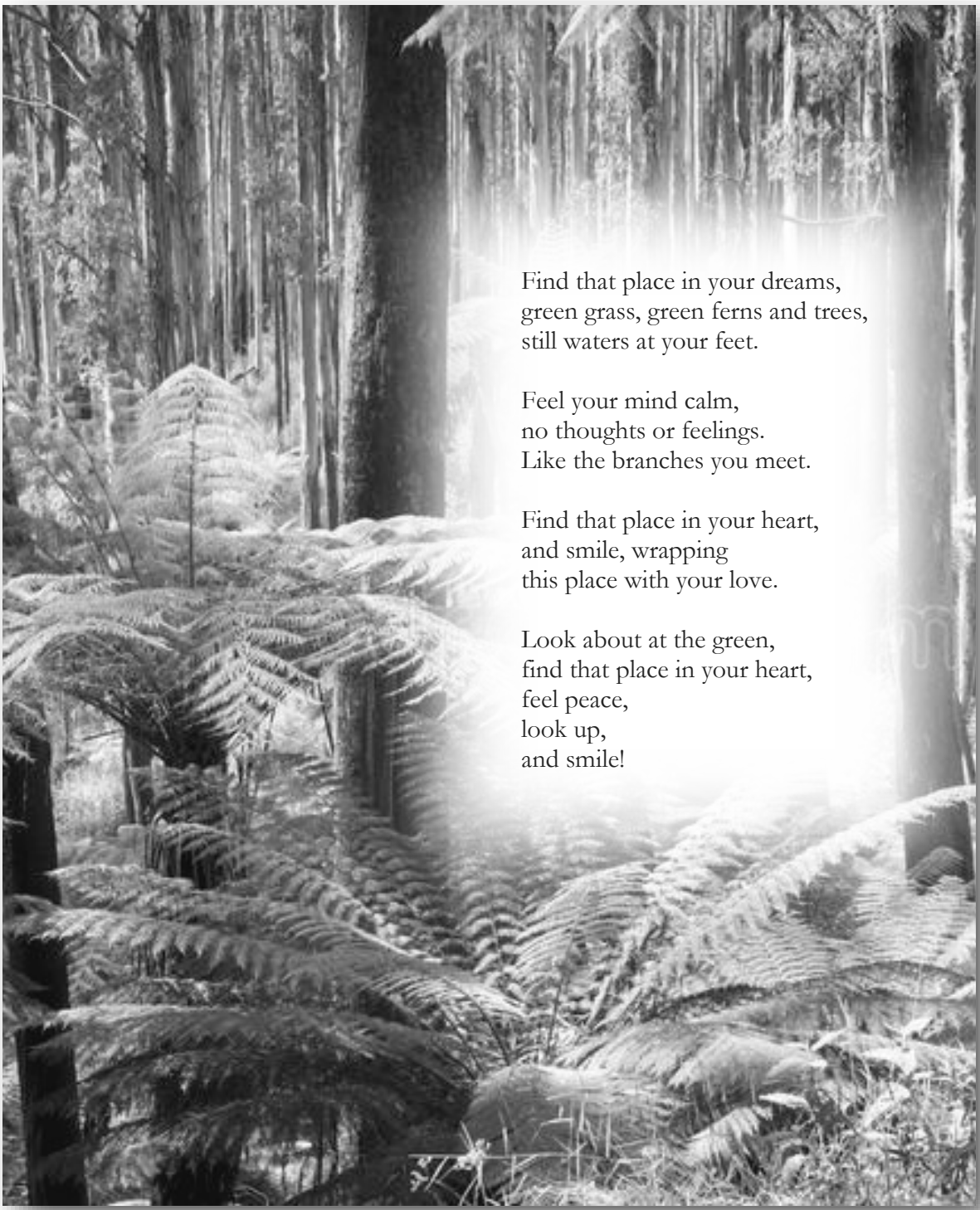
I'm grateful for a turgid past, the journey our lives give us,
we pass on some immortality for those no longer with us.
I am grateful I am in the bush, far from the madding crowd,
where folk have time to say g'day, and nothing's really loud.

I'm grateful for a cup of tea, and a rug upon my knees,
I sometimes have wild fantasies I own a dog without fleas.
I'm grateful for my family, I'm grateful for my friends,
the ties that bind us hold me up when I get the mental bends.

I'm grateful for our footy fans, their passionate lack of grace,
I'm even grateful for Collingwood for they too have their place.
I'm grateful the game goes on when I'm absent from the field.
for now, I'll live life from the sidelines, and let ambition yield.

Because I'm grateful, I no longer seek reward or status,
or fancy house or car, pursuit of which can sometimes break us.
I'm not grateful for material goods, I don't need them to thrive,
yet acts of love and kindness lift me, I'm just grateful, I'm alive.

FIND THAT PLACE



Find that place in your dreams,
green grass, green ferns and trees,
still waters at your feet.

Feel your mind calm,
no thoughts or feelings.
Like the branches you meet.

Find that place in your heart,
and smile, wrapping
this place with your love.

Look about at the green,
find that place in your heart,
feel peace,
look up,
and smile!

I SAW HEATHY TACKLE

Kevin Heath was a Box Hill winger, the speed of the first fifteen,
an Eastern suburbs rugby club, in the Melbourne rugby team.
His mates said he was a legend, they talked of him with awe
but Heathy had just turned sixty and that wasn't what we saw.

He walked like a cattle drover, bandy legged and crabbed,
we saw the white scars on his knees, how he winced when he was grabbed.
It's life handed Heathy lessons, and hard ones by the book,
but despite his gait and constant pain, a smile was his constant look.

Our team was called the Unquenchables, and we felt rightly so.
We were seldom top of the ladder but we reckoned we never let go.
Our league was over thirty five year olds and by fifty, most saw the light,
so Kevin was a bit of a dinosaur, but remember, they know how to bite!

We'd wheel him on late in the game, when at last the outcome seemed settled,
and his smile turned to cheers and laughter, as onto the field he shuffled.
This game was our enemy, Melbourne, and we couldn't field a full team,
so for once Heathy got a whole game in, which we quickly learned was his dream.



At half time we were already well down, at the kick off they gathered the ball,
this tall young man ran right through us, we couldn't touch him at all.
He was fast and strong and he swerved, he ran through our lines like a stag,
he scored his try between our posts, the conversion was theirs in the bag.

So we had to kick the ball back to them, and it went, to our chagrin and pain,
to the same young man who ran like the wind, and he pierced our defences again.
Our pride was crumbling to pieces, as he reached our last line of defence,
I was on one wing, Heathy the other, I covered to his side of the fence.

Cos he ran directly at Heathy, like a buggered old drover he stood,
so he had room to swerve again, and score, he looked sure he would.
But Heathy jumped out like a sandcrab, we winced at the sound of the crunch,
his strong arms grabbed on and held, like a yabby with his lunch.
But then like a ballet his body, stretched out with a smile on his lips,
his arms took the initial impact then his shoulders, waist and hips.
I swear the bastard stretched a foot, but he still had that grip on his hip,
his head snapped back as his jaw hit, but his arms kept a fearsome grip.

They hit the ground together, in a hard, sickening thud,
Neither man moved, the ball rolled away, both players lay stunned in the mud.
I reached Heathy first, he was lifeless, the youngster was gasping for air,
yet he helped me raise Heathy upwards, who promptly laughed at us pair.

The rest of the game was a blur, but we all tackled and tackled again,
and none of them went near Heathy, they all winced at the thought of the pain.
After forty five years I've hung up my boots and the finest sight, God forbid,
was that I saw Heathy tackle and I'm glad to this day that I did.

MURIEL'S POEM

There's a path I plan to follow, and follow it with you,
it leads to new adventures, a future uncertain and new.
And at its end we'll be different, not the same as before
I hope it ends on love, and maybe, even more ….

If we laboured through the angry clouded hills,
could your adversity, weak and soaked and chilled
let forth your delight in rapturous explosion at the peak,
as you would hold a newborn child,
and laugh giddily through streaming shards of sunlight
lancing the green boughs,
as we sail the glinting valleys stream towards shelter .

When your wet pants chafe your soaked sore thighs,
your fingers start to numb and you wonder if you're wise.
As a cold trickle descends your back,
do you feel that fierce excitement welling up within you,
that you are part of this wind and rain ravaged world,
not some dry air conditioned soul passing dispassionately through it?

I have travelled far and widely, and mostly on my own,
it wasn't always easy, destination unclear and unknown,
I want us together on our journey, through the good and the bad,
to feel as one the joy of living, a joy I feel we've never had.

THE EIGHTY YEAR FIRE

Eighty years I've lived and loved this farm's thousand acres on Cudgewa Creek.
It's a beautiful place, it's never known fire since I was born eighty years on this week.
I had family down for the festival, a great way to celebrate New Year's Eve,
then the word came out fires were headed our way, it was time for us to leave.

We rolled out the hoses with dry mouths, as the smoke coils thickened around,
two houses to save and machinery sheds, our life's savings might come to the ground.
Our water pumped up from the creek-bed, the power lines safe to the south
so imagine my shock when the power cut out, I stared at the glow, open mouthed.

The fire rolled over the hill like a swarm, a growing great broadside of flame,
tried moving the generator down to the creek, but spot-fires made our efforts in vain.
We were down to plan "C" and the fire didn't stop, every minute some new flames would shoot,
I hooked the one blackberry spray to the tractor, my granddaughter hooked one to the ute.

She's had her licence for just on a year and I knew that the fear made her pray,
but we circled the houses and sprayed what we had, somehow keeping the fires at bay.
Then the sprays cut out, it was down to plan "D", towels, buckets and a rainwater tank,
I left my daughter, grand-daughters and baby at the house, I admit that my spirits sank.

At the new house the tank was already in flames, water in the pipes all I had,
half a bucket to save a house, in spoonfulls, saved the house and the shed.
With wetted towels, two teams fought through the night, losing a shed on the way,
till at last through the smoke and ash came light, and it was New Year's Day.

I rise at six to twisted burnt fencing, and at last light shoot my dying stock,
long days feeding hay on the scorched dead paddocks, still grateful for my lot.
For farming is hard, and if ever I wondered, would the next generation see it through,
well by God I'm so proud of my family, glad the next eighty years is with you.

Laurie wrote this poem on 18 January 18 2020 when Victoria was burning.

THE MIRACLE AT CORRYONG

The Corryong hills lie blackened and our frantic pace has slackened,
for those of us still standing midst the carnage all around.
Our fences lie in tatters, it's the lack of feed that matters,
burnt and blackened paddocks stretch for miles along the ground.

The grim hard days have left us since bush fires ran right through us,
the numbing sounds of rifle shot and burying stock are gone.
We lost fifteen "k" of fences but thank God we kept our senses,
we saved the house but not the hayshed, the long hard battle's on.

To agistment and to market went the stock that didn't cark it,
we kept the calving breeders but their paddocks have no feed.
We're feeding out each day and where will we get the hay?
And nightly calls our cows r' out and down the road at speed.

Our farmhand up and left us, there's so much work ahead us,
just an eighty year old farmer, and at weekends there's his son.
The grandkids come to help out but it's too little and we doubt
we need a mighty miracle to get the hard work done.

Then, the sound of hay trucks coming, in a mighty convoy running,
a truck with forty round bales, he pulls up in the heat.
The driver gives his time for free, the hay's donated, there's no fee,
and he swears they'll keep on coming till we're back up on out feet.

We're laying fence posts smarty and we walk between them briskly,
the rising sun sits luminous in misty morning light.
We'd like to lay them kinder but the wire is on the winder
and there's a paddock left to do before the volunteers alight.

Laurie wrote this poem on 18 January 18 2020 when Victoria was burning.

And there's Lions from Kiewa and Rotary from Wodonga
they come in teams of ten or more, farmers near and far.
At ten we'd tea and sanga with team Tangambalanga,
we see a new fence gleaming with the stamp of Waratah.

And the farmers hearts are lifted by the volunteers they're gifted,
who fence all day with Blaze-Aid, in heat with hearts and zeal,
passing cars and trucks honk loudly at volunteers working proudly,
the whole of Corryong's cheered up by their shining lines of steel.

There's Black Saturdays survivors who've come to help their neighbours,
folk that lost their houses help us, 'cos they know just how we feel.
By their kindness we are humbled, as yet another hay truck rumbled,
at the next fire we'll be with them, helping other farms to heal.



TREVOR'S BIG DAY OUT
(at the Tambourine Mountain Scarecrow Festival)

Scarecrows don't get viruses, which gave us an idea,
because our family scarecrow's friendly, he don't cause any fear.
We thought about the lonely he could visit in the town
with our dog Blue to pull him, on a trolley, all around.
Trevor loved the scarecrow trail, you'd see him everywhere,
his big smile greeted kids and birds, 'cos Trevor didn't scare!
But after all these years his friendly face became outmoded,
so Trevor got a refit, to go on a mission with Covid.

A mic and camera on his face, an Ipad on his belly,
we bolted his frame to a trolley, cos his stake was rather smelly.
We trained old Blue to heed commands from his masters' zoom meeting,
so they could deliver meals on wheels to those in need of eating.
Dad tried poems through the Ipad, to make the lonely jolly,
the boys gave Blue commands to pull Trevor in the trolley.
Then came the day of the festival, our family felt so clever,
we'd no idea the chaos that was in store for Trevor.

Trevor bought great joy to town, the isolated and lonely,
sharing poems from his maker, the boys read tales remotely.
Day's end came, success was called, the dog came home to dinner,
Dad took the boys to Clancy's, to celebrate their winner;
leaving little sister left behind, missed out on all the fun,
but she started giving Blue commands n' set Trev's Zoom to run.
A facemask placed on Trevor resembled a Victorian or a robber,
a toy pistol in his wavy hand and some evil baddie clobber.

The dog pulled the trolley into town, gun toting Trevor on board,
he entered the 7-11, rolled up to the counter and roared,
"This here is a holdup, put all your chocolate in the trolley!"
"Don't be slow, I've got a gun, and can I have that lolly?"
The attendant pressed the police button and bravely played for time,
he counted the chocolates one by one, till they heard the sirens whine.
Old Blue was ordered around and out, slipperier than a rat,
and he would have made a good escape, 'cept for that bloomin' cat!

That screeched and ran from Trevor, a scary scarecrow at last,
and in pursuit, the dog, the scarecrow and the cops running fast.
The chocolates bounced out down the street, people saw Trevor and fled,
the little girl turned off the Zoom and went up to lie in her bed.
The cat ran through a hedge and a branch caught Trev on the jaw,
he was caught with his ill-gotten gains by the long arm of the law.
He spent the night in a cell, a good scarecrow turned to bad,
we turned ourselves in next morning, our little girl looked so sad.

So when you're out on the scarecrow trail, relax and join the fun
'cos thanks to Trevor you'll never be faced, by a scarecrow with a gun!



AT THE START OF THE DAY



In the soft and silky darkness
with the breezes faint and warm
moves the stirring of the creatures
that precludes the break of dawn.
Kookaburrus break the curfew
in their raucous friendly way
and the stirring becomes a buzzing
as we greet the start of day.