

Videos showing the author's hut in 1983, Archie Hair, some of 'the wonders', Briagolong, Walhalla and other aspects relevant to the story can be viewed at: wonderment.org/wonderment.org/wonderment.org/wonderment.org/

FOR LINNY WITH LOVE



When asked why he made, from within faerie rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flock the shepherd replied: "I'd be a damn fool if I didn't".

Published by Brian O'Keefe First published 2013 Brian O'Keefe

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ISBN: 9781925027891 (ePub)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the staff at Peninsula Community Mental Health Services (especially Dr "P"), Frankston, Victoria, 3199 Australia.

I am also indebted to the following for their kind assistance:

Phillip Ronalds: Drawings of Wee Bards.

Linny Patrick: Drawings of Skyrunner, Duckorpuss and frog.

My trusty old mate 'Uncle' Ken Doyle: Photographs of Freestone and

Gladstone creeks, Walhalla 'battery', sunrises, night and Archie Hair's grave.

Marion Hair: Photographs and information about Archie and Edna Ha Eric and Joy Hair: Photographs of Archie and Edna Hair, and excerpts

from Eric's book 'Archie Hair and The Arches'. Cynthia Morley: Photograph of Jess Morley R.I.P.

Barrie Clissold: Photographs of Bok Hall. Frank Straw: Letter about Archie and Edna.

Publishers of Walhalla Heyday for photographs of Walhalla School,

miners, funeral and town.

Nicholas Caire: Photographs of aborigines and 'Listening Tree'.

Doug Treasure R.I.P: Extract from Harry Treasure's memoirs. Photograph

of Rockalpine.

Robin and Anton Teese: Music notation.

Jonathan Webb of Saxon Productions: Post production assistance.

Gippsland Times: Article about Archie Hair.

Allan John 'Duffy': Drawing of billy.

Ken and Pam O'Keefe: Gift of a computer and printer. And all of my wonderful family for support and laughs.

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Archie & Edna Hair

INFORMATION

ARCHIE HAIR (1891-1980): Approximately 9 kilometres north of the small town of Briagolong, in a region of south-eastern Australia called Gippsland, the Freestone Creek emerges from a rocky gorge to form the Blue Pool. Near here once stood a small wooden house that was known locally as Archie Hair's Hut. It had been the home of Archie Hair and his wife, Edna. Archie had previously built a bush house on the site but it was destroyed in the devastating 1965 fires.

Archie had a deep love of nature and children. The elderly couple would often have children staying with them. After they died their house was demolished and the place of many fond memories is now a picnic area.

While living in a hut he had built a few kilometres upstream from Archie and Edna's home, the author often passed the deserted house and used to wonder about the people who had

lived there. Over time he collected information about Archie and began to feel a kinship with someone he never met.



The Original Arches

THE KURNAI (later called Ganai) were an aboriginal tribe that had roamed Gippsland for over 30,000 years. Kurnai means 'men'. The Braiakaulung people were a branch of this tribe and it was from them that the town Briagolong derived its name. There is some confusion over the name Braiakaulung, with some referring to it as land of the rising sun and others to it as meaning men of the west. *Extract from Discovering Briagolong by Laurie Manning*.

ANGUS McMILLAN: A Scotsman, Angus McMillan, is generally credited as being the first white discoverer of an area in south-eastern Australia that he called Caledonia Australia. This was later officially named Gippsland.

HARRY TREASURE (1877-1963): The Treasure family left Wandilligong, near Bright, Victoria, in 1878 to settle on the Dargo High Plains and raise cattle.

DUCK-BILLED PLATYPUS: An amphibious, egg-laying mammal frequenting fresh-water aquatic systems from the mountains to the tidal limits of eastern Australia. There is no encyclopaedic reference to a plaid- billed duckorpuss.

JESS MORLEY was a tough, gentle, slow-talking bushman, cattleman and farm worker with a deep voice who the author worked with on Doug Treasure's property near Stratford. One of Jess's greatest pleasures was to roll a cigarette, have a cup of tea and tell yarns during smoko.

WATER DRAGON: A semi-aquatic lizard that can grow up to a metre in length.

WATER BOATMAN: Small aquatic insect that appears to use its legs as oars to row upon the surface of tranquil water.

FAERIE: The word fairy is used in various ways; one is the narrow use of the word to express one species of these supernatural creatures 'of a middle nature between man and angels' (as they were described in the seventeenth century) varying in size, powers, lifespan and moral attributes.

'Fairy' originally meant 'faer-ie' – a state of enchantment (French: 'Faerie'). Faeries themselves are said to object to the word and people often think it better to speak of them as 'the Good Neighbours' or 'the Good Folk'. However, in the following narrative, Rianna mentions 'dream faeries' to her human for ease of explanation.

Although the origin is obscure it is believed they call themselves The Elan (The People). The Elans are older children of the earth, having arrived before human beings. Legend has it that

they fled to earth, the special home of God the Mother, after being traumatized by a battle in the heavens.

Faeries have ancient heritage and wisdom and are known elsewhere by different names e.g. 'Faery' from the Gaelic 'fear shidhe' pronounced 'far hee'; or 'fairy', often used in children's stories.

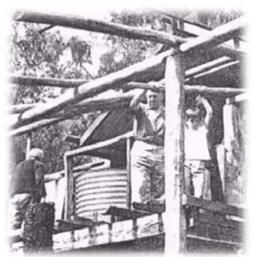


THE FOLLOWING WAS PRINTED IN A 1970 EDITION OF THE GIPPSLAND TIMES.

IT'S ARCHIE HAIR'S LAIR

North of Briagolong (named after local Aborigines), near the Freestone Creek is the place known to visitors, including many from overseas, as the home of Archie Hair.

For many years white-haired Archie, 80 next birthday, has ruled a bush kingdom. He knows every blade of grass, every tree, every change in the mood of the Freestone valley; and every bird knows him.



Building the second Arches.

On a sloping grass verge sandwiched between the dusty Dargo Road and the quiescent Freestone, Archie Hair's log and board house stands sentinel. Slate grey rocks coated with moss greens climb from the creek. Gums clutch at crevices. Wildflowers paint the hills. This is Archie Hair's parish.

It was here Archie built the original 'Arches' when he and his wife moved here from their Rosedale farm. It was a sort of Mother Hubbard cottage at which the occasional passer-by called; then scouts and guides; then dozens of children and today almost everybody. The white-haired friendly fellow named his place 'The Arches' and tacked a sign on the door:

The door is open to friends and kin. Just turn the knob and walk right in.

The sign's still there but the original 'Arches' is gone, reduced to ashes in the '65 fires.

Archie Hair built a new castle. It's not palatial. Beams are made from logs. Robbie Burns gazes down from a stained wooden frame and there's a print of the Cathedral d'Amiens, and one of Gallipoli. Above the kitchen is an attic for children to sleep in. To hundreds of Gippsland and Melbourne scouts and guides, 'The Arches' is a wonderful place.

The day I dropped by the friendly fellow's place he was addressing letters to people in half a dozen countries. Enclosed was the following greeting:

"Life is austere but ne'er the less, You can always find some happiness. Goodwill of some description; A cheery word, a smile, a laugh, Is better medication by half Than any known prescription."

No child visits without Archie organizing a miniature treasure hunt. The reward is a small toy or sweets. Archie's carved walking sticks and clue-trails through the hills have entertained, and educated, hundreds of children for years now.

His friendliness is perhaps best reflected in this note in his crammed visitors' book, written by Esso boss Lindsay Lipscomb and his wife Dee, who visited him in winter: "Esso was here and found that our fire (at Esso's Longford gas plant) was a wee candle compared to the truly Australian warmth of Archie's fire."

THE AUTHOR

I first met Brian O'Keefe (known since his schooldays as Bok) at the Briagolong Hotel while he was hitch hiking to Queensland in 1979. He ended up staying in the area for ten years, working at odd jobs and performing with the Briagolong Bush Band. He also toured a one-man show of, mainly original, Australiana.

Brian was born in Woking, England on 2-2-1944, when his mother was evacuated from London's East End while it was being bombed during World War II. The family migrated to Australia in 1955.

While living in Briagolong Brian built a hut beside the Freestone Creek, in the hills north of the town. The isolated hut, known locally as Bok Hall, was constructed from wattle and daub, and pine offcuts. The roof was hessian resting on offcuts and wattle poles and coated with a mixture of alum, lime, salt, cement and water. This recipe came from a 1930's book on building a chicken coop. It was here that he wrote many songs, humorous bush verse, poems and stories.





Hut in the early stages of construction

In this book, Brian has combined personal experiences and folk history with fantasy to share a story that is a celebration of life and Nature. Archie Hair is used to tell many of the tales.



Bok Hall

The hut was a charming dwelling that blended in with its bush surroundings. The creek was Brian's water supply. Candles and kerosene lamps were used for lighting. Cooking was done on a campfire – the main recipe being a large pot of vegetable stew that would last for days in winter. Brian always knew when this was going off because it would start bubbling before being put on the fire to heat.



In the hut

The hut served as a refuge for Brian who has had problems with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, social phobia and alcoholism for over 50 years. After a suicide attempt he was taken to Sale Hospital and later admitted to Hobson's Park Psychiatric Hospital. Upon release, Brian went to live in the hut before moving to Melbourne.

One night during this period, while sitting on an old tree stump beside his campfire waiting for the billy to boil, something happened that was the catalyst for this book – a leaf fell onto his knee.

As Brian later remarked "It is amazing how, depending on the way we perceive things, a seemingly insignificant incident can have an important influence on our lives."

Unfortunately, the hut only survived for ten years before being destroyed by a flash flood in 1990. It has since been demolished.

Helen Cooper



After the flood

More information, especially about Archie Hair, can be found at the end of this book. Events prior to decimalization in Australia are mentioned in imperial measurements.

THE MEETING

Sitting on an ancient tree stump outside his hut, the man stared into a campfire's flames as they flickered about an old blackened billycan while he waited for it to boil.

He was too preoccupied with his problems to appreciate the beauty of the country sky blooming with stars. He did not hear the soothing night sounds, or the gurgling of the creek tumbling over rocks on its journey down the valley.

He was feeling too melancholy to care that out in the darkness beyond the glow of the flames, the flowers of mint bushes, clematis, sarsaparilla, wattles, heath and myriad other blossoms were waiting for dawn's gentle artist, the gold-fingered magician, to softly paint them into a bright, new day. He did not even appreciate the cosy warmth of the fire.

An old wombat grazed contentedly not far from the hut. Black gum trees towered high, silhouetted against the night sky, while subtle bush perfumes drifted through that magical place.

Everything, except the man, seemed to be at peace there. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he shuddered. The action reminded him of the old saying that someone must have walked over his grave. Not being superstitious he dismissed the thought.

The sound of water hissing in the fire distracted him from his gloomy reverie. He lifted the billy out with a stick, flicked off the lid and poured a handful of tea into the boiling water. After replacing the lid he tapped the side of the billy with the stick to help the tealeaves settle.

While waiting for the tea to brew the man fed the fire with black-wattle twigs – just to watch them burn. Flames leapt up, causing shadows that had been creeping around him to flee into the night as if time had ticked a Cinderella midnight.

The fire was eating the crackling fuel and sucking out its sizzling resin when something glided down from out of the dark beyond the swirling sparks and landed on the man's knee. He was just about to automatically brush off what he thought was a eucalyptus leaf when he heard a voice say:

"Hullo."

The man looked down and was startled to see a little female, faerie-like creature sitting upon his knee.

"Er, hullo," he replied. Then, not knowing what else to say, asked: "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please," she said. "If you would pour some into that gumnut by your feet I would be grateful."

"I'm afraid I don't have any sugar left," he said, apologetically, after picking up the gumnut and blowing dust from it before filling it with a few drops of tea.

"Just think of something good that has happened to you," said the little creature. "That will sweeten it for me."

"What a stupid thing to say," he mumbled grumpily, passing her the gumnut of tea which she took in both hands. He then filled his mug before replacing the billy beside the fire.

"Because something sounds stupid to you does not mean that it is stupid. Please, just do it for my sake," pleaded the strange visitor.

"Oh, alright, but it won't do any good," said the man. Then, because he felt he had nothing better to do anyway, he thought about his life. Although negative thoughts kept getting in the way, he did manage to remember the kindness of some of the people he had known.

"There, that's the best I can do," he sighed.

"Let's see if it was enough," said the faerie creature and took a sip of her tea. "Goodness!" she gasped, while her body gave a little wriggle of excitement. "It is far sweeter than I expected it to be. What could you have thought to make it taste so sweet?"

"Oh, nothing really," replied the man, surprised by her reaction, and he told her what he had thought.

"You are very fortunate. What a pity you do not realize it."

The man looked at her closely: *She seems to be a faerie,* he thought, *but how can she be one when they don't exist?*

The creature wore a full-sleeved gown that flowed down to her bare feet and seemed to have the texture and hue of sunbeams. Her wings appeared to be made from delicately-veined moonbeams. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. She had an endearing habit of briskly rubbing the tip of her nose with the knuckle of a forefinger – as if it was itchy. But it was her eyes that captured the man's attention. They seemed hypnotic, while their night-dark pupils simultaneously expressed both a child's wonder and yearning.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" he asked.

"You will find out soon," she replied, cryptically.

"Well then, what's your name?"

"You can call me Rianna if you like," she said with a dismissive shrug of her shoulders as if names were an irrelevant distraction from more important things. "What would you like to be called?"

"People call me Mr Block. Sidney Block."

"Do they just? Well, I think I'll call you Lillypilly. Is that alright Mr Peppercorn? Mrs Owl won't mind me sitting on her lover's knee will she Sid?"

"What on earth are you talking about? Anyway, there's no need to be cheeky."

"Oh my darling," said Rianna, "I'm not being cheeky. It's just that you look so funny sitting out here in the night with such a woebegone expression on your face – as if life is a great weight that you are forced to carry around all alone. Don't take yourself so seriously Mr Stringybark. Anyway, I'd like to know more about you."

"There's not much to tell," replied the man gloomily.

"Oh, Mister," responded what he had decided must be a faerie, "I'm sure you have a lot to tell. Most people have interesting things happen to them all the time but they use extremes for comparison and, as a result, think that their own lives are boring."

Suddenly, the man put his face in his hands and his elbows on his knees. Fortunately, Rianna fluttered away just in time.

"I must be going mad if I'm talking to a faerie, or what looks like a faerie," he said to himself, slowly shaking his head.

"Oh my dear Mr Sid, do not be concerned. This is a special time; a time to share some of The Wonderment."

"Some of the what?" asked Sidney Block, sitting up straight once again.

"You will see. But I have another favour to ask of you."

"What is it this time?" he enquired as shadows crept back from the bush now that the flames had consumed the wattlewood and the fire had burned down.

"I'd like you to give me something that we can both share," said Rianna, fluttering back onto his knee and looking up at him beseechingly. "It is one of the most precious things in life. It is something that will make you happier for the giving and me happier for the sharing, and it will not cost you anything."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replied, with a puzzled expression on his face. "What is it that you want from me?"

"Why, a smile of course! Come on, you great big man with all the worries of the world. Please give me a smile, just one little smile," she said, adding an inducement: "It will help show you a way to the secret."

"But I don't feel like smiling," he said, too preoccupied to ask about the secret.

"Does it make you happy being miserable?"

"Of course not!"

"Why are you out here in the bush all by yourself?"

"I don't know where else to go, or what else to do, but it does get lonely and boring being here," sighed Sidney Block.

"How you can be bored when there is so much wonder within you and outside you is beyond my comprehension. Anyway, if you aren't happy why don't you try and do something about it?"

"What can I do about it?"

"For a start you could try smiling!" grinned Rianna.

Despite his feelings her reply caused him to reluctantly smile.

"There now," she said, pleased with the result. Although it could not be compared with a real smile at least it was not a dead smile. There was a hint of life and hope in it. "Isn't that better? Don't you feel a little less sad?"

Some part of the man did not want to admit that what he still considered a figment of his imagination was having a positive effect on him. He was so accustomed to feeling depressed and confused that he resented any attempt to change his frame of mind – especially by a creature that appeared to be a faerie. However, something he did not comprehend seemed to be influencing him and he decided that, even if he was suffering from some form of insanity, because he had nothing better to do he may as well agree with her.

"Well, you funny little thing," Sid responded. "I certainly don't feel any worse. If I am going mad then this seems to be a pleasant way of doing it. Now, what was the secret you mentioned?"

"It is more of a secret that you must find yourself," answered Rianna. "But I can tell you that the deeper you learn to smile the closer you will get to it."

While she was speaking Sid happened to glance across the valley and noticed that a mist was descending; a light, wispy mist that appeared to be creeping through the bush. He mentioned his observation to Rianna.

"It might not be a mist," she said. "It could be the Great Moisty of Mount Moornappa."

"The great what?" he asked in surprise.

"The Great Moisty of Mount Moornappa. It looks like a mist but is really the combined spirits of creatures that have been killed unnecessarily by humans for sport in this area.

"The Great Moisty lives not far from here in a large, prehistoric, wombat hole on Mount Moornappa. It only comes out to search for more unfortunate spirits to take into itself so that they do not feel alone.

"The Moisty must leave the hills when the sun shines on it because its bush creatures cannot bear to feel the warmth of life that has been stolen away from them so callously.

"It is usually very gentle," Rianna continued, "but when a human causes it to get angry then it swirls thicker and thicker and can be quite dangerous. Some time ago it recognized a hunter camped in the bush one night as a person who had killed some of its creatures, just to try and feel important which, of course, he could never be.

"The Great Moisty was so upset that it whirled and swirled tighter and tighter around the man, moaning all the while with the sorrow of its dead creatures' spirits.

"Even though he considered himself a great hunter the man became frightened, so he fired his rifle into the Moisty. Naturally, the bullet passed through the mist as if the man had shot at a cloud. This caused the moaning to increase in intensity.

"Time and again he fired desperately, but the Moisty wrapped itself tighter and tighter around him until he thought he was going to choke. The last bullet the hunter fired ricocheted from a rock, killing him. Then the mist drifted away and the man's body fell to the ground.

"His ghost is the loneliest in the valley and must wander forever alone among the animals of the Freestone, who chase it away whenever they feel its presence so it can never rest. Everything in the bush rejects it. Even gum trees drop limbs on it whenever they get the opportunity."

"Serves him right," Sid said, deciding not to question how falling branches could possibly harm a ghost. "But tell me Rianna, how can you know the difference between the Great Moisty and a mist?"

"You can't, but those who destroy unnecessarily often feel a pain in their heart that they do not understand. To deliberately harm another living thing is to hurt life. And to hurt life is to also wound yourself – often in ways you may never comprehend. You humans are always accountable for your actions, even though the cost may seem disproportionate to the deed.

"I do go on, don't I?" said the faerie, smiling self-deprecatingly. "It's just that I get annoyed because too many human beings think themselves important and tend to forget about the value of the rest of life. Things may not necessarily be what you think they are."

The faerie and the man sat in silence for a while, looking out at the mist, or Moisty. Sid doubted that hurting flies or mosquitoes would cause him any harm.

After a while Rianna asked: "Would you like to go on a journey with me?"

"Where to?" he enquired, intrigued.

"You will see when we get there," she replied.

"But I might not enjoy it,"

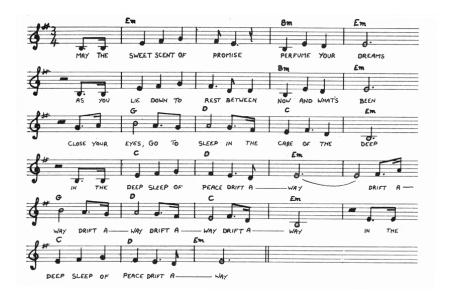
"Maybe you won't," said the faerie. "But you don't enjoy being here so what have you got to lose? Anyway, it was just a suggestion. I'm not going to force you."

Sidney Block smiled at the mental image he had of the faerie trying to force him to do something he did not want to. "All right," he agreed. "I may as well. There's nothing better to do. I'll just put out the fire before we go."

"Oh, there's no need to do that. In fact you can put some more wood on. We may be away for quite a while. Just relax and look into the flames as you were doing before I arrived."

The man, convinced that he was going mad, did not bother asking how they could go on a journey if he stayed where he was, or how the faerie knew he had been looking into the fire before she arrived. He just did as she requested.

While Sid stared into the flames he began to feel drowsy, then he heard a lullaby being sung softly in a voice that resembled Rianna's yet seemed to come from far away:



May the sweet scent of promise perfume your dreams As you lie down to rest between now and what's been. Close your eyes, go to sleep in the care of the deep, In the deep sleep of peace drift away. Drift away, drift away, drift away, drift away, In the deep sleep of peace drift away.

May love close your eyes with its gentle soft kiss, Soothing tomorrow where little is amiss. May faerie friends play all your troubles away And the pink tint of dreams take you away. Far away, far away, far away, far away, To where Ashlakune waits far away.

Go to sleep gentle lover, caress your sweet dreams And cherish the best of all that has been. And when you awake may the night quietly take Your fears with its shadows away. Far away, far away, far away, far away, Your fears with its shadows away.

Soft as the touch of a dream fluttering by May you drift to tomorrow while life's lullaby Caresses the sleep wherein you will lie, In the sweet sleep of peace drift away. Drift away, drift away, drift away, In the sweet sleep of peace drift away.

The lullaby faded and the man heard the faerie say, distantly, as if from a dream: "Come on Sid. Leave yourself in life's quicksand, yearning for stars to cling to. It is time to go."

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Oh, here and there," she replied, "from the sunbeam on the raindrop to the rainbow's end. We'll go wherever we have to go to get to where we are going, but we must get a move on because, although it is always now, you have no more time to waste."

"But what are we going to see?"

"Parts of everything or nothing, depending upon the way you perceive it."

Rianna stood up on Sidney Block's knee and fluttered away.

As if it was a completely natural thing to do, the man left what he thought was his body sitting by the fire and followed her in his mind.

THE DREAM FAERIES

The man and the faerie moved off into what appeared to be the light of dawn, yet it was a dawn unlike any Sidney Block had experienced previously. He recognized what he saw but felt as if he was seeing it through the eyes of a stranger.

That's peculiar, he thought, it seemed that only a moment ago it was night-time and I was sitting by a campfire. Now I'm following what appears to be a faerie, not sure of who I am or where I'm going. But he kept walking anyway, away from a past that would never seem the same.

As they travelled along the creek Rianna fluttered through sunbeams that were reaching over the hills and stroking the bush awake. Each time she did so her gown merged with the sunbeam as if they were one, causing her head, hands, feet and wings to appear disembodied.

"Look at that," she said pointing to some of the Freestone's fishing spiders. They were round and shiny-black with bright blue bellies. There were half a dozen of them standing on a branch of a tree that had fallen into the creek. All of them had circular webs attached to their rear ends by long silky threads and were casting the webs, like nets, onto the water, letting them sink before pulling them in ready to cast again.

"How come the webs don't just float on the surface?" enquired Sid. "They must be very light."

"The spiders stick grains of sand along the edges with resin from black wattles to make them sink," the faerie replied.

"It must be annoying for them to carry the nets around all the time."

"Oh, they don't. When they finish fishing they bite them off and eat them to conserve the silk. They spit out the stones and resin and then weave new nets when they feel like a change of diet," explained Rianna.

"What are they fishing for?" Sid asked, fascinated.

"Tiny fish called bluebellies. These fish are attracted by the blue on the spiders and think that they are others of their own kind. Occasionally a larger fish swims into the web. When that happens the spider is usually dragged into the creek and eaten."

"I never knew that spiders could fish."

"Wouldn't you learn to fish if you had to eat flies and other insects for breakfast, lunch and dinner?" Rianna retorted while rubbing her nose.

"I suppose I would."

Just then a delicate sound tinkled through the bush. It was one of the most poignant sounds Sid had ever heard. At first he thought it was a bellbird, and then realized it was far more moving than a bellbird's call.

"What's that sound, Rianna?" he asked.

"Come along. I'll show you. What is happening is one of the most amazing things in the world. It is something that very few people have ever had the privilege of witnessing."

The faerie and the man cautiously moved to where they were able to see dewdrops glistening on lacy cobwebs delicately strung between wattle branches.

"Can you see them?" Rianna asked, fluttering down to sit on Sid's shoulder.

"Can I see what?"

"Can you see the baby faeries being born?"

"Can I see the what?" Sid asked, raising his voice in surprise.

"Hush. Look closely. There," she replied, pointing.

He looked past her tiny pointing finger to where sunbeams were warming the dewdrops. What he beheld in the morning light were baby faeries emerging from evaporating dewdrops, within which they had been curled in foetal positions. Each wore a gown that, like Rianna's, gave the impression of being created from sunbeams.

When they hatched, some of the babies climbed to the top of the webs and stood there unfurling and flexing their fragile moonbeam wings in the warmth, as if drying them before flying away.

The majority briefly clung to the webs and appeared to look around anxiously, while uttering what sounded like pitiful, piping cries of distress before clumsily fluttering away in the direction of the creek.

"I don't believe it! I just don't believe it!" Sid exclaimed in astonishment while watching flecks of sunlight flitter around him.

"Ssshhh," whispered Rianna. "Will you please keep your voice down, otherwise they will hear you. It is a terrible thing for new-born faeries to hear that someone does not believe something important although, unfortunately, it doesn't take long for most of them to realize the truth."

Sid gazed in wonder at what was happening before asking: "Why don't the spiders eat

"Because the babies are invisible and have no weight spiders are unaware of their presence."

"But how come I can see them?" enquired Sid, unconvinced.

"You have been given that privilege to help you on your journey but, except in your memory, you will never see them again."

The man was thoughtful for a while. Despite his embarrassment he could not stop himself from querying: "Er, I don't mean to be rude but how do faeries, um, procreate? Besides, they all seem to be female."

"The baby faeries you can see are dream faeries," Rianna smiled as she replied. "There are many different types of faeries who come into being in various ways. They do not have to go through all the problems that humans seem to have with procreation, although they do enjoy affection. No, these faeries are not flesh as you know it, and the reason they appear to be female to you is because that is what you would prefer them to be."

Her smile faded as she continued: "This is how they come into being. As you know, the seeds of humans' dreams drift through the air seeking ways to fulfilment. However, on very special nights, nights of enchantment, something magical happens."

Sid did not know anything about seeds of human dreams drifting through the air but, not wanting to seem ignorant, didn't interrupt Rianna.

"On these nights the dewdrops that have formed on cobwebs become dream faeries' birth sacs; for when a dreamseed drifts into one it causes a baby faerie to form. Moonbeams nurture the babies until, at dawn, the sun's rays reach out, kissing the dewdrops with tenderness. Then, like the melting of a lover in the arms of a beloved, baby faeries are born.

"Each one of them is very excited, and almost bursting with love, because they expect to be united with the spirit of the person they are a part of so they can help turn dreams into reality and be free to go to Ashlakune."

"Where's Ashlakune, Rianna?" Sid asked.

"I'll tell you soon," she replied. "The sounds you can hear, reminiscent of bellbirds, are really cries of disappointment from the baby dream faeries who don't feel a person's spirit waiting to share their joy at being alive on a new day.

"You see, Mister, for one reason or another many of the humans whose dreams gave them birth have deserted the faeries – usually because they lacked faith in their ability to fulfil their dreams. So, too often, their faeries become the deserted ones." After some hesitation she quietly added: "I am one also."

"Oh, that's sad," Sid said, feeling sorrow for something other than himself for a change while not giving any indication that he understood Rianna was a deserted faerie. "What happens to them then?"

The deserted dream faerie's voice trembled with emotion as she replied: "They go down to the creek and peer into the water to see if they can see the reflection of the person whose dream they are a part of."

"Wouldn't they just see their own reflections?"



The Freestone Creek

"No. Dream faeries don't have reflections of their own. If they do see their human's reflection, no matter how faintly, then it means that the one whose dream gave them birth is still capable of carrying a dream to fruition – if only their faerie can find them in time and help show them a way to the secret.

"There are places all over the world where dream faeries are born, usually as close to water as possible. If there is no water available the babies look into their teardrops for a reflection."

"But suppose they don't see a reflection? What happens then?"

"Then their tiny hearts become so full of grief that they turn to stone, while the sun evaporates the rest of the babies' bodies as if they never existed."

"Oh. No. That's terrible! I never realized dreams were so important," responded Sid.

"In their own way dreams are as important as love," replied the faerie. "Both must be shared or they also evaporate, and part of the heart of the person who could not share them turns as if to stone."

Sid thought about that for a while and, although he had difficulty believing in faeries, could not help feeling that what Rianna had said was true.

"What happens if a baby dream faerie does see a reflection?" he asked.

"Well, then they have to search until they find the one whose dream they are a part of, growing and gaining strength for the journey from the need in their person's heart. When they find that person they must then try and help them understand that all is not lost by attempting to show them a way to the secret."

Sidney Block felt dazed, not knowing what to think. He had experienced many things in his life, most of which did not seem important anymore. It was as if he had entered another world; a world he felt more at home in than the one in which he had previously been living. Even though he had begun to feel a sense of belonging something would not let him accept what was happening.

"I didn't think faeries liked human beings," he said. "Anyway, I couldn't see any people waiting for their dream faeries. In fact, I've never heard of any person mentioning meeting one."

"That is not surprising," responded Rianna. "Few people experience the opportunity you have been given. The baby faeries, the lucky ones that is, feel the power of the strength of their human's spirit and are nurtured by it as they fly away to where it is attempting to soar. There they become one and work together towards fulfilment, usually without the person ever being aware of their dream faerie's existence. As for not liking human beings, it is more usual for humans not to like aspects of themselves. Dream faeries cannot exist without you.

"How can I explain it Mister? We all need each other and are part of each other. It is the belief in everything being a part of the answer that gives you the strength to truly live; that helps tranquillity bloom from the garden of pain in your heart. Every person who has ever lived has felt the pain to some degree. It can be the pain of birth or death, depending upon whether or not you try to understand it.

"If you have the courage to learn from it, you must become a student and let your pain be a teacher that can help show you the way to some peace of mind. Only then will the smile of serenity begin to shine from within you. Only then will you not disappoint a baby dream faerie.

"If you listen very closely you may be able to hear the lonely ones sing when they reach the creek, as they try to summon up enough courage to look into the water."

"I can't hear any singing," responded Sid, frowning – as if that expression would aid his hearing ability.

"It is a song you have never heard before," whispered the faerie. "To hear it you must put every other thought out of your mind."

"What's the song about?" Sid asked, also whispering.

"It is about the place of peace they hope to reach called Ashlakune," she answered, barely breathing the words into the man's ear.

"Why do they call it that?" he whispered back.

"Why shouldn't they? You humans have enough names for what you imagine to be your place of peace."

The man actually smiled again. "I suppose you're right," he said.

"Ssshhhh. Close your eyes and listen."

Sid did as Rianna requested. No sooner were his eyes closed than he felt, rather than heard, a sound that slowly became a song, a song that seemed to be both a plea and a prayer



Ashlakunelin, oh Ashlakunelove
Where is the dream that we are all part of?
Where is the one who's yearning to fly, love,
Fly, fly away to Ashlakune?
Ashlakuuuuune, Ashlakuuuuune.
Let us all fly away to Ashlakune.

Love is the answer. Fear is the question.
Time is a moment that we needn't mention.
Don't run away love. Cherish the day, love,
And we'll all fly away to Ashlakune.
Ashlakuuuuune, Ashlakuuuune.
We'll all fly away to Ashlakune.

Ashlakunelin, oh Ashlakunelove, That is the place we all yearn to go love. It waits in your arms and dwells in your heart, love, For you are the seed of Ashlakune. Ashlakuuuuune, Ashlakuuuuune. We'll bloom in the heart of Ashlakune.

It's better to sing than to sigh for the moon, love. Better to smile than to weep for the past love. Sweeter your tears when they are shed for another, And nearer by far to Ashlakune. Ashlakunune, Ashlakunune. Love lights the way to Ashlakune.

The song faded. The man thought of baby dream faeries looking into Freestone Creek pools, desperate for a reflection. He imagined the relief of those fortunate enough to see the reflection of their human, and the disappointment of the unlucky ones. *I won't think about it. There's nothing I can do,* he thought. But he could not stop thinking about it.

Sorrow filled Sid as he imagined the grief of the babies without reflections. Tears blurred his sight when he thought of the delicate tiny faeries evaporating, while their hearts turned to stone and dropped like grains of sand at the water's edge. Fortunately, Rianna spoke:

"We cannot help the poor things," she said, "but at least we have found each other. You see, Mister, I am the faerie of your unfulfilled dream and I need you as surely as you need me."

After what the man had just experienced the faerie's statement did not surprise him. "But Rianna," he said, "humans have many dreams. We can't be expected to fulfil them all."

"Unfortunately, Sid," the faerie replied as she stood up on his shoulder before fluttering away, "you humans often confuse dreams with fantasies. The fullfillment of dreams is a way to a better reality. Fantasies are an escape."

THE TREES OF WONDERMENT

The man, deep in thought, followed the faerie as they travelled through the light of a morning gold-dusted by the sun. Past thickets of manuka bushes they travelled, bushes that showered their snowdrifts of blossoms along the valley a'warble with the magpies' carolling song.

Dappled sunlight flashed rainbow colours from startled parrots that scattered through the bush in flustered flight at the man's approach. The valley was full of the chatter and singing of birds. From nearby came the crack of a whipbird, then an answer from its mate.

A cheeky shrike thrush called to them from a yellowbox tree, while a bowerbird made rude noises behind some bushes. A magpie dived at the man for coming too close to its nest, and a crow cried out lonely as a lost child from way up in the pastel blue sky, while a distant kookaburra laughed and laughed and laughed.

After a while they arrived at a few acres of flat land that seemed familiar to Sid. He even had the impression that he could smell smoke from a fire that was burning nearby, but decided he must have imagined it.

"Where are we, Rianna?" he asked.

The faerie looked around and replied that it was the place of the stunted Chinese Trees of Wonderment.

"The Chinese trees of what?"

"Wonderment."

Sid looked around but could not see anything particularly wonderful.

"Over there," said Rianna, pointing to some spindly little trees that seemed out of place where they were, as if they did not belong there.

If they are trees of wonderment then I'm a blade of grass, thought the man who was not sure who he was anyway but, not wanting to annoy his faerie, asked: "What are they doing here? They're a long way from home."

"Break off a frond and let the tree tell you," the faerie answered, mysteriously.

Against his better judgment Sid went up to one of the little trees and snapped off a leafy frond. To his surprise a strange aroma wafted out. Why, it smells like some sort of oriental spice, he thought. Fascinated, he took another sniff and the perfume seemed to permeate his whole being.

The aroma was so intense that he imagined he could hear Chinese music; music that started a story flowing through him. It was such an eerie sensation that at first he fought it. But something within him wanted to listen, so he gave himself up to whatever was happening and felt the story say:

Many years ago, far away in China, there lived a family of peasants who were continually persecuted by their greedy master. One day, a grandfather took his favourite grandson by the arm and walked with him to their master's persimmon grove, where pigs grew fat and contented eating the sweet fruits that had fallen to the ground.

It used to make the grandfather very angry when he saw the pigs eating so much while his family starved, but the landlord would have had them killed if they touched the persimmons.

"My grandson," said the old man. "I see the light of life in your eyes. You are not meant to stay here and have it extinguished by the hopelessness of our existence. You must leave this

place and go out into the world. I have heard it said that there is a country called Australia where a lot of gold is being found. Maybe you should go there. Many of our countrymen have gone before you."

"How will I get there?" asked the grandson.

"Prepare yourself," the old man replied, "and then return to this place in five days' time. Beneath a rock near the furthest persimmon tree I will leave enough gold for your passage to Australia."

"But how will you get it, Grandfather?" enquired the young man, knowing only too well how poor all of his family and their friends were.

"Don't worry about that," said the old man. "Just make sure you use your chance wisely and do not waste it, for you have an opportunity that none of the rest of your family has. Now, take this."

So saying, he held out a small leather pouch threaded onto a length of greased cord. "This contains a miniature portrait of your mother. Next to that I want you to place these." He held out his other hand. In it the young man saw a few seeds that were unlike any he had ever seen before.



"What will I do with them?" he queried.

"Do not do anything with them until you find the place of your dreams," the old man replied. "When you find that place then you must plant them.

"My father gave them to me before he died. He said that they are seeds from the Tree of Wonderment and that I was to plant them when I found the place of my dreams, for only there would they flourish – just as no person can flourish anywhere but in the environment that suits them the best. If they are planted anywhere else their growth will always be stunted, and they will not have the chance of growing into what they are meant to be.

"I never found that place. Now it is too late for me, but you are young and I will give you the chance of escaping from here so that you can search for your own place. You see, my grandson, these seeds can grow into mighty trees; trees that will shelter your life's garden from intense heat yet let in enough sunlight to help it flourish. In winter they will drop their

leaves to enrich and nourish your soil. The blossoms of these trees will grow into whatever fruit you wish, so long as all that your heart desires is good.

"You may yearn for a companion to share your life with then the Trees of Wonderment, if you are worthy, will plant a seed of love in the heart of someone who will become the woman of your dreams. If you and your partner desire children to share the gift of love with, then the trees' pollen shall fertilize you both so that you can be assured of the blessing of children who will be a comfort and a joy to you for all of your days.

"Should your garden be thirsty the trees will weep sweet tears of compassion that it may drink. If the weather of life turns bitter, then the Trees of Wonderment will warm your soil with the love in their roots. Should you occasionally feel homesick for the place of your birth then just break a frond from one of the trees and its aroma will transport your spirit back.

"But, remember," emphasised the old man, "the Trees of Wonderment will not flourish anywhere other than the place of your dreams. The seeds have been in our family for generations but none of us ever found the place to plant them, although we yearned for it all of our lives."

"I am most grateful for these gifts, my grandfather, and will cherish them always," said the young man, taking the seeds and putting them in the pouch containing his mother's portrait. He hung the pouch around his neck and swore to himself that he would find the place to plant the seeds and live the life his family had not been able to. The old man embraced his grandson and then they parted.

Five days later, the young man went to a rock near the furthest persimmon tree and found beneath it, wrapped in a piece of rag, some gold coins. That same day he left his family and home and, after many adventures, arrived in Melbourne, Australia. The day after he left his grandfather was arrested and executed for stealing and selling some of the master's pigs.

After unsuccessfully searching for gold at Ballarat, the young Chinaman travelled to Sale, in Gippsland, where he found employment in a market garden. He was a good gardener but, even though he never found very much, the lure of gold called him on.

For years he wandered throughout Gippsland trying his luck at various diggings, including those around Omeo and Walhalla.

Sometimes he would go back to working in market gardens. It was on one such occasion that he heard alluvial gold was being found in the Freestone and Gladstone creeks so, once again, he rolled up his swag and this time headed for Briagolong.

He planned on working his way up the Freestone Creek and then on to the diggings at Crooked River, near Dargo.

He had always felt like a stranger in a foreign land in Australia and was homesick for his family and friends back in China. All his dreams now consisted of was finding enough gold to pay his passage home. When I get there, he used to think, the first thing I will do is plant the seeds from the Tree of Wonderment, for that is the place of my dreams.

When he reached the Freestone he panned along it until the day he arrived at some flat land near the bottom of a gully, where he decided to camp for the night. There were a few other miners camped there also but the Chinaman, although he was lonely, was very shy so he set up camp alone beneath an old eucalypt tree.

That night, as he lay wrapped in his blanket, he dreamed his grandfather was calling him home because his mother was dying and yearned to see her long-lost son one last time.

The Chinaman awoke feeling so sad that he thought his heart would break. He lay staring up at clouds drifting across the moon like ghostly sampans on a distant sea. The image caused him to take the pouch from around his neck and remove the faded portrait of his mother. Tears filled his eyes as the intermittent moonlight exposed her worn but gentle face.

While staring at the portrait he did not notice the seeds from the Tree of Wonderment spill out onto the ground.

Weeping silently, the man lay within his pain until he fell into a restless, tear-stained sleep.

A breeze rustled the old gum tree's leaves with occasional bursts of laughter from the other miners' camp. Slowly the breeze grew in strength until it seemed to become a gale blowing all the way from China.

Storm clouds filled the sky. Lightening flashed and thunder crashed throughout the gully. Suddenly, a large limb broke off of the tree under which the homesick man was sleeping and fell on him, killing him instantly. Rain started falling and the seeds from the Tree of Wonderment began taking root in the wet soil beside the man's body.

The other miners found him the following morning. Not realizing he was a Buddhist, they buried him and put a rough wooden cross at the head of his grave, but that has long since rotted away.

Small, strange trees that looked as if they did not belong in that place grew from the seeds of the Chinese Tree of Wonderment, but they never flourished because it was not the place of the man's dreams. However, it is still possible to break a frond from the stunted trees and smell oriental spices.

The aroma drifted away, and the story faded.

*

"Isn't it strange, Rianna," Sidney Block commented, "how a scent can make you imagine so much."

"You can call it imagination if you like," she replied. "Anyway, we have been here long enough. Come on."

THE NUNYAS

The faerie flew away and the man followed instinctively, leaving behind the story of the stunted trees of wonderment and the burial place of the Chinese man's unfulfilled dreams.

Together they travelled further along the banks of the creek towards a destination that had always been elusive to the man.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"We will follow the creek to The Place of The Eyes," replied the faerie.

Sid was about to ask her what she meant but was not really sure that he wanted to know, so he just followed her as she fluttered through the bush, appearing to have a greeting for every living thing.

"What are you talking to?" he asked, annoyed at Rianna's enthusiasm for life.

"Everything," she replied.

"Then how come nothing seems to respond to you?" he commented, with some satisfaction.

"They respond in my heart."

"I bet rocks don't."

"Of course they do," said the faerie and swooped down to kiss one on the top of its bald head. Then she knelt and kissed a pebble. Looking up at the man she said: "All of nature is precious in its own way."



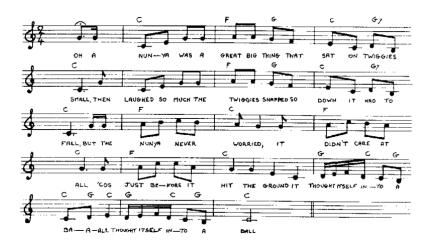
Looking towards McKinnon's Point

Eventually, they arrived at a place with high cliffs on either side of the creek that is called McKinnon's Point.

Sid sat down upon a rock, then immediately stood up again because he was unsure whether or not Rianna had been joking when she said she talked to rocks, as if they were alive. He decided to sit on it anyway because no matter where he sat he felt he would probably be sitting upon something that may be alive. Unbeknown to him the rock had flinched when it noticed the descending buttocks.

The faerie fluttered onto his knee once again. "Some Nunyas used to live there once," she commented, pointing to holes high up in the cliff opposite.

"What the heck were they?" asked Sid, who had never heard of Nunyas. Then, to his surprise, the faerie started singing.



"Oh, a Nunya was a great big thing that sat on twiggies small And laughed so much the twiggies snapped, so down it had to fall. But the Nunya never worried, it didn't care at all, 'Cos, just before it hit the ground, it thought itself into a ba-a-all, Thought itself into a ball.

Then back up high it would bounce again, right into the sky But to stop itself from falling down it had to learn to fly,

So it imagined itself into a bird, not a small one but a biggie, And as it flew it would spy again another tiny twi-i-ggy, Another tiny twiggy.

'Ho, ho,' it would say quite merrily, "what is it that I see?
I do believe it's the perfect place for a jolly thing like me.'
Then out of the sky it would fall again, onto a new twiggy flopped,
Until it seemed there'd be no twiggies left if the Nunyas could not be sto-o-oped,

If the Nunyas could not be stopped.

But of course it had to happen that the Nunyas became extinct Because the silly things had so much fun they forgot to eat and drink. So, one by one, to their surprise, each of the Nunyas found That they weren't heavy anymore but light as thistledo-o-own, Light as thistledown.

Now, the only reason that you see twiggies around today Is because the wind has finally blown all of the Nunyas away. But I've heard it whispered that, as they drifted out of sight, They thought themselves into nightmares and come back every ni-i-ight, Come back every night."

The faerie stopped singing and the man asked: "Is that really true, Rianna?"

"Of course it is," she answered. "It's as true as you and I sitting here together."

"But I've never heard of them," he retorted.

Rianna sighed and said: "Just because you haven't heard of something does not mean that it never existed."

"Well then, how could they have lived in those holes?" Sid queried, still unconvinced. "Most of them are only small and you said that the Nunyas were big,"

The faerie smiled; "Maybe they only thought they were big." Then she patted his knee, stood up and said, "Come on Smartie. Let's go to a Listening Place and I'll ask The Spirit of the Kurnai* to tell you about the skyrunner birds."

As she flew away Sid asked: "Go to where to ask who about what?"

"To a Listening Place," Rianna called back. "The Kurnai were an aboriginal tribe that once lived in this region. The Spirit will tell you about birds called skyrunners. The Spirit can tell you many things, but for now I think it is important that you hear about these extinct little birds. I'm sure you will find their story interesting."

* Later known as Ganai.

THE SKYRUNNER BIRDS

Sidney Block did not feel happy about going to listen to a spirit but he went anyway, wandering after Rianna as she led him along the creek until they arrived at a large tree.

"Here we are," said the faerie, swooping down to sit at its base.

The man sat beside her and leaned back against the tree's trunk. He thought of how the peeling bark of that type of tree always gave him the impression it was undressing.

"How long do we have to wait for The Spirit of the Kurnai?" he asked.

"Be patient. It will come when you are ready," the faerie answered.

"I'm ready now," Sid replied, eager to get the experience over with.

"No you aren't. You humans get impatient for things to happen in your own sense of time. You cannot rush nature. The Spirit will know when you are ready. Just relax and observe what is happening around you without any knowledge or care of your existence. You are of no consequence to time. While you are here just sit quietly and observe the place fate has put you. It may even help you understand the importance of your insignificance."

The man was trying to comprehend what the faerie had said when a dingo appeared from out of the bush. The animal went up to a tree, tore a piece of bark from it and then, gripping the bark with its front teeth, headed towards the creek. When it reached the creek the dingo turned around and slowly backed into the water.

"Look, Rianna," Sid said, quietly. "That's a strange thing for a dingo to do."

"No. It isn't strange at all," she replied. "Just watch and see if you can understand what it is doing."

Deeper and deeper went the dingo until only the tip of its snout and the piece of bark between its teeth could be seen above the water. It stood there for a while before letting the bark drift off downstream. Then it returned to the bank, shook itself, and disappeared back into the bush.

The faerie asked Sid if he knew why the dingo had done what it had, but he could not think of a reason.

"The answer is simple," she replied. "The dingo was de-fleaing itself. You see, as it backed into the water the fleas moved up its body until they were forced to crawl onto the bark. When they had done that the dingo let it float away, leaving the fleas to their fate in the Freestone's rapids."

Sid closed his eyes and imagined the bark raft floating down the creek, carrying the fleas to their doom.

The sun's warmth made the man feel comfortably drowsy so he dozed for a while, dreaming that it was night-time and he was sitting beside a campfire, staring at something within the flames. Distantly, he became aware of Rianna speaking.

"Open your eyes Mister Dreamy and look up."

Sid opened his eyes and was amazed to see a magnificent rainbow, by far the most beautiful he had ever seen, arcing across the sky. Automatically, he sat up straight and said in awe: "Oh, Rianna, isn't it wonderful. Where did it come from? I haven't seen any rain."

"That is no ordinary rainbow," the faerie answered, "but a personal one caused by a smile shining through tears. The end of it could be where we met."

"Fair dinkum? Does that mean there's a pot of gold waiting for me?"

"No. Not gold but something far more valuable. It is a treasure within you that you can share with every living thing you come in contact with."

"What sort of treasure is that?" enquired Sid, doubtfully, feeling that he might miss out on something special.

The faerie's eyes grew moist as she said: "It is the treasure of caring."

"I'd prefer a pot of gold," replied Sid.

"That is only because you have not yet realized the value of the treasure in your heart but you will, in fact you must, otherwise all you experience will have been wasted."

Rianna stopped talking and seemed to listen for a while before continuing: "Would you like to hear about the skyrunner birds now, before the rainbow disappears?"

Trying to hide his disappointment at not getting a pot of gold and worried about meeting a spirit Sid decided to get the experience over with. "I may as well," he said. "But what have they got to do with rainbows?"

"Rainbows were their life," Rianna replied, looking up at him. "It was their inability to accept what they were and their longing to be what they were not that destroyed them. Sit back and listen. The Spirit of the Kurnai will tell you about them. Relax and you will hear it."

Once again the man leaned back against the tree. Then, softly at first, he heard a gentle rumbling, or droning, sound that seemed to be coming from deep within the earth. *I must be imagining things*, he thought. *If I didn't know better I'd say that was the sound of a didjeridu. But how can one be played beneath the ground?*

Closer and closer the sound came, closer and closer, until it reached the roots of the tree and then slowly continued up through the tree itself; not only through the tree but through Sid's body as well.

He had a strange sensation that he was merging with the tree and becoming part of its roots, its trunk, its branches, its leaves. He had become part of the tree and the tree a part of him. He was in the tree looking out at a man leaning against his trunk – a man staring intently at a rainbow.

The moment passed yet he could still feel or hear (he was not sure which, it all seemed to be the same thing) the sound of the didjeridu. Then he realized that it had become a voice; a voice speaking to him silently from within the tree.

'I am the Spirit of the Kurnai,' it rumbled.

Sid shuddered with fear as the voice said:

"There is nothing to fear here except yourself. Not a thing in the bush wishes you any harm.' Why can't I see you?' Sid asked.

'You can see me,' replied The Spirit. 'I am all around you. I am in the grass beneath your feet and the tree against which you lean. I am in the air you breathe and the earth that feeds you. I am part of you and you are part of me and together we are part of all things. However, that is something you must learn for yourself. What is it in particular that brings you here?'

Sid was at a loss for words. The faerie answered silently for him: 'I was hoping you would tell my person about the skyrunner birds.'

Sid could not help but wonder why no-one was speaking out loud when, suddenly, The Spirit answered him by entering his thoughts and saying:

'It is what you hear within yourself that influences you. If you ever want to learn more of what there is to know then just be silent in a listening place and try to hear a spirit in the quiet of your being.'

'Er. Thank you. I will Mr Kurnai, um, Mr Spirit,' Sid stammered in his mind.

He noticed a moth fluttering around in circles between the rainbow and an owl that was staring at him from its perch on the dark limb of a tree. *That's strange,* he wondered, *I thought moths and owls only came out at night.* Then, as The Spirit began telling the story inside his mind, Sid forgot about them and closed his eyes.

*

Not far from the junction of the Freestone and Gladstone creeks there once lived the last known colony of little birds called skyrunners.

There were two types of this species of bird. The majority resembled miniature emus but the Freestone variety looked somewhat like tiny kiwis. Their beaks were long and slender and used for sipping, not pecking, at food. Their wings alone were not large enough to allow them to fly so they had developed feathery, webbed feet with sharp claws that enabled them to run up trees and through the sky.



Skyrunners' eyes were small and dull grey in colour. However, when a rainbow appeared they would grow larger, glowing with its reflected hues.

Although these birds were much-loved by our people, they did not like themselves. They thought they were ugly and unworthy of a mate. Each of them hid alone beneath leaves on the forest floor and dreamed of the day, the wonderful day, when a rainbow would appear in the sky and they could sip colours from it in the belief that it would make them attractive to other skyrunners.

On bright, moonlit nights skyrunners would come out of hiding and creep through the bush in search of colourful feathers. They took these back to their hiding places and used them to make nests.

When traveling through the bush our people were careful not to tread on a pile of leaves in case they crushed a skyrunner. To kill one, even accidentally, was thought to bring extremely bad luck.

Because they did little more than spend most of their lives hiding, skyrunners' heart rates slowed down to such an extent that they did not need much nourishment to stay alive. For food and drink they would sip dewdrops, raindrops, sunbeams, moonbeams, fragrant bush perfumes and pollen.

Besides being lonely and thinking they were ugly, these birds were also deaf – at least they were deaf until a rainbow appeared in the sky. However, not being able to hear did not stop them from singing and sometimes, usually on dark cloudy nights, one of them, unable to bear the loneliness in its heart any longer, would sing to an imaginary lover.

Other skyrunners would join in, each singing in exquisite harmony – even though they could not hear the song they were singing. Maybe they could feel vibrations flow through the air; vibrations of something very dear to them that reached out from one yearning heart to another; something they could not hear yet shared, deep inside.

I wish I could have heard them, Sid thought.

To his surprise, The Spirit's voice entered his mind and said: 'Just be grateful you can still hear the other birds singing. Now, please don't interrupt. You can think all you want to when I have finished.' Then the story resumed.

The sound of their song was the most beautiful that had ever been heard in the forest. It was a sound so sweet that every living thing that heard it was filled with emotions of joy and sorrow simultaneously. Nothing could ignore the wonder of that melody.

Stars stopped twinkling, clouds paused in the sky and breezes held their breath – as if afraid they might blow the song away so that it could never be heard again. The sad thing was that not one skyrunner ever realised how sweet its song was, even though each of them sang the same song of yearning from deep within their own heart.

The only hope in the little birds' lives, something they had dreamed of from the time they hatched, was the appearance of a rainbow. Day after day, especially when the sun shone during a shower of rain, they would peep out hopefully from beneath the leaves that hid them, only to be continually disappointed when no rainbow appeared.

Day after day, week after week they would peek out until it seemed that years might pass without any sign of a rainbow; until they felt they would die all alone in their hiding places without ever having been loved.

Even the bush felt sad for the poor little creatures and wished that it could do something to help them but it could not, it had to go about its own business of survival.



However, when the time was right, came the day, the glorious day when, after a special fall of rain, the sun shone and Nature, the magical artist, painted a brushstroke of miracles in an arc across the sky, and a rainbow finally appeared.

Nowadays, rainbows are pale comparisons of those that bloomed back in the skyrunners' time. Those rainbows were unpolluted and far more brilliant than any that can ever be seen again. In fact they were so beautiful that in The Dreamtime they became known as 'the tears of wonder.'

The first appearance of the rainbow seemed faint, as if it was unsure of itself but, being a child of Nature caressed by the sun, it could not help blooming. It was a sight of such hope and beauty that it was known to stop wallabies halfway through a hop and drop them, stunned, to the ground. In their excitement cockatoos almost choked on their screeches.

Wedge tail eagles swerved high in the sky so that they did not disturb the rainbow. Caterpillars stopped eating and dreamed of being butterflies. The creek gurgled happily over rocks when it saw itself reflected in an Aladdin's cave of beautiful liquid jewels. The sky glowed with pride, and the sun smiled.

Small grey eyes grew large with wonder as the skyrunners peeped out from their despair, and then sparkled with joy when they saw the answer to their dream.

Raindrops splashed glittering rainbow fragments throughout the bush. Instinct told insects to move away as quickly as possible from the mounds of leaves on the forest floor. The bush waited in anticipation. The magnificence of the rainbow grew in such intensity that the sky worried it might burst, and the sun wished it could blink.

The radiance of the rainbow's colours made everything that had witnessed the scene previously forget what was about to happen, just as the pain of childbirth diminishes in a mother's memory when she yearns to bear another child.

Then a sound, soft as a murmur at first, slowly grew in intensity until it filled the forest. It was the sound of skyrunners. They had become so excited at the sight of the rainbow that they had thrown off their covers of leaves and were running up and down on the spot, as if unsure of what to do.

The birds' little legs drummed tiny feet on the ground in time with the beating of their racing hearts. Then they started singing. Unfortunately it was not the beautiful song they had sung when they were deaf and lonely. It was a terrible sound; a sound that ripped through the bush like a raucous scream of desire.

Miraculously, the skyrunners could suddenly hear, although what they heard were not the awful sounds they made. What they heard sounded more beautiful to them than the song they had sung from their hearts when they were lonely. It was a song as sweet to them as the rainbow's colours.

Their singing ravaged the air; it shrieked like thwarted banshees; like tormented spirits being crushed by tombstones, although, to the little birds, it was the joyous, wonderful sound of the promise of fulfilment. At long last they were happy. They were on the verge of being freed from a lifetime of sorrow.

Unfortunately, the skyrunners upset every other thing that heard them. They were deliriously happy and overjoyed that they could finally hear their song. The more they looked at the rainbow and listened to their song the worse they sang and the greater became their desire until, unable to contain their excitement any longer, they shrieked with joy.

The birds quickly carried their nests to the rocky edge of a part of the Freestone Creek that, because of the nests' beauty, became known by our people as the Coloured Pool. Then they ran up the trees, all the way to the topmost branches. This was the time the bush had waited for when, for a short while, the skyrunners were too happy to even sing.

When they reached the topmost boughs the birds stopped and waited. Their legs pounded up and down uncontrollably, running on the spot so fast that, like hummingbirds' wings, they were almost a blur.



Their glowing eyes grew larger, bright with rainbow colours – as if benevolent angels had taken jewels from Heaven's treasure-trove and scattered them like brilliant living opals throughout the treetops.

Then, unable to bear the anticipation any longer, the skyrunners rushed along the branches to the very ends and gleefully launched themselves from the forest canopy and into the sky, flapping their tiny wings while running the air towards the rainbow.

Before white men cut down the tallest trees in the bush, skyrunners did not have very far to run through the sky before reaching the rainbow. Those trees grew so high that God had to trim the tops off the ones that tickled his beard.

When they did finally reach the source of their dreams the birds ran through it while sipping coloured raindrops. Of course, what they drank and the moisture on their feathers made them heavier. To stop themselves from falling too quickly back to earth and crashlanding, they spread their webbed-feet and stunted wings and floated back down towards the nests.

Filled with joy, each of them thought it was beautiful and would surely find a mate to live happily with for the rest of its life.

When they landed each of the birds began singing again. Then, without trying to choose who might be the most attractive, because they thought that everything was beautiful, males and females paired up with the partner closest to them.

They mated with that partner as if with a dream. Of course, twice as many nests had been made than were needed but, feeling content, the females didn't prefer any one in particular and laid an egg in the first empty nest they saw. The eggs' shells were speckled with all of the rainbow's colours.

The first thing the parents wanted their babies to see when they hatched was beauty. They thought that pretty colours would make their children think that life was beautiful, and that would make them happy for as long as they lived. The poor little birds forgot that they had seen the same colours when they had hatched, yet still ended up feeling sad for most of their lives.

Time can be a curious thing, depending on the way it is perceived and how long each thing is meant to live. Time seemed different for skyrunners than for human beings, just as it does for mayflies which, after hatching, may only live for 20 minutes.

From the rainbow's first appearance until it began to fade was as long as it took the birds to run through it and sip its colours, float back down to earth, mate, lay their eggs and have them hatch.

In their joy, the parent birds perched upon rocks around the coloured pool and screeched at the rainbow, too happy to notice that it was slowly beginning to fade.

The baby birds excitedly pecked holes from inside their shells until there was enough room for them to step out into the new world. When they saw their parents singing happily to the rainbow it had a lasting impression upon them. Then they noticed that their nests, and the broken shells of their eggs, were also the same colours as the rainbow.

Feeling that everything in life was beautiful, each of the babies cheeped terrible, heart-felt sounds of happiness. The sounds coming from the nests startled the parent birds so much that their songs suddenly felt like sand rasping in their throats.

Confused, they stopped singing and looked around to see what was making such awful noises. They were shocked to realise that it was their own babies; naked babies that looked uglier than they themselves had once felt.

Each of the adult skyrunners stared in dismay at what was making the noise, and then looked back desperately and hopefully towards the rainbow.

They could not understand what had happened. Why weren't their babies beautiful? Why did they make such awful sounds? Something was wrong, very wrong. And what was happening to the rainbow? It was disappearing! Had their babies frightened it away? Was it their fault for having such ugly children? Why were their dreams fading with the rainbow and being shattered like the shells of the beautiful eggs they had given their offspring?

The poor little birds were stunned. The colours drained from their eyes, disappearing with their dreams and the last traces of the rainbow. Only the sky was left, a sky that seemed emptier than any they had ever known.

Had they hurt the rainbow's feelings? They could not understand how birds as pretty as they thought they were could have had such ugly children.

They looked at the nests and saw that the babies were staring happily into their eyes as if at rainbows. The babies also appeared to be singing, but the parent birds had suddenly became deaf once again and could not hear their children's songs of wonder.

The birds closest to the pool lowered their heads in sorrow and were shocked to notice that their reflections had not changed at all. They still looked the same as they always had. This realization caused them to be overwhelmed with despair.

One by one each of the adults turned sadly away from the pool, deserted their children, and dragged their disappointment back into the bush where, once again, the little birds hid themselves under leaves.

Other skyrunners rushed to the pool to see their reflections; and so every one of them came to realise that they had not changed either. They also returned to the bush and hid, alone once again; pulling dead leaves over themselves to hide their shame.

Eventually, all of the older birds had gone – only the babies were left. These wobbled unsteadily down to the water's edge to see what had upset the other birds. When the babies saw their reflections they felt it must have been their appearance that had caused them to be deserted, and they too were struck dumb.

The tiny, new-born, skyrunners copied their parents' behaviour and also went away to hide their shame beneath leaves. Some attempted to creep under leaves where adults already hid. These were pecked at and roughly pushed away until they were forced to find their own hiding places. Soon the only sounds to be heard were the occasional rustle of leaves.

While the adult skyrunners hid they thought that they were to blame for their children's ugliness because they had not drunk enough of the rainbow's colours to be beautiful. The baby skyrunners thought it was their fault the parents were sad because they were not pretty, and would somehow have to become as beautiful as the rainbow to make them happy.

So it was that each lonely old and lonely young bird waited for another rainbow to appear in the sky. Every one of them thought that when it did they would sip enough of its colours to be beautiful forever. The sad reality was that, when a rainbow finally did appear, the older birds ran into it and drank so much that they became too heavy to float safely back down to earth and crashed, killing themselves.

The joy of the birds that had never sipped colours before blinded them to the tragedy around them as they floated down to repeat the cycle. Unfortunately, when they saw their own children the younger skyrunners' reactions were exactly the same as their parents had been.

As time passed the bush went back about its business. Eagles soared where a rainbow had once been. Caterpillars forgot about butterflies and returned to eating as much as they could. Wallabies hopped uninterrupted. Jewels dissolved in the creek and the nests were eventually blown or washed away.

Except for the broken bodies of older skyrunners scattered throughout the forest, everything seemed to be the same as it had been before the rainbow. Everything seemed the same – even the little birds hiding beneath leaves, waiting to be beautiful so that they could be happy.

But that is not the end of the story.



'Queen Lilly & King Billy'. Dispossessed indigenous couple who often visited Briagolong

THE GRIEF OF AGES

There was deep sorrow in the hearts of the native tribes when they were forced to leave the places that had been home to them for many thousands of years; the places they loved dearly and were as much a part of them as the stars are to the night.

One day, an old woman sat down and told the few remaining children of her tribe what life had been like before the white people came. She told them of the mighty forests, rich with life that had grown with them since their history was a sapling.

She talked of the wonder of mystical nights around campfires when spirits whispered, murmuring tales from The Dreaming through the flicker of flames that still burned brightly in her memory.

The old woman told them of the ancient days, the stolen days, days that surged within her like a raging sea.

To the lost children listening in awe she seemed to speak from the earth's very heart as she told of the corroboree-dancing, clay-daubed bodies; of the intricacy of her people's alliance with the rest of nature and how, between the shining of the sun and the shadows of the moon, wonder had breathed legends through the mystery of that place.

She spoke of the lush grasses of the plains where her tribe had hunted the grazing animals. She told the children of rivers, lakes, marshes and fresh, sweetwater streams that had once abounded with fish, yabbies, waterfowl, crayfish, mussels and many other forms of wildlife.

She described the tribal wars she had witnessed. She told them such tales of the way life had been for their people that other members of her tribe gathered around to listen, and the more they listened the greater became their sorrow for what had gone forever.



While the old woman reminisced, a cloud drifted across the sky and showered tears of wonder through the sun's rays, causing a magnificent rainbow to blossom over the distant hills that had once been part of her home. It was a rainbow more glorious than any that had ever been seen before, or would ever be seen again. It would also be the last rainbow the old woman and the skyrunners ever saw.

She pointed to it and told the children about the strange little birds that hid under leaves until a rainbow appeared, and how they began making a terrible noise before running up the tallest trees and into the sky towards it. She said that they were too small for her people to see what happened to them after they ran into the sky, but she thought the birds must have sucked the colours from the rainbow because it always seemed to begin fading not long after they had landed.

A deeper depression filled the old people's hearts as they remembered. Due to the way some of the strangers were treating the bush and their fellow human beings, even the earth and sky seemed to become filled with an unbearable sadness.

The poor old woman became so overwhelmed at what had been lost forever that, as tears filled her eyes, grief broke her heart and she fell to the ground and died. When the old woman died the weather suddenly turned bitterly cold, even though the sun was shining brightly.

One of the tribal elders went to the woman's side and cradled her head in his arms. As he did so he noticed that the last two tears she would ever weep shone with all the colours of the rainbow, and looked like two of the most precious jewels in the world as they rolled down her cheeks. The old man wiped the tears away and was amazed to find that they were solid. They had frozen.

While the native people mourned the death of the old woman and the loss of their heritage, back in the hills the skyrunners had become very excited when they saw the beauty of the rainbow.

Unfortunately, the little birds did not realize that, at the same time as the grief-stricken woman's tears froze, a greater sorrow than the bush had ever known filled the ancient world with anguish so profound that it caused the rainbow to freeze.

Then they ran. Oh, how the poor little birds ran. Up the trees and through the sky towards the rainbow they ran, almost delirious with joy because they felt that they were going to be happy forevermore.

If they had not been using all of their energy for running then they would have sung. Each pounding little heart wanted to sing melodies sweeter than any they had ever sung before.

They felt that their songs of joy would hatch the whole world awake to love forever and nothing need ever be sad again.

One after the other, dazzled by beauty, the birds hit the frozen rainbow and died; their slender beaks chipping off pieces of coloured ice that, like a shower of jewelled particles, fell with them back to earth.

The sound of the Spirit of the Kurnai seemed to have receded, causing Sidney Block to think that the story had ended. Without opening his eyes he thought that even if skyrunners had existed then the manner of their death was not such a bad thing. The way their world was changing they probably would not have survived much longer anyway. At least the last thing they saw was the colours they yearned to be.

However, the story had not finished. Having lost his fear of spirits – at least this particular spirit – the man listened as the voice continued within him.

THE FROZEN RAINBOW'S END

At the same time as the rainbow froze Bob Graham, who for some reason was better known as Charlie, was searching for gold not far from the Coloured Pool. Although he had been prospecting for the best part of a year, Charlie never found much more than enough gold to purchase the provisions that gave him the strength to keep on searching for more. He longed to find a nugget large enough to enable him to buy a farm, and then he intended to go courting the woman he wanted to be his bride.

The prospector was so engrossed in his work that it was some time before he noticed anything unusual. Neither the rainbow's glow nor the muffled drumming of the skyrunners' feet distracted him. It was only when the little birds began singing their raucous song of joy that he was jolted from his concentration.

When he looked around to try and find the cause of the terrible sound he saw the rainbow, and the sight of it amazed him. It looked as if it was solid, and more brilliant than any he had ever seen before.

As he gazed in awe at the rainbow Charlie shivered and realised that he felt cold yet, only a few moments previously, he had been perspiring. This struck him as strange because there appeared to be only one, insignificant, cloud in the sky and the sun was shining brightly.

Going to where he had left his swag he put on his jumper and jacket, but still felt cold. Thinking he might be coming down with a chill he unrolled his blankets, lay down and, fully clothed, wrapped himself in them. *Maybe I've been working too hard,* he thought and decided to rest for a while.

Fortunately, the awful sound stopped as abruptly as it had started.

Charlie closed his eyes, thus missing the skyrunners desperate dash to the rainbow, and their tragic demise.

Sometime later curiosity caused him to open his eyes again. As he lay looking up at the rainbow he noticed that it appeared to glisten and, curiously, seemed to have moved closer to earth than when he had first seen it. He did not realize that it was the frozen rainbow's weight that was causing it to slowly descend.

Worried that he was hallucinating and must indeed be ill, the prospector snuggled deeper into the blankets and tried to sleep, hoping that when he awoke he would feel better.

He slept for a few hours, which was something he could not remember doing during the afternoon since he had been a child. When he awoke the sun was setting and he was surprised

to see that the rainbow was still in the sky, and even closer to earth – although, due to the setting sun, it was now reddish-pink in colour.

Thinking that a cup of tea might help clear his mind Charlie set about collecting wood to build a fire and boil the billy. While doing this he noticed that the bush seemed strangely quiet. There was no evening chorus of birdsong that usually filled the air at that time of day. What he did not notice was the broken body of a skyrunner crushed beneath one of his boots.

The sun had almost set by the time the billy had boiled and, even though Charlie sat by the fire sipping a mug of hot tea and eating some of his rations, he still felt cold. In fact the evening felt so chilly it caused him to shudder, as if it was haunted.

Feeling uneasy the prospector decided to try and think pleasant thoughts. Not surprisingly he dreamed of the gold he hoped to find one day so that he could live happily for the rest of his life and never be lonely again.

Time travelled on. The sun set, the moon rose and the night sky twinkled with stars while the man sat staring into the fire, engrossed in thoughts that were common to most people. He was so absorbed that he did not notice the rainbow, reflecting the moon's glow, now shone like a silver arc across the darkened sky.

As the moon rose higher, the silverbow glistened brighter and the ice fragments chipped off by skyrunners glittered like fallen stars throughout the forest.

The cold night air invaded Charlie's dreams so he decided to return to bed. After emptying the remainder of the billy's contents onto the fire, he was absentmindedly watching white steam rise into the dark like a hissing ghost when he saw something that stunned him. The rainbow was still in the sky, although now it was a silverbow! Awestruck, he looked at it in disbelief until the cold forced him to wrap himself in his blankets and watch the silverbow from his bed.

This he did for a while, his fascination tempered by a twinge of fear, but eventually he drifted off into a fitful sleep. Within this sleep the prospector dreamed that he found an endless seam of gold; enough to buy happiness for every person upon the earth; enough gold to make a mighty arc across the sky. It was the most fulfilling dream he had ever had.

At dawn, the first rays of sunlight slipped over the hills, through the forest and into Charlie's dream, waking him to a new day. Yet, when he opened his eyes, what he saw made him think that he was dreaming still for there, in the morning sky above him, was the golden arc of his dreams. He did not realize that what he beheld was a frozen rainbow reflecting the dawn sunrise.

Charlie could not believe his luck when he saw that the end of the golden rainbow, or what he thought of as a goldbow, was not far from his camp. In fact, during the night it had slipped so close to earth that one end seemed to be almost within reach above a cliff

Scrambling out of bed in excitement he grabbed his pick and a canvas shoulder bag then, hoping to chip pieces from it, climbed as close as he could get to the goldbow.

After climbing closer to the realization of his dreams than he had ever been, Charlie measured the distance in his mind and, synchronising the pick's swing, took a running leap into the air – intending to knock a chunk of happiness from the goldbow.

Unfortunately, he could not jump high enough, and the momentum of the pick's sweep through the air thudded it into the ground without touching the goldbow. Because Charlie was still tightly gripping the handle he was flipped over onto his back and stunned by the impact. He was fortunate not to have been flipped over the cliff.

Time was passing. The sun was rising and by the time Charlie had regained his composure the golden arc was becoming a rainbow again. Not only was it becoming a rainbow but, unbeknown to the prospector, it was starting to melt.

Charlie decided that the only way he would be able to break off pieces was by throwing rocks at it. He rushed around collecting the largest rocks he thought himself capable of throwing and made a big pile of them on top of the cliff. It was only when he was about to hurl one that he realised the goldbow had disappeared. There was nothing left but a rainbow.

At first he was disappointed but then he reasoned that, due to their rarity, pieces of rainbow would probably be worth more than gold so he threw one of the largest rocks he could at it.

The prospector had overestimated his strength and the rock just rolled down over the cliff. Eventually Charlie became adept at throwing the right size rocks to break off satisfying chunks. These also fell over the cliff and into the creek.

After happily breaking pieces from his dream and exerting himself more than he felt he had done while searching for gold during the entire past year Charlie was exhausted. He decided to rest for a while before climbing down the cliff to retrieve his treasure.

The weather was warm, unlike the previous day's chill that had made Charlie think he might be ill, and the rainbow was beginning to thaw. Believing the dripping of melting rainbow drops to be the patter of rain, even though he had not noticed any clouds, the prospector lay down beneath the shelter of a tree.

Bone weary but happy his contentment made the hard earth feel like a comfortable mossy bed. He closed his eyes, rested and planned his future. Work had never seemed more fulfilling or rest so peaceful.

The sun rose higher, heating the day and melting the rainbow so rapidly that drops of water fell with such intensity that the weather began to resemble a monsoon. The prospector's shelter soon proved to be inadequate but he stayed there anyway and hunched beneath the tree with his jacket pulled up over his head.

He was astounded by the sudden climatic change and felt as if he had been transported to tropical northern Australia. If there had been storm clouds, thunder and lightning Charlie would have found what was happening more acceptable, but there was only the continual down pouring of rain from what had appeared to be a cloudless sky.

The longer the downpour continued the more humid the atmosphere became, until Charlie found it stifling. In fact he felt sure he could hear the rain sizzling as it landed on rocks, as if he was in a sauna. Because they were drenched now anyway, the prospector decided to take off his clothes in an attempt to gain some respite from the clammy conditions.

When he lifted the jacket from his head he was stunned to see that a thick mist, reminiscent of steam, had penetrated the valley so densely that he had the uncomfortable impression of being cocooned in a warm, damp shroud. Other than his underwear the prospector took off the remainder of his clothing before putting his boots back on.

Unbeknown to Charlie, rivulets had begun pouring down the hills before joining up and cascading into the creek. This had become a raging torrent, washing away the skyrunner nests and filling the Coloured Pool with rocks and debris, so that it no longer exists.

One of the nests was washed into a hole in the cliff at McKinnon's Point, where it was protected from the elements until found by an old bushman, Archie Hair, many years later.

The rainbow finally melted and the sun's heat caused the steam to evaporate, leaving Charlie holding his clothes to keep them out of the mud and wondering what had become of the rainbow. Then he heard the roar of raging water and saw the flooded creek.

Although dumbfounded by what he was experiencing Charlie hung his soaking clothes on branches to dry and then, taking the canvas bag with him, went in search of the pieces of rainbow he had broken off. Not realizing that it had melted, the eager fortune hunter searched fruitlessly before wondering whether his treasure had been washed away by the heavy rain.

Deeply disappointed, Charlie decided to travel downstream and wait near the entrance to the Blue Pool – where he felt a lot of the treasure would be trapped when the flood had passed.

The prospector went back to his camp but found that all of his gear had also been washed away. Wondering what to do next he climbed back up the hill to the tree where he had left his clothes, which were now almost dry, and put them back on – other than the jacket and jumper, which he carried.

Charlie contemplated his situation, which did not seem promising. He knew that he should return to civilisation but did not want to leave before collecting at least some of his treasure. The problem was that he didn't have any food, although he certainly wouldn't have to worry about finding enough water to drink. He decided to travel as far as the Blue Pool and then review the situation.

Feeling depressed by his bad luck, the prospector kept to high ground, away from most of the slippery clay and mud. He had not travelled far when he realized that the grass was dry, as if the downpour had been localized.

Looking down at the creek he noticed that, although the water was still raging, its level seemed to be dropping. This brightened his spirits somewhat and he decided to wait near the Blue Pool for the water to subside, even if it meant going without food for a day or two.

When Charlie reached the pool's entrance he was pleased to see that most of the flash flood had passed, although the creek was still deeper than normal. He waited until he considered the danger was over and then climbed down to look for his treasure. After searching unsuccessfully for the remainder of the day the prospector decided to have one final look the following morning.

Without his swag, food or the makings for a cup of tea he spent an uncomfortable night curled up on some ferns, but fortunately the weather was mild – and he still had some hope left.

The following morning, yearning for a cup of tea, the prospector eased his body from the ground and attempted to stretch some suppleness into his limbs.

During the night the creek had returned to normal so Charlie had what is known as a dingo's breakfast – a sip of water and a look around – and then resumed his quest. He searched up and down the creek, along its banks and beneath rocks. He even dug in the damp sand with his hands but found nothing of interest other than a sock and a torn blanket from his swag, which he retrieved.

Having enough cause to be fed up and perplexed, which he was, Charlie scratched his head and wondered whether he had spent too much time alone in the bush and was starting to go mad.

"That's it," he said aloud, "I've had enough." Then he wrung out the soggy sock and blanket, put the sock in a pocket of his jacket, threw the blanket over a shoulder and left the area forever.

It was a good thing he never knew that one of the rocks he had thrown at the rainbow contained a gold nugget that would have bought him the farm of his dreams.

Fortunately, like many travellers who lived a subsistence lifestyle, Charlie had sewn some coins into the lining of his coat. These were only to be used in desperate circumstances, such as he now found himself in. With those for security and a small amount of gold in a pouch on his belt, the ex-prospector went to Lakes Entrance and worked on fishing boats until he could afford to purchase a few acres of land.

On this land he built a cottage which he and the woman he eventually married, who was not the woman he had dreamed of marrying while searching for gold, called 'Rainbow's End'.

Like an ebbing tide the Spirit of the Kurnai seemed to slide slowly back from the shore of Sidney Block's consciousness, until it had returned into the earth from whence it came. The man opened his eyes and glanced at the sky but saw no sign of the rainbow. However, he knew that for the rest of his life rainbows would always remind him of skyrunner birds.

"So you see Mr Sid," said the faerie, interrupting his thoughts, "the treasure at the end of a rainbow may not necessarily be a pot of gold."

"That was a sad story, Rianna," he responded. "I'm pleased it wasn't true."

"Oh, but it was true," she replied. "In fact there's more. I don't know why The Spirit did not finish telling you. Maybe it felt that you didn't believe it."

"I thought it was just a story. How could anyone be expected to believe anything so incredible?"

"There are far more incredible things in Nature than skyrunners and frozen rainbows, Mister. Now, do you want to hear the rest of what happened or would it just be a waste of time?"

Sid thought that if he was dreaming then at least it was an interesting dream. Feeling chastened, and fearing his attitude may cause him to miss out on whatever else the faerie had to share, he admitted that he did want to know more.

"Alright," Rianna said. "Do you remember the small wooden house near the Blue Pool?"

"You mean Archie Hair's hut?"

"Yes. Well I think that old Archie was one of the few people The Spirit told about the skyrunners."

"How do you know that?"

"I have learned a lot of things while searching for you."

"Do you know that Archie's dead?" Sid asked, not fully understanding the faerie's reply.

"Yes. But hopefully you will get a chance to share some of his experiences. He could teach you a lot if only you bothered to try and learn."

Sid could not think of a response to that remark and decided that even if he could it might be better to remain silent.

"Now," said Rianna, "sit back, relax, close your eyes again and apologize to The Spirit for being ignorant. Hopefully it will finish the story."

Sid did as he was told and was surprised to find that he did not feel foolish making an apology to a spirit in a tree, then he was gratified to hear the didjeridu sound return and the story continue:

Many years later, after learning of the story at a listening tree, Archie Hair went to Lakes Entrance in search of Charlie's descendants, hoping they could verify his part in it. To his surprise, he discovered that a family called Graham had indeed lived on a property not far from town in a house called 'Rainbow's End'. Unfortunately they had long since left the district and he was unable to find out what became of them.

However, Archie did visit the place where the house had once stood, although all that remained was an overgrown garden containing a few straggly old fruit trees and some agapanthus plants. With a stick he dug up a couple of agapanthus bulbs. He took them home and planted them in the garden of the house he shared with his wife, Edna, near the Freestone Creek. Although their home has been demolished the agapanthus plants can still be seen.

The voice within Sidney Block went silent but he was still aware of the didjeridu's soft droning, as if the earth was breathing. Feeling there was more to be told he waited patiently and heard the story continue.

THE TEAR OF JOY

Just before the skyrunners died many of them, too happy to realise how cold the air they ran through had become wept tears of joy, little tears that froze with rainbow colours as they fell.

Most of the tears shattered when they hit rocks, or eventually melted where they had fallen. A few were caught in spider webs and hung like jewels in precious necklaces before melting. Some of the webs' occupants actually pounced on the tears and wrapped them up, thinking they were exotic prey, only to become confused when they finally decided to eat what they had trapped and found that their prey had vanished.

When something amazing happens it is not unusual for something equally inexplicable to occur, and so it was on this occasion.

Before all the tears had melted the prospector began throwing rocks at the rainbow in his futile attempt to capture happiness. Although many of the tears were smashed by the rocks some were entombed in crevices among dream faerie's broken hearts and, by an extraordinary process of nature, became petrified.

During the flood caused by the melting rainbow most of the petrified tears of joy were washed downstream into the Avon River, but a few remain buried near the creek.



Jess Morley

One day in November 1985, Jess Morley was panning for gold upstream from the Freestone Creek's entrance into the Blue Pool. Although little gold had ever been found in the creek Jess enjoyed his hobby without expecting to find anything of value. He moved a couple of rocks embedded just above water level hoping to expose a few flakes of alluvial gold.

After digging out some moist sand with the edge of his panning dish he scooped water into it and swirled the contents around. As the water cleared Jess thought he saw something

colourful in the settling sediment. Sluicing off more residue he found, submerged in the water remaining in the dish's rim, a tiny, exquisitely-coloured piece of opal-like stone that was in fact one of the rare petrified tears of joy.

To get a better look at what he had found Jess moved his dish into the sunlight. As soon as the light shone on the stone a small rainbow emanated from it, causing him to put the dish down in surprise.

The rainbow briefly hung in the air before drifting upwards while slowly growing larger. As it grew Jess became aware of a sound, an awful sound that increased in volume as the rainbow expanded. It was the most terrible noise he had ever heard and was mystified as to its origin.

It was a sound that seemed to come from everywhere yet nowhere specific at the same time. Jess even had the uncanny sensation that some of the noise was coming from beneath his feet. The feeling was so intense that it caused him to lift each foot and make sure he was not accidentally treading on some unfortunate creature.

Jess Morley was a bushman with a deep voice who had a unique, slow way of speaking that caused him to add an unnecessary 'h' to some nouns and repeat the previous letter. For example, on Jess' tongue the name of his wife, Cynthia, became Cyhynthia. He was a tough, gentle man whose greatest pleasure in life was to drove 'cahattle' back and forth from Gippsland's high country to the lowland plains.

Once, while bringing a few head of cattle down from Mt. Wellington, Jess had been trapped by a freak snowstorm. He was not embarrassed to admit (to the author) that the reassuring sight of a snow faerie convinced him that all was well and he would arrive home safely.

Indeed, like Archie Hair, who had lived near where Jess was panning – and who Jess claimed was his step-grandfather – he was no stranger to curious bush experiences, but what he now saw and heard was so out of the ordinary that he was stunned.

The cacophony continued, echoing through the bush as the rainbow grew; causing the bushman to cover his ears in case the sound's intensity damaged his hearing. The rainbow, which by that time measured about 3 metres in width, began to fade, as if it had exhausted itself.

While the rainbow faded the raucous sounds abated until both were gone. Relieved, Jess uncovered his ears – only to find that he could barely hear anything at all.

The bush was strangely quiet, almost as if expecting something else to happen. There was hardly a sound to be heard. Even the creek seemed as if it was creeping gently down the valley on tiptoes in case it disturbed something important.

The atmosphere was so eerie that Jess felt afraid to move, worried that doing so might shatter something precious.

After a while he was grateful to hear the distant laughter of a kookaburra. The bush seemed to revive, as if coming out of a trance. Soon, everything was the same as it had been before the little stone was exposed to sunlight.

Jess picked up his panning dish, far more curious now about what it contained, and wondered whether the stone was a precious jewel with magical properties. What he saw surprised him; the stone's brilliant colours had faded, as if sucked out by the sun. In fact they were now so faint that he wondered if the extraordinary experience had been no more than an illusion.

Deciding to keep the stone anyway, Jess lifted it out with the tip of his knife and put it in a tobacco tin he used for any gold he found. While doing this he wondered whether it might be wiser to keep the experience secret in case people thought he was going mad.

That evening, after dinner, Cynthia asked her husband if he'd had any luck on his panning expedition. Against his better judgment he decided to show her and their son, Gordon, the stone because it intrigued him – besides it was the only worthwhile thing he had found.

While unscrewing the tobacco tin Jess fleetingly worried that the terrible noise might be heard again when the stone was exposed to light. He need not have been concerned. Nothing unusual happened when he tipped the tin's solitary content onto the kitchen table.

His wife and son looked down at what had fallen out. Unimpressed by what they saw they looked up at each other with shrugs in their eyes.

Jess took his reading magnifying glass from a drawer and began examining the stone, commenting that its colours had seemed much brighter when he found it.

Cynthia remarked that it did not appear special and was too small to be of value. Jess had to admit that the stone did look insignificant, and found it difficult to comprehend how what lay on the table could have been the cause of the day's strange occurrence.

His wife and son also took turns in examining the tiny stone but found it disappointing and could not imagine why he had bothered bringing it home. Although it appeared to contain barely discernible colours there was nothing of special interest.

Jess realised this and wondered whether to try an experiment, but was wary of the consequences. However, due to the different circumstances and the fact that the stone's colours had almost disappeared, he did not expect anything dramatic to happen and decided to proceed.

"Gohordon, would you go and get a glass of wahater?" Jess asked his son.

The lad replied that he wasn't thirsty. His father smiled and said that it wasn't to drink.

While his son filled a glass Jess scooped the little stone on to his palm and then took a torch from off of the mantelpiece. When the glass of water arrived he dropped the stone into it. Although immersion in water seemed to slightly enhance what was left of the stone's colours, nothing of any consequence occurred.

Jess turned off the kitchen light, switched on the torch, and shone its beam on the contents of the glass. For a moment nothing happened then, once again, a little rainbow materialized – although it was not as bright as previously. Jess switched the torch off but the rainbow remained where it was, glowing dimly. Then it drifted upwards before, like an apparition, disappearing through the ceiling on its way to a destination beyond human sight and comprehension.

"Wow, Dad. That was far out!" exclaimed Gordon, enthusiastically.

His father did not have an explanation when asked how he had performed the trick and said that he had not expected a rainbow to form, let alone do what it did. He just thought that the reaction of light through water might brighten the little stone's colours.

Gordon said he would ask his school science teacher what could have caused the rainbow and why it reacted the way it had – especially without light. Jess thought the answer to that question would probably be beyond the realm of any science teacher's understanding.

He turned the torch on again and shone it through the glass, but no more rainbows appeared. In fact, even the remaining dull colours of the stone had faded away completely – as if exhausted. What was left looked like any other fragment of rock and would have been indistinguishable from countless similar numbers of its kind lying beside the Freestone.

Jess turned the kitchen light back on and the Morley family sat around the table discussing the strange phenomenon they had witnessed. Jess did not mention that, just before the rainbow moved through the ceiling and out of sight, he thought he had heard a distant cry that seemed to echo between the stone and the rainbow.

After his wife and son had gone to bed, Jess sat in the kitchen and wondered what to do with the now ordinary-looking little stone, feeling that it was too precious to throw away. He had inherited Archie Hair's box of wonders. This was a wooden box that contained an

assortment of interesting objects the old man had collected while living in the bush. Jess decided to include the stone with them.

He looked around for something suitable to wrap it in and thought he might find an appropriate piece of cloth in the remnants of his wife's hope chest – or disappointment chest, as he called it.

After searching amongst frilly pillowcases and various other bits and pieces he could not see any use for he noticed a small, delicate, lace-edged handkerchief. Without realising why, he instinctively knew that was what he had been looking for.

Almost reverentially, Jess lifted the tiny stone from the water with a spoon and placed it on the dainty handkerchief. He then wrapped up what he would never know was a petrified tear of joy and laid it to rest in the box of wonders.

As he lay in bed that night Gordon could not stop thinking about the strange little rainbow. Even when he closed his eyes and tried to sleep he could still picture it, reflected on the inside of his eyelids. Although he blinked a few times in an attempt to dislodge the rainbow and make it disappear, that only caused it to float up into his mind where it began to grow as he drifted off to sleep.

While he slept, Gordon dreamed that he could hear a strange sound calling from the rainbow, as if urging him to fly into it.

Without knowing why it seemed important that he do so, the boy fearlessly launched himself into the dream and flew through his mind's sky towards the rainbow. This had grown so large that it now formed a magnificent arc across his imagination.

High above mountains and towering, ancient trees he flew – awed by his power of flight – yet, no matter how far he flew, the distance between his body and the rainbow never diminished.

The further he travelled the wearier he felt and the more futile his journey seemed. It was as if all of his effort was doing no more than making him feel like an old man, or how he imagined an old man would feel if he was trying to fly towards something that only seemed to move further away the harder one tried to reach it.

As soon as Gordon began to lose faith in his ability to reach the rainbow he started falling. Terrified by the thought of crashing into the earth he flapped his arms as fast as he could, but it was useless. Faster and faster he fell, past the tops of mountains and trees until, just before he hit the ground, he awoke safe in bed.

*

The voice of the Spirit of the Kurnai receded once again and faded back into the earth. Instinctively, Sid felt that this time the story of the skyrunners had ended. He opened his eyes and was not surprised to notice that the rainbow had disappeared. He looked around and saw the faerie beckoning him to follow her.

"Come on, Mister," she said.

THE MOUNTAIN EGG

 ${f R}$ ianna flew ahead of her man for a while before turning to call out: "Just keep walking along the creek. There's something I have to do. I won't be long. I'll catch up with you." Then she fluttered away into the bush.

Sid did as the faerie had requested and crunched along the sand and pebbles at the water's edge, enjoying the sound and the pleasant weather. He passed a family of emus feeding from a

clump of blackberry bushes and was surprised that his presence did not disturb them. He also found it unusual that blackberries were ripening at that time of the year.

He stopped walking and was about to join the emus in a feed of berries when he heard a noise that sounded like someone snoring. Thinking that a swagman might be camped nearby he looked up and down the creek, but could not see anyone.

Sid wandered in the general direction of where the sound seemed to be coming from but, although the snoring grew in volume, other than himself there was not a human to be seen.

That puzzled him. He stopped and listened for a while before realizing that the sound seemed to be coming from a cluster of small rocks. As he crunched his way over to them the snoring turned into a snort, then something asked, in a muffled, sleepy voice:

"What's there?"

Sid felt sure that the voice had come from one of the rocks. Even though it made him feel foolish, he replied: "It's me, Sidney Block."

"Oh," said one of the smaller rocks from within itself. "You're a human being, aren't you?"

"Er, yes I am," answered the man as he knelt down beside the rock. "What are you?"

"I am an egg, of course," replied the rock, as if that should have been obvious.

"No, you're not," Sid responded, hoping that no one could see or hear him. "You're a rock."

"I am too an egg, and I'm waiting to hatch," the rock stated, adamantly. As an afterthought it added: "Although it does seem to be taking rather a long time."

"Alright," asked the man who thought he was Sidney Block, "if you are an egg, what sort are vou?"

"I'm a mountain egg of course because a mountain laid me," the rock answered, proudly. "When I hatch I'm going to grow up to be the biggest mountain in the whole world."

"No, you won't."

"I will too!" exclaimed the rock.

Even though he felt silly getting into a dispute with a rock Sid could not help saying: "Look, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you are not going to grow up. You are going to wear down. You are going to wear down smaller and smaller until you become a stone, and then a grain of sand. You will just keep getting smaller and smaller until, eventually – well, I don't know what you will eventually become."

"I'm not going to wear down to a grain of sand," said the rock, obstinately. "Sand grows up to be stones. I'm going to grow up to be a great big mountain like my father."

"Have it your way," Sid replied, "but you're only wasting your time waiting to grow up to be a mountain, besides, what you are is very important. In fact, the more I think of it the more wonderful it seems."

"What's so wonderful about it?" asked the rock.

"Well, as time goes by, bits of you are worn off by the weather..."

"Is that why it seems to be getting quite cramped in here?" the rock interrupted.

"It could be," Sid agreed, smiling to himself. "The bits that get worn off then become parts of the soil from which plants grow. You might become part of a blade of grass that gets eaten by a rabbit."

"I don't want to be eaten!" cried the rock in alarm.

"You probably wouldn't even notice it. Anyway, the rabbit that eats you may in turn get eaten by an eagle. Instead of being stuck on the ground you may eventually have a part of yourself soaring high above the tops of mountains. Wouldn't that be exciting?"

"I suppose so," agreed the rock, dubiously. "What else could I become?"

"Well, you may become part of a human being, a tree, a koala bear. In fact, throughout time you could become parts of many things. Maybe you have already been part of a mountain and now you are becoming part of something else."

The rock seemed to be thinking about what the human had said because it was quiet for a while before asking, in a very soft voice: "How long will it take me to become part of a beautiful flower?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

"Well, what will I do while I'm waiting?"

"What do rocks, sorry, mountain eggs, usually do?"

"Oh, we just sort of lie around. But it does get a bit boring. Sometimes, after heavy rain, a few of us lucky mountain eggs get to tumble about together in the creek. That's mighty fun. You should come and join us. We have so much fun that we don't care what tumbles around with us."

"Thank you very much!" Sid replied a bit put out by the way he had been invited. "Anyway, I'm afraid my body isn't made for tumbling around in water with rocks."

"That's too bad. You don't know what you're missing out on. Ah well, I suppose I may as well go back to sleep. I could have a long wait until I hatch. Are you sure you can't tumble around with us?"

"No," said Sid, and then he reconsidered: "Well, I could but it would hurt, so I wouldn't enjoy it."

"Hmmm," the rock seemed to ponder the answer and then said: "In the unlikely event that you are right and I do wear down to become something else, I certainly hope I don't become part of something like you. I enjoy tumbling around too much." The rock must have pondered again before asking: "So, you don't think I'm going to hatch and grow into a mountain?"

"I'm afraid you won't even grow into a hill."

"Hah," said the rock, scornfully. "What would you know? You're only a human being." Then it asked: "Would you like to make yourself useful and do us mountain eggs a favour?"

"Certainly," Sid replied.

Sid smiled at the rock's request and couldn't wait to tell Rianna that it believed she was either a butterfly or a moth. He looked at the rock and thought that they must spend a lot of time sleeping if all they had to look forward to, while waiting to grow up and become mountains, were occasional tumbles in the creek together.

He bent down and listened to some of the other rocks but none of them seemed to be snoring. He even knocked on a few to see if they would wake up but they made no sound, so he went on his way.

As he walked further along the creek Sid wondered how the rock could see, hear and speak when it did not appear to have eyes, ears or a mouth. He occasionally picked up other small rocks, or bent down to larger ones, hoping to hear the sound of a snore but, other than the one who thought it was a mountain egg, they were all silent. *Maybe the other rocks are just quiet sleepers* he thought, patting one.

Even though he knew it was not possible for rocks to be mountain eggs Sid liked the idea, but could not explain how the one he had met thought that it was. Anyway, as it had said, he was only a human being so how could he know?

However, forever after, whenever he saw a mountain part of him hoped that it had once hatched from a small rock. Maybe that is the part of him that had once been part of a mountain egg?

After rounding a bend in the creek Sid heard the sound of snoring once again, although this time it was very soft.

"Don't tell me it's another mountain egg waiting to hatch!" he uttered aloud to himself in surprise before again bending down to pick up a rock and listen to it. But the snoring had stopped.

Suddenly, Rianna alighted on the rock and asked him what he was doing. Feeling embarrassed, but deciding to be truthful, Sid replied that he was listening to see if the rock was snoring.

"And was it?" enquired the faerie.

"No. But I did hear something snore," Sid replied, defensively, realising how ridiculous his answer must have sounded.

"Maybe it was you."

"Don't be silly, Rianna. How can I be snoring when I'm awake and walking along the creek?"

"And listening to rocks snore."

"Alright. I know it seems like a stupid thing to do but I did hear them."

"You might be sleepwalking."

"If I was sleepwalking I wouldn't be having this conversation with you," Sid replied, as if talking to a faerie and listening to rocks snore had any relevance to a logical explanation for his experience.

Remembering the other rock's request, he told Rianna to please refrain from kissing them because it tickled and woke them up.

The faerie smiled and decided not to tell him that it had been her pretending to snore that caused him to pick up the rock he was holding.

"Come on, mister," she said, fluttering from the rock. "Put that down and stop disturbing rocks. Let them sleep in peace if that is what they are doing. How would you like it if you were in a deep sleep and something picked you up to hear if you were snoring?"

Rianna didn't want to hurt his feelings so she decided not to mention that when he slept no person within a wide radius could ever doubt whether or not he snored.

"Where were you going when you said you had something to do?" Sid enquired as he gently put the rock down.

"Nowhere," replied Rianna. "I just hoped that you would have an opportunity of sharing a wonder by yourself."

"Well, it was certainly the first time I've had a conversation with a mountain egg,"

"Let us hope it will not be the last."

"Come to think of it they would make gritty omelettes", he joked.

"So you do have a sense of humour, Mister. Maybe there is hope for us yet."

SNAW

Sid knew that he snored because he occasionally heard himself start snoring while drifting off to sleep, or else one of his extra strong snorts would wake him up. Besides, various people throughout his past had complained about the intensity of his affliction. He admitted his embarrassment about this problem to Rianna, who feigned surprise.

"Do you really?" she replied. "Well, you shouldn't worry about it because there is a good reason why people, especially men, snore. In fact, back in The Dreamtime snoring became revered."

"You've got to be joking," scoffed Sid, who thought the only good thing that could possibly be said about snoring was that at least it proved a person was still alive and had not died in their sleep.

"No, it's true," the faerie assured him. "I'll tell you about it while we travel to the next place. Do you mind if I hitch a ride?"

"Be my guest."

Rianna fluttered onto Sid's shoulder, sat down and clung to his shirt collar for support. While the man and the faerie continued their journey, she told him how snoring came to be revered.

"The first recorded snorer in the land you now call Australia lived in East Gippsland, near the Buchan Caves. As you probably know, aborigines preferred to sleep under the stars or in bush shelters. But in The Dreamtime, due to the ever-present danger of giant wild animals such as sabre-tooth dingoes, man-eating yabbies, blood-thirsty bunyips, carnivorous koala bears and mosquitoes as big as magpies, for safety sake they tried to spend as many nights as possible in caves.

"Unfortunately, there weren't many suitable caves in Gippsland. The best by far were those at Buchan, but the local tribe was naturally very protective of them and would not allow strangers to spend the night there. Other tribes had to take their chances out in the bush with the wild prehistoric creatures.

"It must have been rather frightening to be cosily snuggled up in your bed, probably having a pleasant dream that had nothing to do with the reality of life, and then be rudely awakened to find yourself being ripped to pieces by some terrordactyl or a goreasaurus."

"Struth, it'd give you a bit of a shock alright," agreed Sid.

"That's right, it would," said Rianna. "Of course precautions were taken, such as having lookouts posted and fires lit to scare the creatures away. But over time the wild animals' fear of fires lessened to such an extent that some species began using them as beacons to find their prey. Even the fires at the entrance to the Buchan Caves were becoming less of a deterrent. But fortunately fate intervened.

"One night, a tribe who were not allowed into the caves decided to camp nearby and have a corroboree in the hope that it would scare away evil spirits and monsters. While the men danced and the women barbecued giant frogs' drumsticks, one woman mentioned a strange noise her husband had begun making in his sleep. It was growing louder each night and she was worried that it might be a demon trying to escape from his dreams.

"The women discussed this disturbing phenomenon until the meat was cooked, which fortunately coincided with the end of the men's dance. The tribe sat down and, while they were tucking into their tasty supper, the men began arguing as usual about who was going to stand guard that night and keep stoking the fires so they didn't go out.

"The woman whose husband had been making the strange noise while sleeping had an idea that would resolve the argument and also give her a good night's sleep for a change.

"Her husband was a greedy man and especially partial to giant frogs' drumsticks, so she told him that he could have her, and their children's, share of the food if he stood guard. He dithered for a while before his greed got the better of him and he reluctantly agreed.

"Of course, the children weren't happy about giving him their food and started crying. Fortunately, their mother had collected a good supply of wild honey that afternoon so, to pacify them, she let them eat some of that instead.

"This upset the rest of the tribe's children, who also preferred something sweet to any other sort of food. In exchange for the rest of the honey the woman let them give their frog meat to her husband as well.

"That night, while his tribe slept, due to the amount of food he had consumed the man standing guard began feeling drowsy, and was too tired to put more wood on the fires that surrounded the camp. Because he felt content he was overcome by a false sense of security and lay down to rest. The guard soon fell into a deep sleep, allowing the fires to die down.

"A monstrous goannasaurus that had been crouching hungrily in the dark bush shadows for just such an opportunity stealthily approached.

"The monster, feeling secure and attracted by the sweet scent of honey, was just about to grab hold of a sticky, sleeping child in its jaws when the night was rent by a sound more awful than any the tribe had ever heard before. It was the guard making the sound that had upset his wife only this time, possibly due to the amount of food he had eaten and because he was lying on his back, the frightening noise was far more intense.

"Suddenly the camp was awake, terrified that some horrible fate was about to befall it. Even the goannasausrus stood frozen to the spot with its saliva-dripping jaws wide open.

"The child who was to be the intended snack began screaming when it saw the monster standing above it, but the guard slept on, oblivious to the tumult that was beginning to erupt around him. Afraid of what danger might lurk within the terrible sound the creature turned and ran off into the night.

"Those closest to the child saw the goannasaurus run away and became more afraid of the dreadful sound – especially as it could even frighten one of their greatest fears.

"The sound permeated the night and was heard in the caves, where the occupants became so disturbed by it that they ran to the entrance and threw more wood onto their security fires.

"The panic and commotion awoke the guard who, after a few loud snorts yelled out: 'Keep the noise down, you lot. I'm trying to sleep!'

"His wife recognized her useless lump of a husband's voice and realized that it must have been him making the same sound that had upset her during the previous nights. However, this time the intensity of its volume had increased so dramatically she knew that, while her husband slept, she would never be able to get any rest.

"The woman managed to settle her tribe's anxiety and reassured them that it was only her husband they had heard. The natives took some convincing and wanted him to demonstrate how he had made the sound. Because he had been asleep, the husband could not understand what they were talking about."

"The tribe debated the unnatural sound. Someone suggested that the giant frogs' legs might have been poisonous and because the guard had eaten so many he was the most affected. This theory didn't explain the sound's creation but the errant guard eagerly agreed to it because he realized that to do otherwise might cause him to be accused of sleeping on his watch.

"More discussions followed and it was decided to make the guard – who was renamed Snaw because of the sound he had made – eat big meals of poisoned frog drumsticks every night so the tribe would never have to worry again about being mauled to death in their sleep. Another benefit of this idea was that the tribe would not have to swelter during hot summer nights by having fires burning around their camps.

"Snaw finally agreed to the decision only after he had convinced his people that it would not be necessary for the frogs' legs to be poisoned.

"In the morning one of the tribal elders from the Buchan caves approached the camp and, having heard of the night's miraculous event and the reason they had been awoken, said that Snaw's people were welcome to come and stay in the caves with them.

"Of course," commented the faerie, turning to look at her man's face, "the reason the cave people invited the other tribe to stay with them was not an act of generosity. They just wanted the security of Snaw's sound." Then she looked ahead again and resumed the story.

"Snaw became a hero to his people, especially as they could now stay in the caves. He also became very fat from eating too many giant frogs' legs and spending so much time sleeping.

"Even though the security problem had been solved it created another quandary. Snaw's sound, or snoring as it is now called, became so stentorian that its reverberation throughout

the caves denied those seeking safety within any chance of sleeping. It also created a health hazard.

"The severity of the snoring caused some of the more fragile stalactites to fracture and fall from the ceiling. These crushed or impaled those unfortunates lying below with their fingers in their ears whilst trying to seek the oblivion of sleep. Some tribal members got so fed up they went outside into the bush to sleep but were gobbled up by the monsters.

"The elders of the two tribes called an emergency meeting to try and find a solution to the problem. After much discussion it was decided that Snaw would have to sleep in a humpy just outside the caves, and be tied in such a position that would not allow him to roll over in his sleep and face the entrance. He was also to be fitted with a piece of bark wrapped funnel-like around his mouth and nose so that his snoring would be directed out into the night, away from those inside. This solution worked quite well, although it wrecked many pieces of bark.

"The tribal elders, realizing that it was unlikely Snaw would live forever, especially with his unhealthy lifestyle, decided that he should have an apprentice who would learn the art of snoring so that it could be passed down to future generations.

"Of course, this would mean consuming huge feeds of giant frogs' legs and having to spend every night alongside Snaw, listening to, and practicing, the terrible sound.

"Although a few were tempted by the food, not surprisingly, there was no serious interest in taking up this position. The more foolish of the elders even nominated a wife as a candidate. Naturally, that caused furious domestic arguments.

"The problem was eventually resolved by having every male of initiation age spend nights with Snaw. Of course some were more adept at recreating the sound than others, but from then on most adolescent males learned to snore to some degree. And so, down the ages, almost every man became a snorer to keep his family safe from wild beasts. In fact, through association, even many women learned how to create a mild version of the sound.

"It did not take long for news of this amazing deterrent to spread throughout the land. Unfortunately, so many of Gippsland's giant frogs were killed for their drumsticks that they became extinct, but by then snoring had become self-perpetuating. People realized that it was no longer necessary to overeat before going to sleep in order to be capable of snoring, although it did help increase the volume.

"Over time the ability to snore spread around the world. No matter what nationality a person was, or what language they spoke, they always snored with the same sound as Snaw – even though they had never heard of him.

"The monstrous creatures that had terrorised the native people were so afraid of the sound that they dared not go near the sleeping tribes. To survive, they were forced to fight and eat each other. Hence, it became easier for hunters to kill them in their weakened state until only small, harmless members of the species remained. The tribes used these as a renewable food source.

"With the danger removed, snoring became redundant because it was no longer necessary to make the sound to protect one's family. However, although it has fortunately decreased in volume over time, mankind still retains the ability to snore. Perhaps it is an instinct that cannot be overcome, or maybe it is humans' attempts to frighten away the monsters of their sleep."

Rianna stood up on Sid's shoulder and concluded by saying: "So you see, Mister, there was a good reason for snoring."



Entrance to the Blue Pool

THE STORYTELLER AND ARCHIE HAIR

The faerie flew away, leaving the man to follow. He dawdled along, thinking about mountain eggs and snoring. After climbing a steep path he paused and stood on a large slab of rock high above the creek and noticed Rianna close by, holding a pink heath flower to her lips.

"Tally-ho Sidney," she trumpeted. "What's the matter slowcoach, are your boots too heavy? Come on, we don't have forever you know." Then she swooped down to wait on the shore of a small lake that had formed where the creek flowed through a narrow gorge.

"Do you know where we are, Mister?" she asked when a puffing Sid caught up to her.

"Yes. It's the Blue Pool. Archie Hair used to live near here."

"Well, I hope to introduce you to someone who will share him with you," she replied. "He is a person who came to know Archie quite well over the years. Just sit here. I won't be long."

Then the faerie fluttered away once again.

No sooner had Sid sat down than he heard a voice say: "G'day."

He looked around and saw what appeared to be a swagman standing next to him, and was surprised that he had not heard him approach.



The Blue Pool

"G'day," he replied.

The stranger was a gaunt, scruffy-looking man with a weatherworn face. His eyes were deep-set and shaded by bushy eyebrows – so well-shaded in fact that it was difficult to see what colour they were. Sid peered into what he could see of them and had the uncomfortable sensation that he was looking into the glow of a fire's embers.

The stranger was dressed and did look like a much-travelled man of the road. His clothes seemed even older and more worn than the man himself, as if they were some other ancient swagman's castoffs.

On his head he wore a battered hat with a few feathers stuck in its faded band. His trousers had bowyangs tied around each leg and were secured at the waist by a piece of rope. Beneath his waistcoat he wore a frayed, collarless shirt. Poking from the top pocket of his coat were a few yellow everlasting daisies that Sid recognized as similar to those that grew up on the Dargo High Plains.

The swagman's boots and socks were so travel-worn that a few toes poked out, looking suspiciously eager to escape from what remained of the boots' confines – which would have been a natural reaction for any self-respecting toes. Sid suppressed a smile as he imagined them running off into the bush, leaving the swaggie tottering and yelling at them to come back.

Slung over the stranger's shoulder and secured with more rope was his swag. One of his tanned, sinewy hands rested on top of a knobbly walking stick and held the handle of a blackened billycan that must have felt the heat of countless campfires, and been the source of many memories. The other hand held a large, faded green neckerchief that he appeared to be using to flick away imaginary flies.

Puffs of dust rose from the neckerchief as he waved it. In fact everything about him seemed dusty, although not from age for he appeared ageless. It was as if, unaccountably, he had always been and always would be the age he was at that moment. Sid decided that it must be the exotic dust of distance.

"Do you mind if I join you?" the stranger asked, with a voice that seemed to resonate from deep within him.

"No, of course not," Sid replied, even though he was still perturbed by the man's eyes.

"Thanks, mate." The stranger put down his swag and sat on it. "What are you doing here, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I'm waiting for a friend. She should be back soon. By the way, I'm Sidney Block."

The men shook hands but the stranger did not proffer his name, he just said: "I'm pleased to meet you." Then he briskly rubbed his hands together and held his palms out towards the water as if warming them by a fire.

"Is your friend a good old mate?" he continued.

"To tell you the truth I haven't known her long. In fact I think it was only last night that I first met her."

"Is she a girlfriend?"

Without thinking Sid blurted out: "No. She's a faerie." Then he felt embarrassed.

"A faerie, eh. And what sort of faerie would that be?"

"She said she's my dream faerie."

"Ah, a dream faerie," replied the stranger, reflectively, slowly nodding his head as if agreeing with some personal knowledge. "They're the best kind, even if they usually ask for more than a mortal can give. You are a fortunate man to have the opportunity of meeting yours. Make the most of it Sidney. Being human you will obviously be a disappointment to her, just as you are to yourself, but don't let that stop you seeking to try and make each other's lives fulfilling."

"Do you have one?" Sid felt encouraged to ask, amazed that his companion accepted the existence of faeries so naturally.

"I most certainly do. Although I haven't seen her for quite some time we are a comfort to each other," the man answered. He lowered his hands and again rubbed the palms together before leaning his forearms upon his knees and enquiring: "What brings you to this place?"

"Rianna, that's my faerie's name, said to wait here while she went to find someone who could tell me about Archie Hair."

"Ah. Old Archie. Now there's a grand man."

"But he's dead," said Sid, wondering why the swagman had responded as if Archie was still alive.

"Oh, his body is, but not his spirit. What did you want to know about Archie?"

"I'm not sure. It's Rianna who thought I should learn about him."

"Dream faeries always have good reasons for wanting their person to know something," the stranger replied, and then continued:

"Archie and I became good mates over the years and were fortunate to have shared a lot of yarns together. Maybe I can be of assistance in your quest. There isn't enough time to tell you all I know but, hopefully, I can share sufficient to satisfy your faerie. Anyway, she may return soon with whoever she was looking for."

The stranger seemed to gaze deeply into Sidney Block's eyes, disconcerting him once again because he felt sure that within the recesses beneath the bushy eyebrows either fires, or their reflections, were glowing.

"But to experience some of what I know," the stranger continued, "it is not enough to just listen. You must be transported back and become part of those times to fully appreciate them."

"How am I supposed to do that?" asked Sid, wanting to turn away from the intense, although not unfriendly, face yet feeling unable to. Something compelled him to keep looking, and for a moment he wondered if he was being hypnotized. The swagman's reply gave him a sense of relief.

"Just look into the water but do not focus on anything, or think of anything. Free your mind from thought and allow it to rest. Don't let anything distract you. Gaze into the water until you feel as if you are a part of it.

"If you can do this then you will have let go of the person you think you are now and so be able to share part of what happened long before your arrival. But you must also visualize what I have to share for it cannot be told in words alone. You must become part of the experience, even though you will remain an onlooker."

The stranger's directions seemed confusing but, having shared all he had since meeting his faerie, Sid did not doubt that if he could follow the instructions he would have an opportunity of sharing more intriguing aspects of the place he lived in that, not long ago, had seemed lonely and boring.

"Are you ready?" enquired the stranger.

Sid assured him that he was, and gazed into the placid water with unfocused eyes while clearing his mind of any stray thoughts. Then he heard the stranger say:

"Archie Hair was a friendly, widely-respected man who had a deep love of nature and children. He was also a poet and quite good at drawing. Archie and his second wife, Edna, lived about 100 metres from here in a quaint wooden house called The Arches. In fact Archie built two houses here. The first one burned down in a bushfire.

"Maybe it was partly due to them living in such an isolated place that Archie and Edna became renowned for their hospitality. They were especially popular with children, groups of whom, including scouts and guides, would often stay with the elderly couple."

The narrative began merging with scenes appearing within the water, making what Sidney Block was experiencing seem more realistic than if he had only been listening to a story.



Archie and Edna at home

Before the children arrived, Edna would bake bread, cakes and biscuits in the wood stove while her husband made up small gift packages of toys and sweets. He hid these so that he could take the children on treasure hunts in search of them.

Archie also carved tiny walking sticks, which he said were for some of the Freestone's little people who had grown so old that they had trouble walking unaided. Another thing he did was to paint small pebbles a gold colour. He sometimes left one of these with each of the gifts, saying that faeries had left them to remind the children to treasure the richness of their childhood dreams.

In the evenings, before the children went up to sleep in the attic, Edna would make them cups of cocoa to drink while they sat listening to Archie tell tales of long ago. These stories always seemed more interesting than any they had read in books or learned at school. He told them about dream faeries, skyrunner birds, the plaid-billed duckorpuss, fire fish, listening trees and much more.

The old man kept the children spellbound as he told all manner of bush stories; stories that will live for as long as there are old people young enough to share them and children to listen.

While Archie spun his tales and wove them into the children's memories, Edna sat quietly in an armchair darning socks or knitting.



Outside the first Arches

THE HAUNTED BOTTLE

One evening after dinner Archie told some children who were visiting for the night to sit down while he fetched his box of wonders. This was a wooden box wherein he kept an assortment of things that he had collected during his life in the bush. Although Archie called them 'wonders' the contents did not seem particularly wonderful to most people until they heard the stories about them.

"There is a story in everything," he said as he placed the box on the table and withdrew a dark brown, medium sized bottle from it. The bottle was so old that it had a seam-joint halfway down. "Take this for example. It looks ordinary enough, but don't let that fool you. This is a very special bottle."

"What's so special about it, Mister Hair?" asked a young boy.

"I'll tell you, Robin," Archie replied. "Late one autumn, a cold autumn that turned into a bitter winter, a newly married couple living in Bairnsdale had an argument. As many lovers' quarrels are it was over something petty, but the young man stormed out of the house saying that he had to be by himself for a while.

"He saddled his horse, grabbed a blanket roll and some provisions, and then rode away from his wife. She slammed the door behind him – not realizing that she would never see her husband alive again.

"Months later, when the spring thaw had begun, some members of the Treasure mountain cattle family, Harry and his sons Jim and Jack, were riding up to their old homestead, Rockalpine, on the Dargo High Plains to see if the winter storms had caused any damage.

"It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day and, despite a few thick snowdrifts, the men were enjoying the ride. Suddenly, about 3 miles from the homestead, they heard what sounded like someone calling for help.

"This struck them as unusual because it was unlikely that any other person would be travelling the high plains at that time of year. They listened closely for a while and then Harry said: 'Come on. I think it's coming from that gully.' As quickly as the snow would allow they rode in the direction they thought the calls of distress were coming from.

"After the men had been searching through the twisted old snowgums for a while Jim suddenly called out: 'Over here, Dad.' When Harry and Jack reached Jim they found him bending over a body lying in the melting snow. It was the frozen body of a man yet, even though he was obviously dead, they could still hear what seemed to be the poor fellow's pleas for help drifting through the air.

" 'I'm...over...here...Help...Help...Please...help ...me...' was being repeated over and over again in a weak, wavering voice, yet no-one was speaking.

"Of course, this made the Treasure men feel uncomfortable and they scanned the area, hoping that something living was making the sounds, even though they knew the words were coming from the air around them.

"Jack rolled the body over and saw a bottle beneath the man. Picking it up he noticed that it was corked, and sticking out from under the cork was a scrap of paper. Upon this paper, written in a barely legible scrawl, was the request: 'Please do not open until given to my darling wife, Jenny.' Jack also noticed that the frozen, clenched fingers of the man clutched a pencil stub.

"They tied the poor fellow's body onto a pack horse, while the wavering voice kept calling: 'I'm...over...here...Help...Help...Please...help...me...' On and on it went, getting forever weaker and more distant as the trio travelled to Rockalpine with their tragic load.



Rockalpine, circa 1930

"The men rested at the house overnight, leaving the corpse on the veranda roof where it would be safe from dingoes and not thaw out. Harry said he would take it down to Bairnsdale the next day. The following morning, with the body strapped on a packhorse, he set off for the lowlands.

"When he reached the Bairnsdale police station and showed the body to the police, one of them said: 'Why, that's Albert Bowden, young Jenny's husband. Poor chap.'

"Harry explained how he had been found and gave them the bottle. He then left to book his horses into a stable and himself into a hotel for the night before making the arduous return journey.

"A constable was sent to fetch Mrs Bowden. After she arrived and identified the body the sergeant took her into his office, sat her down and tried to console her. Then he showed her the bottle.

"What went through the distraught woman's mind when she saw the body was overwhelmed by what she experienced when she pulled the cork from the bottle to take a closer look at the note for, as soon as the cork was removed, a voice gasped from the bottle; a ghostly voice; the voice of her late husband.

" 'My...darling...Jenny,' it said, 'I...love...you...I'm...so...sorry...Goodbye.' Then the words faded into the warmth of the room and the poor young woman fainted."

The children looked at the bottle with a lot more interest than when they had first seen it.

"But how could she have heard her husband's voice when he had been dead for so long?" one of them asked.

"And what about the cries for help?" enquired another.

"Oh, that's easily explained," replied Archie. "You see, when the young man rode off he must have planned on spending some time alone on the high plains, but was trapped by one of the severe snow storms that can blow in quite suddenly up there. The weather would have been so cold that it froze the man's words as soon as they left the comparative warmth of his mouth.

"He probably realised this after he'd been calling for help for a long time yet could barely hear himself. Then he must have decided to speak his last words into the bottle so they would be trapped there until thawed out and released. What the Treasures heard when they found the body were his cries for help thawing out in the spring sunshine."

"Gee. What happened next?" asked a child, so absorbed in the story that she did not doubt that words could freeze.

"Well," continued Archie, picking up the bottle and gazing at it, "Jenny Bowden took the bottle home and put it on her mantelpiece. The coroner found that Albert's death was accidental, so his body was released for burial.

"After the funeral, when their relatives and friends had gathered back at the Bowden's house for a wake, some of the mourners thought they heard strange sounds coming from the bottle. Of course, that may have only been their imagination. Anyway, the widow hadn't felt comfortable about having it in the house because it made her feel even more sad and lonely, so she decided to get rid of it.

"When Jenny wrote to thank Harry Treasure for bringing her husband's body back she also sent him the bottle, saying that for personal reasons she didn't want to keep it herself and thought he might like to have it.

"Five years later Harry and his wife, Clare, were sitting on the veranda at Rockalpine when, from inside the house, there came an eerie moaning sound followed by a crash, as if something had been knocked over.

"Although the moaning sound had made them feel uneasy, the couple went in to investigate. Everything seemed to be in order until they came to the spare room. This was a guest room used by Mrs Treasure to store memorabilia and knick knacks that she did not have space for elsewhere. In there they saw a small dresser lying on the floor amidst the wreckage of smashed ornamental vases and figurines, but they had no idea what caused it to fall.

"A couple of weeks after that incident they were visiting a friend in the town of Dargo. During the exchange of conversation the friend happened to mention that Jenny Bowden, who had remarried, had recently died in childbirth.

"Both of the Treasures felt a shudder pass through them and they looked at each other, wondering whether she had died at about the same time as they heard the eerie moaning sound and crash. You see, along with other bits and pieces, locked in the dresser that had fallen over was this bottle."

"Crikey," breathed one of the children. "But how did you get it Mister Hair?"

"Harry knew that I liked collecting interesting things from the bush so he gave it to me because his wife didn't want it in the house anymore."

The children seemed to shrink back from the bottle, causing the old man to say: "Oh, there's nothing strange about it now. Unfortunately, it hasn't done anything unusual since I've had it. I think that whatever was in there left the day Jenny Bowden died."

Edna wondered whether that had been a suitable story to tell children before bedtime but she kept the thought to herself.

Footnote: After Jenny's death, her sister was sorting through some of the poor woman's personal effects when she came across the scrap of paper that had been jammed in the bottle. It was lying on top of a few of Albert's old love letters from the couple's courting days. Feeling that it should stay with the bottle she had sent it to Harry Treasure.

THE COOEE AND THE MUSSELL

After telling the children about the haunted bottle Archie poured himself a cup of tea before starting the next yarn.

Edna looked at her husband fondly and thought: *If the devil himself came through the door with blood in his eye he would still have to wait until Dad finished his cup of tea before he could take him.*

The old man reached into his box of wonders again and this time took out something that looked like tangled strands of coarse grey hair.

"This is some of The Cooee of Culloden's hair," he said. "I found it caught in a blackberry bush. I suppose the Cooee had become trapped there and had to cut it off with his knife to free himself."

"Who was the Cooee, Mr Hair?" asked a girl with hair so blonde it was almost white.

"The Cooee, Louisa, was a very old aboriginal man with wild hair and sad eyes who lived in the bush near Culloden, about 2 miles from here. He'd built a humpy there and lived in the area for as long as anyone could remember.

"Usually he kept to himself and was rarely seen. But, for a few nights around the time of the full moon, wrapped in animal skins and with spears in one hand, he would suddenly rush from the bush, stand on the Freestone track, put the other hand up to his mouth and call out 'Cooooooooeeeeeeeeeee,' at the top of his voice before disappearing back into the bush."

The old man scratched his neck. This was something he often did when thinking about things that had happened long ago.

"Cooee is a call aborigines make that can be heard over a great distance," he continued. "However, The Cooee I'm talking about was a harmless old fellow, although travellers who happened to be on the track when he came rushing out didn't think so. They thought they were going to be attacked by a madman and feared for their lives. It's amazing how he escaped being killed by a frightened traveller or irate miner in the early years. He was shot at often enough."

The children became absorbed by the story, especially as the night was closing in and Edna had lit some candles and a kerosene lamp. The dim light flickering about the room enhanced their imagination.

"No-one knew why he lived there alone," continued Archie. "Some people thought he was a criminal who had gone bush to escape punishment. Others thought he was a tribal outcast. Mum's (Archie often called his wife 'Mum' and Edna would call him 'Dad' – especially in front of children) a romantic and liked to think that he had lost his love and lived alone with a broken heart. I thought he had returned to the place of his ancestors and gone mad with loneliness and that, at the time of a full moon, he cooee'd, hoping to get an answer from his people.

"Whenever we used to hear his call mournfully drifting through the bush at night, Mum would say: 'There goes The Cooee calling for his love.' I would say: 'There goes The Cooee calling to his people.'

"The Cooee's call never bothered Mum and I, in fact we were so used to it that it seemed a normal part of the bush sounds. That was why, when we didn't hear it one full moon, we felt that something was missing."

"What happened, Mr Hair? Why didn't you hear it?" asked another of the children.

"Before I can tell you that Danny," replied Archie, looking at a boy who seemed to be on the verge of outgrowing himself, "I had better tell you about this mussel."

The old man put The Cooee's hair on the table, took a sip of tea, and then lifted a large freshwater mussel from his box of wonders. He passed the mussel to the children so they could all have a feel of it before he took it back. They noticed that it was heavier than any they had felt before and asked Archie why this was so.

"I'm not sure," he replied, "but I think I know what's in it. However, first let me tell you something about it." Archie held the mussel near a candle flame, illuminating the shell's colours of cream, brown and black.

"One morning, as I was walking along the creek while practicing my bird calls, I happened to notice the mussel lying on the sand. I thought I had disturbed a water rat that had put it

there to be opened by the sun's warmth, so I left the mussel where it was and continued on my walk.

"On my way back, I noticed that the mussel was still lying unopened in the same place. I don't know why but for some reason I bent down and picked it up. To my surprise, although the day was warm and sunny, the shell was cold and moist; not only that but it felt quite heavy, heavier than any mussel I had ever found before. I thought about that for a while before deciding to take it home as a treat for Mum because she finds them quite tasty.

"After I got back Mum boiled up a saucepan of water and I dropped the mussel in, thinking that would give it a quick cook and open it. When she thought it was ready she lifted it out with a tablespoon and put it on a plate, but the shell was still tightly clamped shut.

"She decided to take it outside and dong it with a couple of rocks but when she picked it up Mum found that it was still cold. 'There's something strange about this mussel, Dad,' she said, passing it to me. 'Not only won't it open but it appears to be sweating, even though it still feels cold.'

"I wiped it with a tea towel," continued Archie, "and then watched closely. Sure enough, drops of moisture appeared to seep through the shell. Mum thought it might be weeping because she had hurt it by putting it in the boiling water, but I assured her that it was moist before it went in. However, we decided that I should put it back where I found it because there seemed to be something special about it; something that should not be interfered with.

"I put the mussel back on the beach and, from then on, whenever passing it while walking along the creek with children like you we would try to guess what was inside. Although it never seemed to change physically – it was always cold, heavy, shut tight and moist with what appeared to be dewdrops on its shell – what we imagined it to contain changed constantly and that made it very precious to us. Strangely, no matter how dry the sand around the mussel was, the sand beneath it was always damp.

"One day, some children and I were trying to guess what was inside the mussel and why it was always moist when a boy picked it up and licked it. He was surprised to find that it tasted salty. This struck me as unusual as well because, as far as I knew, it had never been near the sea. It was a freshwater mussel. So I licked it as well..."

"Yuk!" said Robin.

"Not on the same place of course. Unfortunately there was some sand stuck to the spot I licked but, sure enough, the moisture did taste salty, and I wondered whether Mum had been right, maybe it was weeping salty tears.

"Some time later I was walking past the mussel when I happened to glance down and noticed that it looked different. I picked it up and found that the shell was dry, as was the sand beneath it. Not only was it dry but it had retained the sun's warmth. It wasn't cold anymore, although it was still heavy and unopened.

"I was intrigued to know what made it change but couldn't find a plausible explanation, so I decided to take it home and put it in my box of wonders. And here it is."

"But what's in it?" asked Danny.

"I believe that it contains a piece of The Wonderment," replied the old man.

"What's the wonderment, Mr Hair?"

Archie smiled softly at a young girl with questioning eyes deeper and darker than the night outside the window.

"The Wonderment, Linny, may be different things to different people. To me it is what nurtures our spirits and helps them soar. It is humbling and uplifting. It is the countless wonders that abound in nature and fire our imaginations to create many more wonders in our minds. It is a flash of lightning; a tear of compassion; the birth of a butterfly.

"Oh, The Wonderment is limitless and takes many forms. It can be gentle or stormy. It is love, and the phenomenon of the cycle of life. I doubt that any person truly lives unless they

share the miracle of themselves with the rest of life's wonderment. Each one of you is a part of it and..."

The old man's response to the question was becoming so involved it was probably fortunate he was interrupted by Louisa.

"What do you mean, Mr Hair?" she asked, voicing all of the children's confusion.

"Never mind," said Archie, with a smile. "I hope you will understand one day. Anyway, what do you think is inside the mussel?"

The children had no idea.

"Well, I'll tell you what I reckon it contains. I think that inside is a large freshwater pearl; possibly one of the most precious pearls in the world. And, of course, everyone knows that freshwater mussel pearls are extremely rare."

"Are they?" someone asked.

"Almost everyone knows," grinned the old man. "This is how I believe the pearl came to be inside the mussel.

"Once upon a time, long ago, even before Mum and I were born, there was a young aboriginal man who had a very special dream. Of course we don't know what it was, however, I believe that dream for some reason or another was not able to reach fulfilment. Possibly something intervened, something over which he had no control – such as the death of a loved one from a disease introduced by the white settlers who also stole his tribal land.

"Whatever did happen caused his dream faerie to perish and her broken heart to fall into the Freestone Creek, where it was washed into a feeding freshwater mussel.

"Time passed. As the young man grew older, and unhappier, so a pearl grew inside the mussel – a pearl of grief, trapped inside just as the native man's broken heart was trapped inside the shell of his life."

"But what makes you think that, Mr Hair?" asked a dark-haired girl.

"Because, Chloe, like so many things in nature, I feel that the man's and the mussel's fates were intertwined. You see, not long after I'd noticed the change in the mussel and put it in my box of wonders, Mum and I were sitting in the kitchen having a cup of tea, when Mum asked: 'Have you noticed anything different lately, Dad?'

"I thought about it for a while and then said: 'No. What do you mean?' Mum said that she wasn't sure, she just had a feeling that something had changed, or something was missing. But she didn't know what."

Edna continued knitting, used to hearing her husband tell stories as if she was not in the room.

"Well, we discussed this on and off over the next few days without being able to decide what was different, if indeed anything was. Then one morning I was doing some gardening when I heard Mum call out: 'Dad, I know what it is. I know what's missing. There was a full moon last week and we never heard The Cooee!'

"She was right. We hadn't heard The Cooee and that worried us because we felt that he might have come to some harm. Maybe he was seriously ill or had fallen down an old mineshaft. I searched the bush around Culloden and found his humpy burnt to the ground. Near the ashes lay his spears, dilly bag and the animal skins he used to wear in cold weather, but there was no sign of The Cooee.

"It was a real mystery to Mum and me. We had no idea what could have become of him. We hoped he had just gone walkabout – although he'd be unlikely to do that without his spears. Then I realised that he probably went missing at about the same time as the mussel had changed. I organized a search party and we looked high and low but never found him.

"That is why I believe there is a heavy pearl of grief inside the mussel. A pearl that began growing when The Cooee of Culloden's dream faerie's broken heart was washed into it. Maybe the man had been 'cooeeing' to his dream all those years. Because of the change in the mussel I felt sure that The Cooee was dead and had gone to meet his ancestors at last."

The children wanted to know why they couldn't just smash the shell and find out what was inside.

"Of course we could break it," said Archie, "but that would be disrespectful and might destroy its wonder. Besides, if it does contain what I imagine it to then you still wouldn't be able to see the pearl because, just as a dream faerie can only see the reflection of the one who gave it birth, only their person can share that faerie's grief.

"If you broke open the shell and saw nothing you would be disappointed. You cannot share what is not yours to share. However, if you leave it intact then you, and children who come after you, can still wonder at what it might contain, and that makes it far more interesting and valuable than a smashed shell."

"Suppose I'm wrong," continued Archie, stroking the mussel affectionately, "and because The Cooee had finally found peace the pearl of grief was transformed into a nugget of happiness, but only enough happiness for one person. Enough happiness to ensure that the person who breaks open the shell will be happy for the rest of their life, always be loved, have plenty of money and never feel any pain; who should I give it to?"

Unanimously, each of the children cried out: "Me!"

"Or maybe a terrible contagious germ has been trapped inside the mussel for so long that, because it didn't have anything better to do, it has been dividing its cells to break the monotony of its existence.

"Over the years, this may have caused it to become so tightly compacted within itself that it has become claustrophobic and really grumpy. So grumpy in fact that even the tiniest crack in the shell will release it and allow it to rush out to contaminate the whole world with a disease awful enough to be capable of turning children into old people, and old people into children. Who would want to break it open then?"

None of the children offered, although Danny said: "But if we don't break it open we'll never know whether there is something good or bad in it."

"Maybe there are times when what we don't know is better for us than what we do know," replied Archie. "And breaking something to try and gain knowledge could be disastrous."

Before Archie had a chance to say anymore, a young girl who believed in everything the old man said asked him a question.

EDNA'S THIMBLE

Before arthritis stole the suppleness from her fingers, knitting had an almost hypnotic effect on Edna. While sitting in an armchair with her hands, needles and wool moving as one, the craft seemed to cocoon the elderly woman in cosy security.

Having heard her husband's stories innumerable times previously on evenings such as this, she was content to let her mind wander wherever it fancied. That was why, when Archie spoke to her, she did not respond. Archie tried again.

"Mum" he said, raising his voice a little louder.

This time the sound penetrated her reverie, causing Edna to lay the knitting on her lap. She looked up and asked: "Did you say something to me, Dad?"

"Rachael was asking how you and I met," Archie responded. "Would you get the reason out of your box of tricks please?"

"Of course," Edna replied, knowing what her husband wanted to share. She bent over, lifted a thimble from out of her sewing basket and handed it to Archie, who passed it around for the children to look at. The thimble was an old metal one that was pitted all over with indentations so that a needle would not slip when pressed against it.

"This thimble is very precious to Mum and I" said Archie. "In fact it is one of the most precious things we own because it was the cause of us meeting and eventually getting married." Turning to his wife, who had started knitting again, he asked: "Wasn't that so, dear?"

"Yes Dad, it certainly was."

"My granny's got one just like this," said Robin, unimpressed by what he held.

"I don't doubt that," said Archie. "But having something like something is not the same as having the something it is like." Archie took the thimble from the boy and placed in on the table. Then he asked his wife to explain its significance.

Edna was a shy, retiring person who enjoyed company but preferred not to be the centre of attention. That was one of the reasons the couple made a good team – especially when having visitors. She looked forward to the preparation involved in getting the house ready and making sure their guests were comfortable. Although Archie also helped with the preparations, entertaining was his forte.

Edna said that she would prefer her husband to tell the story.

Needing no more encouragement, he began: "In 1916 I was fighting in France during the First World War. That's where I breathed in some of the poisonous gas that now stops me from being able to keep up with you when we go on our walks.

"Of course, I was only a young man at the time and naturally excited to help defend Australia, especially as we had been told that the war wouldn't last long and we would have the opportunity of visiting foreign countries. In our ignorance my mates and I thought this was something not to be missed. We were unlikely to ever have another chance like that for travel and adventure."

The old man paused, distracted by unpleasant memories, before saying: "It didn't take long for us to wake up to the horror, stupidity and lies of what we had to experience."

"Dad" warned Edna, fearing that her husband might forget where he was. Archie looked at his wife and when he saw her nod towards the children was brought back to the present.

Continuing on as if nothing had happened, he said: "During the war, women from various countries would often knit socks and include them in parcels that the Red Cross would distribute to their countrymen fighting overseas. And I can tell you, us soldiers really appreciated them – especially if we had been trying to survive in the trenches. My god, those trenches..."

"Dad," Edna warned again.

Archie briefly closed his eyes and shook his head as if trying to rid his mind of something nasty. "As I was saying us soldiers were happy to receive the socks, especially as they often contained a little handwritten message of good wishes from the woman who had knitted them. Anyway, just before Christmas in 1916, I was overcome by a gas attack and sent to recuperate in England.

"While I was in hospital someone from the Red Cross came around the wards and distributed parcels to the injured soldiers. These contained tobacco and cigarette papers, matches, a little block of chocolate, a small fruitcake, a pair of socks and sometimes a note from the person who had knitted them.

"When I opened my parcel and tried on the thick, woollen socks to see if they fitted I noticed that there was something in the bottom of one of them. I thought that the sender may have thought we were short of ammunition and had enclosed a spare bullet in the sock, just in case.

"I pulled the sock off and, after turning it inside out, found this thimble. I unfolded and read the note, inside which was a sprig of pressed wattle blossom. Us blokes were pleased to have contact with a person from home, especially a woman – even if we didn't know her.

"I kept the note and wattle flowers in a safe place. You can have a look at them later if you want to. The note read:

Dear soldier and countryman,
I hope these socks remind you of the warmth
we who you are fighting for but may never meet
feel for you back home here in Australia.
Victory, gratitude, peace and best wishes,
Edna Chester

"After that she wrote the name of her hometown, which I was surprised to see wasn't far from my parents' farm. Even long after the socks had worn out, I often thought about the woman and wondered what she was like.

"When I was discharged from hospital I joined the Medical Corps and was sent back to France as an ambulance driver. I kept this thimble in my tunic pocket. It became my lucky charm and was a comfort to me as we went through many adventures together.

"When the war was over I was sent home, and one of the first things I did was to visit the woman who had knitted the socks for me so I could return her thimble. That's how I came to meet Mum. She was married at the time and I ended up getting married as well but we kept in contact over the years.

"Eventually, when both of our partners had passed away, we married each other. And here we are."

The old man hesitated briefly before remarking: "Come to think of it, if it wasn't for Mum losing her thimble we would probably not all be sitting here together tonight. I may have even been killed in the war without my lucky charm." Then the old man came out with a saying he often repeated whenever something he considered unusual had happened: "Life can certainly be curious at times."

"I still don't know how I came to leave my thimble in the bottom of the sock," said Edna. "Maybe I had been darning a dropped stitch in the toe. I thought I'd lost it forever and bought another one – although this is my favourite. I was surprised and pleased when a handsome young soldier returned it. Of course I didn't realise at the time that the soldier was Dad."

Unaware that the children were finding it difficult to imagine him as a young soldier, let alone a handsome one, Archie smiled at the compliment. "Maybe that was fate's way of directing us towards our destiny together," he replied as he returned the thimble to his wife. "Anyway, it's time for bed. We have to get up very early tomorrow morning."

There were murmurs of disappointed from the children and pleas for another story.

"Alright, but this has to be the last one," said Archie, pretending to give in to them. He would have gone to bed disappointed himself if they had not wanted to hear another story.

OLD TOM

Archie took a fishhook, from which he had filed off the barb, out of his box of wonders. The sharp tip was stuck into a piece of cork for safety.

"Do you remember Old Tom, Mum?" he asked his wife, while pulling the hook from the cork.

"I remember you going through that stage when I got tired of hearing you talk about him," replied Edna.

"Who was old Tom, Mr Hair?"

"He was a fish, Caleb," said Archie, looking sympathetically at a boy who seemed jammed in the doorway of an awkward age.

"A fish?" were the children's surprised responses.

"I didn't know fish had names like us humans," commented Caleb's younger brother, Cooper.

"I don't suppose they do normally," Archie replied. "I called him that because he reminded me of an old bushman who took me camping and fishing when I was about your age. He was a wise man who even seemed to know what fish were thinking about.

"Tom shared a lot of his bush skills with me, such as how to tie my fishing line to a hook with my eyes closed so that I could do it in the dark. He told me to take the bark off wood if I was trying to make a fire in wet weather. When I cut myself while cleaning a fish, Tom went and found some cobwebs. He put these on the wound to stop the bleeding and keep it clean – like an antiseptic bush bandage.

"Once I was on a riverbank trying to pull a small rotten tree over with a length of rope. I thought it would make good firewood. Old Tom yelled out for me not to wrap the rope around my wrist in case the tree dragged me into the river or hit me by falling the wrong way. I felt embarrassed but I never forgot his warning. That man taught me many useful things.

"The one thing he taught me that I found strange at first was to file the barbs from my hooks so that if I caught a fish we would have a fair fight. He thought barbs were cruel. He also reckoned that only cowards hunted animals with guns for sport.

"Although there were often times when I never caught anything, old Tom would always catch at least one fish, and usually more." Archie was thoughtful for a moment before adding: "I reckon he could have caught a fish in a city drain if he wanted to."

A draught blew under the door, causing the candle flames to flicker and huge shadow moths to briefly flutter around the room before settling down once again to listen to the story.

"Anyway," Archie went on to explain. "The Old Tom I'm talking about was a big, wily, brown trout that I had a lot of respect for because nobody, including myself, could catch him. He always managed to outwit us. In fact, the fishermen I knew gave up trying. They were fed up losing their fishing tackle to him.

"Tom became a challenge for me and I was determined to catch him. That's probably why I annoyed Mum by talking about him so much. Of course he may actually have been a she but, even if he had been a she, she was still a he to me."

Edna looked up from her knitting, raised her eyebrows and smiled fondly at her husband.

Archie leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and gazed at the hook – causing a memory to side-track him.

"Did I tell you about the time old Tom and his son, Jake, took me to Phillip Island?" Without waiting for, or needing, a reply Archie continued the story – while the children wondered which old Tom he was talking about. They decided that it couldn't have been the fish.

"I was a young man at the time and really excited about going away with them for a weekend in their Essex Super Six motorcar. It was an old banger but got us there alright. Come to think of it, I've still got old Tom's pipe. Jake gave it to me after Tom died."

Archie searched in the box until he found the pipe. He put it in his mouth and seemed to puff a few contented, private memories from it – even though he had given up smoking and there was only the lingering stale smell of tobacco from the pipe's bowl.

The children were almost certain now that Archie wasn't talking about the fish.

After seeming to have gained some satisfaction from his smoking imitation and the stale tobacco taste, Archie lowered the pipe but still held it fondly by the bowl.

"When I was a kid," he said, "Tom would often squat down beside our campfire at night, puffing on this pipe, while gazing into the flames as if looking at something only old people could see.

"This was the same style of pipe that the singer, Bing Crosby, used to smoke but I reckon old Tom began smoking his before Bing was even born. In fact I wouldn't have been surprised if Bing copied the pipe from Tom. Although, I suppose it would have been unlikely that Bing,

even though he was a keen fisherman, ever met Tom seeing as Tom never had any interest in leaving Gippsland and, as far as I know, Bing never visited here. Still, that's not important."

The children looked at each other, confused by the direction the story seemed to be taking. Besides having no idea who Bing Crosby was, they wondered if they had missed out on some important information along the way.

"Now, where was I?" Archie asked himself while seeming to gather his wits. "Ah, yes. I remember. Phillip Island. Of course this was long before it was built up and mobs of tourists began going down there.

"We stayed at a place called Ventnor and camped in the ti-tree at the end of a dusty track, right next to the beach. After dinner we went to The Nobbies and watched the fairy penguins arriving home at dusk after spending their day fishing in the sea.

"Jake had a powerful torch, so we could watch them surfing the waves and waddling up the beach. It was lovely to see the little things going home to the rookeries. After that we went and borrowed an old clinker-built boat from a mate of Jake's so that we could go netting for bait.

"Tom and I stood on the beach in our underpants, holding one end of the net while Jake, with the rest of it in the boat, quietly rowed around in a big circle – slowly letting the net out.

"It was a calm, pleasant night and the wavelets made a soothing, shushing sound as they flopped onto the shore, as if grateful for the brief respite before being dragged out into the sea once again by the tide. The moon shone a rippled path across the water – from us all the way to the horizon. For a moment, forgetting where I was, I felt like walking along that path, no matter where it led me."

The old man became so involved in his story that he stopped talking. About to take a youthful barefoot step onto the moonlit path in his memory the distant, understanding voice of his wife saying "Archie" brought him back to reality.

"But then I had to follow old Tom as he walked into the sea," he continued, "and I found the experience a bit spooky.

"The sand fell away quite steeply there and we only had to wade out a little way before the water came up to our chests. Whenever we lifted our feet luminous phosphorous from dead creatures would glow ghost-like within the dark water. It was strange to stand there with only the upper part of your body above the water while wondering what was going on down below.

"Old Tom and I stood there in silence while waiting for Jake to row back to us. The only thing I had ever really liked about the sea was to look at it from the shore, so I was quite worried about standing in it at night while fearing what might be lurking beneath the surface.

"When Jake reached us he gave his dad the other end of the net and then rowed to shore where he pulled the boat onto the beach, while Tom and I began slowly pulling the net in.

"The more of the net we pulled in the more worried I became because our catch began to bump into us and flap about our naked legs. For all I knew we could have been pulling in sea snakes, poisonous jellyfish, stingrays and all manner of dangerous beasts. I didn't like to think about what might be down there and expected to be attacked at any moment.

"Jake joined us and we pulled our catch to shore where he and his dad sorted out what they wanted to keep for bait. Small squid, shrimp and white-bait seemed to be their favourite. They put these in a bucket of water and threw the lucky ones, who were probably delighted that they were of no use to human beings, back into the sea.

"There were strange little creatures in that net that I had never seen before. I knew they had never seen me before either and would be happy never to see me again.

"The next morning, after a delicious breakfast of roast penguin chicks..."

Archie's story was interrupted by howls of protest from his audience about eating penguin chicks.

"I was only joking to see if you were still listening," replied the old man with a wink. "Anyway, after breakfast of a mug of tea and toast and jam we rowed the boat out over McHaffie's reef and concentrated on catching King George whiting.

"On the headland overlooking the reef is The Lonely Grave. This is the grave of Captain William Grossard. He was mortally wounded when an elephant gun accidentally discharged while he was sitting on the veranda of the McHaffie homestead in 1868.

"In 1842 John McHaffie had become the first settler on the island. There's an old windswept Cyprus tree next to the railings surrounding the grave. I bet it's creepy there on gloomy winter nights.

"Anyway, Tom had a wooden box, about the size of a large shoe box, with a glass bottom in it that we used to see what was going on beneath the surface of the water. We could also watch which fish were interested in our bait. If they were too small we'd pull the bait away and wait for a bigger one to come along."

Archie paused and his memory seemed to sigh: "There were plenty of fish around in those days," he commented wistfully before resuming the story.

"Tom was sitting in the bow using a heavy gauge hand-line that I thought was too thick for fishing, but obviously the old man knew what he was doing because he caught plenty. Suddenly he said: 'Strike me. I've got a beauty here.' In fact the fish was so big that Tom had difficulty holding his line and it was pulled through his hands so fast that it cut the skin.

"He refused to be beaten though and managed to wrap the line around the piece of wood that sticks up from the bow of some boats. Then the front dipped down and whatever he had caught began towing us along.

"I was not happy with this situation. The boat wasn't very big and I feared Tom had caught a huge white pointer shark that would drag us further down until we began taking on water and sank. However Old Tom and his son seemed exhilarated by the experience.

"I suggested that we cut the line but the others said there was nothing to worry about. They reckoned that whatever was caught would tire eventually. I just hoped it tired before we drowned or were eaten by it.

"I grabbed the glass-bottomed box and put it into the water to try and see what had been caught. And there it was; the largest stingray I had ever seen, slowly cruising along as if it didn't have a care in the world.

"The ease with which it was travelling made it seem unaware that it was pulling along three men and a boat – well, almost three men; my mum and dad would only let me wear long trousers on special occasions. To my relief, a moment later the line snapped and the bow lifted up.

"We had caught a lot of fish, so Tom said: 'I think young Archie's had enough excitement for one day. It's about time we went home.'

"Although afterwards I felt pleased to have had the opportunity of sharing that experience, it was the last time I went out fishing in the sea. Give me river fishing anytime – even if you don't catch as many fish."

Archie put the hook on the table and said: "Now you know how I caught Old Tom."

"No we don't," protested one of the children, while the rest looked at each other in confusion.

"But I just told you," replied Archie

"No you didn't. You told us about your trip to Phillip Island," someone said.

The old man scratched his head and frowned, realizing that he must have side-tracked himself once again. This was an occurrence that did not perturb Archie unduly but would frustrate his audience. One story was as good as another to him so he could not see that it mattered if some were out of sequence.

"Alright, where was I up to about Old Tom?"

"You said you were determined to catch him."

"And indeed I was. The challenge seemed to have taken over my life. Mum started getting cranky. I promised her that I would go away and camp near the river for a few days then, if I didn't catch the old fellow, I would try and forget about him. So I packed my swag, fishing gear and provisions in our car that we called 'Mag' and set off."

"Why did you call your car Mag? Was it short for magic?"

"No, Linny," Archie chuckled. "The only magic thing about old Mag was how she never broke down completely. She often seemed to want to but she had a stubborn heart – well, engine – that refused to give up. She was a tough old girl. I called her Mag after my aunt Margaret, Maggie or Mag for short. Auntie was a strong-willed woman and Mag reminded me of her.

"When I got close to the river I parked Mag far enough away from it so as not to disturb the fish. Then I set up camp and sat down to have a sandwich and a cup of tea.

"It was a warm day with a gentle breeze blowing. After a while I noticed an unpleasant smell and got up to investigate. It didn't take me long to realise that there was a bloated, rotting wallaby corpse not far away, so I had to move camp. It was while I was doing this that I had an idea.

"After getting my bait tin and some rope from the car, I cut off a bit of wallaby flesh that had some maggots in it and put it in the tin. Then I tied one end of the rope to the wallaby's legs and dragged it as quietly as I could towards a deep pool in a bend of the river where Old Tom was thought to live.

"There was a big tree that had fallen into the water on the upriver side of the pool. This created eddies where food that had floated downstream collected.

"When I got there I hoisted the maggotty carcass onto a limb of a tree that overhung the pool and secured it with the rope. Then I crept back to my camp.

"Of course I was stinking like billio so I took off my shirt and trousers, hooked my line around them and left them in the river to get rid of the smell. Then I washed myself. Fortunately, I always kept a change of clothes in the car because I often didn't know how long I would be away."

Archie was too involved in the story to notice that, after hearing about maggots, Rachael and Linny lost interest in it and went to sit near Edna, who gave them a knitting lesson.

"I spent a couple of days fishing downriver," continued Archie, "but, although I did catch a few fish, I couldn't wait to get back and do battle with Old Tom."

"The next morning I baited my hook with maggots from the tin. They had grown quite plump after feasting on the wallaby meat. Then, quieter than a shadow's shadow, I crept down to the pool. I was hoping that some of the maggots from the dead wallaby had been falling into the water and that Old Tom had acquired a taste for the delicacy.

"I cast the bait upriver without a sinker so that it would float down into an eddy near the fallen tree and slowly swirl around to attract Old Tom. Then I waited in anticipation.

"I didn't have to wait long before I got a bite. Not just any bite but the one I'd been dreaming of!

"The largest brown trout I had ever seen emerged from the depths with its mouth wide open. Impaled in its upper lip was a rusty hook that must have been the outcome of a previous battle. I knew it had to be Old Tom. He scooped up the maggots and disappeared back beneath the surface.

"I was ready for what he would do next and manoeuvred my line away from the fallen tree because I was sure he would try and snag it. If that happened I'd lose him. I was also worried that his powerful fight might break the line. But I managed to slowly reel the old boy in. When I had him near the bank I was confident he was beaten."

Archie frowned and shook his head as if trying to deny the undeniable, or comprehend the incomprehensible. "You wouldn't believe what happened next. The fish suddenly gave a tremendous leap and, momentarily, seemed to hang in the air. Before falling back into the

water he jerked his head sideways as if to dislodge the hook which, to my surprise, he spat at me!"

Once again Archie shook his head. "But that's not all. Before he swam away we briefly had eye contact. Do you know, I could have sworn that he smiled! Anyway, this is the hook I used to catch him."

"You shouldn't have filed the barb off. I bet you would have caught him then," suggested Caleb.

"That's possible. But I like to give fish a fighting chance. Maybe I just wanted to enjoy the challenge. I was pleased to feel that, in our own ways, we had both won the contest and that was reward enough for me.

"That was the last I saw of Old Tom. To Mum's delight I rarely mentioned him again. I never heard of anyone else catching him, so I hope he lived to a grand old age. He deserved that."

"Why did you keep the hook, Mr Hair?" enquired Louisa.

Keeping a straight face he replied: "For the same reason I keep all of my wonders. There is a chance that one day I may grow old and become forgetful. If that happens then I'll have the wonders to refresh my memory about some of the things that I've experienced."

A couple of the children wondered how much older the old man could possibly grow before dying.

"Rightio," said Archie as he stuck the hook back into the cork and returned it to the box. "Now it really is time for bed. There's something very special I would like to share with you in the morning."

Naturally the children wanted to know what it was but Archie told them that it could not be explained, it was something that had to be experienced.



Archie feeding kookaburras

Sometimes, before the children went to sleep, Archie would pull aside a large curtain that separated the girls from the boys, sit on the edge of one of the mattresses on the attic floor and imitate the calls of bush birds. It was said that he was such an excellent mimic not even birds could tell the difference between his calls and those of others of their species.

It was also said that Archie used to teach young orphaned birds to sing the way their parents would have done. It is even rumoured that whenever his ghost hears a call of distress from an orphaned bird it returns to teach the poor thing how to make the sounds necessary to live a normal life.

A child had once remarked:

"Oh, I wish I had wings and could fly like a bird."

"But you do have wings," the old man had replied. "Not the same sort as birds of course. Although you can't see them you have wings that can carry you to places you cannot imagine yet – not even in your dreams. Your wings are wings of love, compassion and wonder and, if you have the courage to trust them and faith in yourself, then they can transport you to places far beyond the reach of the fragile wings of birds."

A DAWN WONDER

There were plenty of groans and complaints when Archie woke the children before dawn the following morning.

"Why do we have to get up so early?" one of the boys grumbled, sleepily.

"Because, Robin," replied Archie, "this is the best time to start sharing some of the wonders."

"Some of the what?" asked Rachael.

"Be patient. You'll experience them soon," said the old man.

After the children had dressed and were gathered together in the kitchen Archie gave each of them a drink of ginger beer and an ANZAC biscuit. When they had finished the snack he said:

"Now, I want you all to join hands and close your eyes. You will have to trust me to lead you for a while."

When the children had done as he asked Archie took the hand of the child closest to him, opened the door and led them out into the dark, delicately perfumed bush of a fresh, new morning.

If the children could have seen, they would have noticed that the old man was leading them around in circles to give them the impression they were traveling further than they actually were, when in reality they were not far from the house.

"Rightio," Archie said eventually. "Don't open your eyes, just let go of each other's hands and lay down on your backs where you are, with your feet towards the sound of the creek. But make sure you keep your eyes closed."

The children lay down upon the grass near the Freestone Creek, just as dawn was preparing to colour the sky. Naturally, a few of them sneaked a peek but not seeing anything interesting closed their eyes again.

"Is everyone comfortable?" enquired Archie, sitting behind them. "You must be comfortable or you won't be able to fully appreciate the wonders."

After some shuffling about everyone assured the old man that they were comfortable.

"Don't go back to sleep," he warned. "In fact, to try and keep you awake I'll tell you about something that happened to me while I was building our first home here – the one that burnt down in a bushfire."

A few dry leaves crunched beneath the old man's body, and a dung beetle scurried away frantically, as he lay back upon the earth and rested his head on his hands.

"I've always loved feeding birds," he said, gazing at the fading stars. "But the ones I especially remember were a pair of shrike thrushes who always stayed close together, as if they were in love.

"Mum wanted to help me build but she wasn't in the best of health at the time. To her disappointment I told her that I would be able to work better alone. So she stayed with her relations until I got the place ready for her to move in and help with the interior.

"I completed one room first. This was my bedroom and kitchen while I worked on the rest of the house.

"When I was building this room, each morning before starting work, I'd stand outside enjoying my first cup of tea for the day and scatter damper crumbs for the birds. However, after finishing the room I became eager to complete the house, so I had the cup of tea while working and put off feeding the birds until I was having a bit of lunch.

"My bed was beneath a window and one morning, a couple of days after I'd stopped feeding the birds before work, I was in bed planning what I would do that day. Suddenly, I heard a tap on the window, and then another one. I looked up to see a pair of shrike thrushes tapping on the glass with their beaks.

"I lay there wondering if they were trying to attract my attention, or just doing it to annoy me. Then it struck me that they may be trying to remind me that I hadn't fed them at the usual time.

"I got up and, without bothering to make a cup of tea, went outside to feed them. The thrushes fluttered down and joined some other birds that were waiting to be fed. When the thrushes had finished eating they flew away and repeated the process the following morning. They had obviously decided that I should give them breakfast at the same time every day.

"Once they began tapping they were insistent and wouldn't stop until I got up and fed them. They were like a friendly alarm clock. Even if I was awake before they arrived, I looked forward to their tapping before getting up.

"The other birds and I got into a routine. After the thrushes had tapped on the window, I would go out and feed them all crumbs and leftover scraps of food before making my cup of tea and starting work.

"We followed this pattern contentedly until I had built the house to the stage where I felt it was almost ready for Mum to move in and help me. Then, one morning, the shrike thrushes failed to appear on time. This struck me as unusual because they had always been punctual.

"I was lying in bed wondering what had become of them when a female thrush appeared at the window."

"How did you know she was a she?" asked one of the children from behind her closed eyelids.

"Because the females have faint stripes on their throats," replied Archie. "Anyway, she did something strange. She only tapped once on the window above my bed before flying to the next window. She alighted on the sill and again tapped just once on the glass.

"I got out of bed and followed her around the house as she continued to tap on each window until she arrived back at the one above my bed. Here she just stood on the sill and looked at me. I had a feeling that she was trying to communicate something but I couldn't understand what it was. Then she flew away. I was sure she had to be one of the birds that visited me every morning and I wondered what had become of her mate.

"I got dressed and went out to feed the birds. There were a few waiting for breakfast but there was no sign of the shrike thrushes.

"That evening while I was sweeping the floor I found a dead shrike thrush near the foot of my bed. I felt it had to be the mate of the one that tapped on the windows that morning. But how had it come to be there? And what had caused its death? Of course, I never found out the answers to those questions, and for all the years Mum and I lived there no shrike thrush ever tapped on our windows again.

"I made a little coffin, put a layer of moss in the bottom, and then buried the bird in what would eventually become our garden. There weren't many wild flowers around at that time of year but I collected enough to put on the grave." *

Before the children had an opportunity to start asking questions about the birds, Archie told them to open their eyes because it was time to see the first of the wonders.

They opened their eyes and began looking around for something wonderful. Then they began whispering among themselves. One of them said: "Excuse me, Mr Hair, but we can't see any wonders."

"You all saw one when you opened your eyes, Chloe," replied Archie.

"No we didn't. All we saw was the sky," complained another child.

"Only the sky!" the old man sighed. Then he asked: "What did you expect to see?"

"The first of the wonders."



"Don't you think that birth is the greatest wonder of all?" asked the old man.

"I can't see a birth," remarked the child.

"You are experiencing the birth of a day. Isn't that wonderful? Look at it and share it, and then look around at some of the other wonders it can show you," Archie replied while gazing at the dawn.

The children continued looking at the sky while the sun painted the new day into an everchanging masterpiece. They tried to see what they felt the old man wanted them to see but could not.

There were pink and white fluffy clouds, a few streaky orange ones, even some that seemed dark and ominous. But mostly there was just the sky, blue and deep and distant, while golden sunlight glinted through trees silhouetted on the dark hills. There was nothing they would call wonderful.

The children tried to seem interested for the old man's sake because he had been kind to them, yet they could not help feeling disappointed.

"Imagine that you had been blind all of your life," Archie said. "Then, suddenly, this morning, you opened your eyes and instead of darkness saw this dawn. Wouldn't you think that was wonderful? Wouldn't this moment be very precious to you?"

The children had to agree that he was right. They looked at the sky again and, although it did not seem as wonderful to them as it did to the old man, at least it meant more to them than when they had first opened their eyes. However, it would be a long time before any of them understood the true value of the gift Archie was trying to share with them.

"Let's go and experience a few of the other wonders that the first wonder can show us and then we'll have breakfast," Archie said before the children lost interest. "Use the wonder of your senses to share the wonder of this morning. The world can be a fascinating place if you do."

"What do you mean, Mister Hair?" Caleb asked.

"Look at the things around you. Listen to the sounds of nature. Be aware of life going about its business as if none of us exists. There is a constant struggle for survival..." Archie stopped in mid-sentence and said: "I suppose you all think that I'm a silly old man but please, just for now at least, try and share yourself with the morning. It is so important. Even though you may never understand it you are still a part of it, and it has many things to teach you."

The children were not sure why Mr Hair wanted them to do what he was requesting but they did not think he was silly – although they could not understand why, if wonders were so important, no-one else had told them. They were often yelled at for getting up late, but not because they were missing something wonderful.

Archie watched as the children stood up within the dawning of the new day and began looking around dubiously. At first it seemed they were only doing this for his sake but before long, and despite their doubts, they soon became involved in exploring their environs and discovering some bush wonders.

Ah, the wonderment of it, he thought. We are given wonders to share wonders.

"What is the one thing that everything you have seen, touched or heard has in common?" the old man asked.

None of the children knew.

"The freedom to be what it is and to be able to play the part in life that it was born to play," he said. "And that is the most important thing in the world."

Nobody seemed to know how to respond to that statement so there was silence for a while before Danny asked:

"Can we have breakfast now?"

"Yes, of course," replied Archie. "Let's go and taste some of Mum's wonders."

They all walked back to the house in silence. When they reached it one of the children said in surprise: "Gee, I didn't realize we were so close to home. It seemed like we were traveling a long way when we had our eyes closed."

"Life can be like that," responded the old man, thoughtfully.

*Archie had a theory about why the shrike thrushes acted the way they had and how the dead one came to be in his room, but he preferred to keep the children wondering.

He reasoned that the birds had not seen a window until he was building the house. Possibly they saw their reflections and considered them threats, and so tried to peck them. They had been distracted when Archie got out of bed to feed them.

The dead bird may have flown through the open door while Archie was working and, thinking it was flying back into the bush, broke its neck when it hit a window. However, he could not understand why the female thrush had tapped on all the other windows.

*

After breakfast Archie took the children on a treasure hunt. When it was over and everyone was sitting by the creek, sucking on boiled lollies that had been part of the treasure, the old man said that all the slurping sounds reminded him of a story. This is the story he told.



Archie and some visitors

MFGASCOLIDES AUSTRALIS

Back in the days when Korrumburra was still a young town and had not yet begun to grow whiskers there lived on its outskirts a boy named Joseph, or Joe the dreamer as his parents often called him.

Joseph did not just dream but actually believed that what he dreamed of was reality waiting to happen. He had no doubt that if his mind was capable of thinking up something to build then it was just a matter of time before he could create it.

All of his spare time was spent in planning or constructing designs that most people he showed them to could not see a use for until it was explained to them. In later life Joseph became a renowned engineer, but that time had yet to arrive.

Late one afternoon Joseph was returning from taking a plan in his mind for a walk through the bush so that he could work on it without interruption.

While thinking, he had travelled further than he intended to when he was distracted by an unusual gurgling or slurping sound. At first he thought that he must have been hungry and his stomach had gurgled, but then it happened again and he realised that the sound was coming from within the earth.

Wondering what it could be the boy knelt down and pressed an ear to the ground, but all he could hear was what he thought might have been the sound of grass growing. Then, just as he was about to get up and walk on, he heard the gurgling/slurping again. He thought that if it was water then there could be an underground stream beneath him.

The plan in his mind was rapidly ejected by a thrill of excitement as he considered the possibilities: I'll build a fountain, or a waterwheel, or a dam, or a wishing well, or a.....Suddenly, the ground beneath him gave way and Joseph was shocked to find himself falling with clods of earth and dry grass into a nightmare.

About eight feet below where he had been kneeling but a moment previously the boy splashed into dirty, foul-smelling, stagnant water. He was so unprepared for the experience that he could not help gasping in a mouthful as he disappeared beneath the surface in a flurry of bubbles.

Fortunately, just when he thought he was going to disappear forever into the dead green depths, his feet touched something solid. Bending his knees, he pushed his way back up to the surface, bumping his head on a piece of wood that had fallen in with him.

Joseph was a good swimmer; the problem was that there was nowhere to swim to. Thrashing around with his arms while trying to cough up what he had swallowed, the boy's nostrils began oozing and his eyes watered.

Once the initial shock had passed, Joseph trod water while wiping his eyes and nose and tried to understand what had happened. He did not have to think for long before realising that he must have fallen down an old mineshaft. After reaching that conclusion he knew that it was going to be far more difficult to get out than it had been to fall in.

The boy tried clawing out handfuls of clay and stones to make a few hand and footholds so he could climb up and repeat the process until he managed to reach the top and haul himself out. But these collapsed, causing him to fall as soon as he exerted any pressure on them.

Not knowing what else to do Joseph clung to the piece of wood that had fallen in with him. Although it didn't have much buoyancy, if he trod water at the same time, it helped keep him afloat. He also dug a hole in the wall and jammed his fist into it as another means of support.

Realising he was trapped in a dire situation and likely to drown the boy was at a loss for anything else to do other than call for help. He did this until his cries and attempt to stay afloat had almost exhausted him.

He was far from any homestead and doubted he would be heard. He knew that when he had not arrived home for dinner his parents would come looking for him – but he was sure that by then it would be too late.

Even though he was almost at his wits' end and on the verge of panic Joseph still had enough presence of mind to review his situation. He tried to calm himself down as much as possible, which was difficult – especially as hypothermia seemed to be invading his body.

Cold and exhausted, Joseph thought of every way he could to get out of his predicament, but eventually decided that it would probably be easier to drown and get his misery over and done with. Suddenly, he heard the gurgling/slurping sound again. *Oh no*, he thought. *More water must be pouring into the shaft*!

Sure that he was definitely about to drown, a black cloud of despair enveloped him. But then he realised that if only he could survive long enough, and more water did fill the hole, he would be able to float to the top. Hope filled him, dispersing the despair.

The boy heard the sound again but the level did not seem to rise. Then, on the waterline, he though he saw part of the earth move, as if something was pushing from the other side of the shaft. Hoping it was the water arriving, Joseph was just about to push himself over and scrape some of the soil away when a chunk fell out and plopped into the water.

A hole opened up and the boy waited for water to come gushing through and save him. He was totally unprepared for what did appear, in fact it was amazing that he didn't faint from the shock and drown. Joseph recoiled, and his hope was rapidly replaced by terror, for what appeared in the hole seemed to be a slimy, purple snake's head.

Too numb to scream, Joseph watched in horror as the head emerged from the hole and turned from side to side on the water's surface, as if trying to sense something. The boy realised that it couldn't be a snake's head because it didn't have eyes, scales or a forked

tongue. In fact it was difficult to tell whether it even had a mouth, although he thought he could see an aperture where the mouth should have been.

Maybe it sucks the blood from its victims like a huge leech, thought Joseph, wishing that he hadn't.

The longer he looked at the creature the more convinced he became that it must be a type of worm, the largest worm he had ever seen. He thought about trying to wrestle and drown it but knew that, no matter how dire his situation, he could never touch the slimy horror.

Then the worm-thing did something unexpected; when all of its head and part of its body was free of the hole it turned and seemed to eat, or dig, its way back into the wall alongside the hole from which it had emerged. As it did so Joseph noticed that it was the worm-thing making the gurgling/slurping sound.

Once the head had disappeared into the adjacent hole, Joseph watched its body (which was pinkish-grey in colour) follow it, and follow it, and follow it. The creature went on and on. It was difficult to judge but as far as Joseph could tell it seemed to be about twenty feet long.

A short time later, Joseph heard the sound approach again. The worm, or whatever it was, appeared from another hole close to the second and turned around to make its way back through the earth near its previous exit.

Joseph had no idea why the creature was acting the way it was. Then he had a fearsome thought that sapped his remaining courage:

Maybe the loathsome thing is the slave of a bigger monster that doesn't have the ability, or couldn't be bothered, to make a hole for itself! And the hole is being enlarged so that whatever is waiting on the other side can break through and eat me!

The sound repeatedly came and went as the worm-thing continued making holes. Joseph closed his eyes. He did not want to see what abomination was waiting to devour him. Blood was seeping from beneath the fingernails that had been broken in his desperate attempts to escape. This was another worry for him: Possibly the monster was attracted by the smell of blood!

He hated the sound the worm-thing was making and was sure that, if by some miracle he survived, it would haunt him for the rest of his life.

It was surprising there was any terror left in the boy, but there was. All of a sudden he heard a series of loud splashes. Believing that whatever was after him had forced its way through the holes, he screamed. At the same time he fouled his trousers and emptied his bladder. The moment he feared had arrived.

Expecting to feel claws rip into him at any moment Joseph refused to open his eyes – he could not see any point. He just fatefully awaited his doom. But nothing happened. When nothing happened he became curious. The longer nothing happened the more curious he became. Then he realised that the piece of wood he was hanging on to could be used as a weapon.

He decided that if he did have to die then he would do it fighting. *I should have bashed the worm-thing's head in when I first saw it* he thought, and was angry with himself that he hadn't. Taking hold of one end of the wood he prepared to defend himself.

At first Joseph only cautiously opened one eye, irrationally hoping that if only half of him could see the nightmare then the rest of him would be safe.

The afternoon was fading and the light in the shaft becoming gloomy, but there didn't seem to be anything to fear – other than drowning or freezing to death. He opened his other eye and saw that all the edges of the wormholes had been broken away to join up and form a rough tunnel.

The boy waited in trepidation but no horror emerged. He waited and waited, but nothing at all emerged, let alone a horror.

As his fear subsided Joseph realised that the tunnel looked large enough for him to crawl through – if he dared. But, not knowing where it led, he feared that it could be a trap. His imagination flashed an unwanted picture into his mind; the end of the tunnel was covered by a strong, sticky cobweb and in its centre waited a monstrous, ugly, boy-eating, spider!

Worried about what he might see, yet knowing he had no choice, Joseph pulled his fist from the support of the clay hole and pushed himself over to the other side. With trepidation he peered into the tunnel and saw that it had been dug on an angle that would take him to the surface. There didn't seem to be anything waiting in the hole to attack him and he was delighted to see the twilit sky beyond it.

Not understanding what had happened, or why, a relieved Joseph dragged himself into the tunnel and wearily crawled along its slippery, muddy length until he reached the end. After gratefully pulling himself out onto the earth's surface he lay shivering beneath the evening sky, while wondering about the strange creature that had saved him. He was thankful that he had not tried to kill it with the piece of wood.

Realising that he had to keep moving and warm up, Joseph managed to stand and began walking unsteadily in the direction of his home. After a while he heard the far-off sound of his name being called. Then he saw the welcome glint of lanterns in the distance. It was a search party.

When Joseph met the searchers shock and exhaustion finally overcame him. The only sense that could be made of his rambling words before he collapsed was something about an old mineshaft. Mention of a giant worm and its hole was disregarded as being caused by him being delirious after his ordeal.

Delighted by their son's rescue, Joseph's parents thanked the helpers and took the unconscious boy home. Realising that rest was the most important thing he needed, they dressed his wounds, towelled him dry and, even though he was still grubby and smelt of stagnant water, dressed him in a fresh nightshirt.

Joe the dreamer was then tucked into bed with a stone hot water bottle safely wrapped in a towel.

The following morning, feeling refreshed after a deep sleep, Joseph had a bath and dressed in lovely clean clothes. While eating enough breakfast for two dreamers he told his parents and older brother, James, all about his amazing adventure.

After listening to their son excitedly tell them about the previous day's experience his parents decided that he was still delirious. He was sent back to bed and allowed to stay home from school for a couple of days.

The boys got along well and James wanted to believe his brother's story, especially as Joseph tended to get upset when people doubted him, so he suggested they go and look for the shaft and wormhole after school the following day, which they did.

Because Joseph had taken little notice of where he had been going and stumbled upon the shaft by accident he was only aware of its general direction. After the brothers had been travelling further than they expected to James asked: "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"I think we might have gone too far," replied Joseph, looking around in confusion. "Let's spread out and go back."

The boys diligently searched a much wider area without success. Eventually, because it was getting late, they returned home.

"I can't understand what happened to them," Joseph commented as they walked back, disappointed. "How could we lose two holes? It's not as if they were little holes. They'd be

easy-to-lose.

"I didn't lose them. I've never even seen them," responded James.

Joseph was too concerned to reply. He knew he had almost drowned and that the wormthing had saved him, but how was he going to prove it without the mineshaft and tunnel?

He had made his brother promise not to say anything to the kids at school about what had happened but, of course, trying to keep a secret in a small country town was futile.

Although James never told a soul, when Joseph returned to school all of the students (probably via the search party) had heard about his experience and wanted him to show them the mineshaft and giant wormhole. He had to admit that he had lost them. Naturally, this caused much hilarity and disbelief, and made him the butt of jokes:

"My dad's got an old posthole you could buy."

"I've got a hole in my sock that you can have for nothing."

"My sister's got a hole in her stocking you might be able to borrow. You'd better not lose that as well though 'cos it's her best one."

"Don't you dare steal our dunny hole."

"You can have our dunny hole 'cos it's full up."

Joseph never learned that a local farmer, Mick Sutton, was a member of the search party that had come looking for him on the night of his near-tragedy.

Mick knew that his father and a mate had once dug a shaft while unsuccessfully prospecting for gold on the family property.

Mick thought the shaft had been filled in, but now wondered whether his father had lost interest after only partially filling it and just capped the hole with wood – which would have rotted after all that time.

Not wanting to be blamed for the boy's accident, or the cause of another one, the farmer checked on the shaft the following morning. Sure enough, the top had collapsed. Seeing the tunnel he assumed that Joseph and his mates had dug it and the boy must have come back to play there alone when he got into trouble.

After making a few trips to the local quarry with his horse and dray Mick filled in the shaft and tunnel that same day.

While working, the farmer had been curious about a gurgling/slurping sound he had heard that seemed to come from within the ground beneath him. He put it down to water being displaced in the shaft.

Although the overflow of water had dampened the surrounding earth the farmer knew that it would soon dry out. When he had finished the gruelling task he camouflaged his work with bush debris. Because the area looked no different to the rest of the property it was not surprising the brothers' search had been unsuccessful.

Fortunately, Joseph never learned that he had unwittingly been the cause of the death of the creature that had saved his life. It had perished after its water-source was filled in. Nor did he ever realise that he had been the first white person to see that type of worm.

In the 1870's surveyors found an animal near the town of Warragul that they thought may have been a snake. It was sent to the National Museum of Victoria where the Director, Professor Frederick McCoy, described it as a new species of earthworm and named it Megascolides Australis. Its common name is the Giant Gippsland Earthworm. It is only found in the Bass River Valley of South Gippsland in an area of about 100,000 hectares bounded by the towns of Loch, Koorumburra and Warragul. The largest recorded specimen was thirteen feet long.

These worms need water to survive so they rarely, if ever, leave their moist underground tunnels. If they hear a disturbance above them the worms make a gurgling/slurping sound

that is caused by them moving through their lubricated tunnels to get away from the threat. Due to over-cultivation they are now listed as an endangered species.

Joseph was on the verge of embarking on what was to become an illustrious career in engineering when he heard of the surveyors' find. A wave of relief swept through him. He finally felt vindicated and could not wait to share the news with his brother and parents.

Not regarded as highly intelligent, there is no explanation why the worm that saved Joseph acted the way it had. But Joseph remained forever grateful.

The carved creature on his tombstone is not an enormous snake depicting the devil's temptations, as observers may think. It is a depiction of the worm that saved his life, the Megascolides Australis.



The stranger looked at Sidney Block and was pleased to see that he appeared to be enthralled by the past being portrayed in what he thought was the Blue Pool. After putting more wood on the man's campfire he warmed his bush-worn hands once again, rubbed them together gratefully, and continued sharing his knowledge of some of Archie Hair's experiences.

THE PLAID-BILLED DUCKORPUSS

 ${f M}$ any people have heard of the mammal called a duck-billed platypus, but Archie Hair was the only person known to have admitted seeing a plaid-billed duckorpuss.

Archie loved the bush and used to tell so many stories about his incredible experiences, and the strange creatures he had seen, that people found it difficult to believe them and considered him to be an eccentric old man with a vivid imagination – not that what people thought of him had ever bothered Archie.

The only people who did not doubt the stories' veracity were children and his family. Unfortunately, most of the children only believed in them until they grew up, after which they stopped believing in many things that were important.

One morning in 1961, Archie decided to ride up to Waterford and visit a mate he had not seen for some time. While he was saddling up his mare, Bess, Edna made him a flask of tea and some salted dripping-fat sandwiches. When Archie was ready he called to his beloved dog, Bonny, and together the trio set off.

They had been travelling for some time when they reached a large waterhole near the junction of the Freestone and Winkie creeks. The old man decided to give Bess a drink and eat one of the dripping sandwiches. When the horse had finished drinking Archie tethered her, and then sat down beside a candlebark tree to have some refreshment and a bit of a rest.

The tree's discarded bark gave a satisfying crunch as he made himself comfortable upon it. From his knapsack he took out the packet of greaseproof-paper wrapped sandwiches and his flask containing sweet, black tea.

After pouring the tea, Archie took a satisfying sip and a bite from one of the sandwiches. Sitting quietly in the bush on a beautiful day, eating dripping sandwiches and drinking tea was

as close as Archie expected to get to Heaven. In fact, it was the closest he ever wanted to get because he could not see how anything else would give him more pleasure.

A willy wagtail flitted about whistling its 'pretty sweet creature' song, while a kookaburra chuckled softly in the distance. A water dragon leapt into the creek, scattering a small shoal of tiny fish – which quickly regrouped beneath the water's sparkling surface after the lizard swam away.

The tranquil scene and the day's warmth made Archie feel drowsy so, not being in a hurry, he decided to doze for a while before continuing his journey. Bonny wandered off into the bush to investigate something of canine interest.

The old man had barely drifted off to sleep when he was awakened by a peculiar noise that sounded something like "meeowwllquack". He thought that a feral cat may have been attacking a duck. Archie waited to hear the sound again so that he would know which direction it was coming from and might be able to help the duck if it was in distress.

After listening for a while, but not hearing anything unusual, he thought that his drowsy mind must have been confused so he decided to continue on his journey.

While Archie was untethering Bess, he heard a splash and a sound that was indeed like a "meeoowwllquack". Hurrying down to where he thought the sound had come from, he looked around but all he saw were a few spreading ripples near a clump of reeds. Not seeing a duck in distress, he decided there was nothing he could do so he whistled Bonny out of the bush and went on his way.

The remainder of the trip was pleasant but uneventful. After Archie arrived at his mate's place the men enjoyed an evening in the company of fond memories and a few glasses of port. They swapped yarns they had shared previously; yarns that, because of the embellishments of time, a few drinks and wistfulness seemed even more interesting in the retelling.

The men talked into the night until the journey of age sent them wearily off to bed. Sleep allowed them to travel in their dreams without encumbrance and they each drifted away to places where youth is eternal.

In the night outside a boobook owl called through the dark, a sugar glider barked and pobblebonk frogs plunked their vocal banjos. A quarter-moon drifted imperceptibly across a sky sprinkled with stars and rimmed by black hills from where a distant dingo howled.

The following morning the men awoke refreshed, although Archie's mate had a bit of a problem with cramp in one leg. He overcame this by walking around his back garden before going for his ritual morning sit on the dunny.

A faded quarter-moon still hung in the sky, as if it had been left behind because it was too slow to keep up with the nomadic night. The stars had all departed and taken their twinkling to parts of the northern hemisphere where other elderly people were preparing to slip into the shrouds of their dreams.

After breakfast Archie bade his mate farewell and began his homeward journey.

He stopped for a while beside the Wonnangatta River and regretted not having brought his fishing tackle with him. It was a river he loved – whether he caught any fish or not. He thought that if Heaven had a Wonnangatta River it might not be so bad – as long as the angels were good at making dripping sandwiches and there was plenty of sweet, black tea, and it wasn't full of clouds but had plenty of bush to roam in.

While continuing his journey, Archie became so engrossed in his thoughts that he was unaware of reaching the place where he had heard the strange sounds the previous day. If Bonny had not suddenly barked and dropped to the ground, with her fur bristling, Bess would probably have taken the old man home before he realised where he was.

When you are thinking in your mind time can be a strange and contrary thing, he mused.

The dog's obvious anxiety dragged Archie from his reverie and made him wonder what had upset her. He dismounted, tethered Bess to a branch, then stood quietly and waited to see what was happening.

Bonny began creeping cautiously down to the creek, with her tail slowly swinging from side to side, before stopping when she reached a bush growing at the water's edge. She growled softly, and then suddenly a loud "quuuuuaaaooowwwlll" sent her running off into the safety of the trees.

The sound was accompanied by splashing and then more cries of "quackmeow" wailed through the air as if something was in terrible pain. Archie had heard many strange sounds in his life but these struck him as the most peculiar. It sounded as if two animals had the one voice.

"Rrrrooowwllaaaaack. Quuaaaooowwlll."

The anguished calls caused the old man to hurry down to the creek as quickly as possible and see if he could offer any assistance. When he reached the bank he pushed aside some vegetation and saw one of the strangest creatures he had ever seen splashing in the water while trying to paddle backwards.

At first glance it appeared to be a cat but then Archie noticed that it had duck-like features as well. The poor thing seemed to be in such distress that Archie was on the verge of jumping in to rescue it when it bubbled a meow and struggled onto a rock ledge not far from where he stood.

After dragging itself dripping onto the ledge the animal shook its sodden fur – causing it to stand up in spiky clumps – then it flopped down despondently and mewed pitifully while gazing at a tadpole swimming below.

The creature had a plaid, or tartan, design on a duck-like bill. It had a cat's head, body and legs but with a duck's webbed feet and a duck's tail. Archie moved closer to get a better view. As he did so, a twig snapped beneath his boot, startling the creature and causing it to turn suddenly and look worriedly in his direction. The animal relaxed when it saw him and said:

"Thank goodness. For a moment I thought you were a dingo."



Archie had been surprised when he first saw the creature, now he was amazed to hear it speaking English. He would have been just as amazed to hear it speaking in any other language, but was pleased that it hadn't because he would not have understood it. The old man asked the animal what it was.

"I'm a plaid-billed duckorpuss, of course," it replied. "What else would I be? My father was a drake and my mother a cat – or was my father a tom and my mother a duck? I can't remember. It doesn't matter now anyway, does it? I'd still be what I am. Oh, meeoowquack. What am I to do? I hate water, yet I love eating fish.

"Waaiiick. I want to be dry and warm but I would starve if I didn't dive into that horrible water and catch fish. To make matters worse, not only must I get wet but something forces me to eat worms and insects and slimy weeds as well, and I hate that as much as getting wet. Quuaaiiooowwll. What am I to do?"

The old man felt sorry for the unfortunate creature and asked if he could help in some way.

The duckorpuss replied that it yearned to be stroked and have some milk to drink. Archie said that he didn't have any milk but he did kneel down and began to stroke the animal. As he did so it wailed:

"Yooowwlllquuuaaack. Not like that. My fur goes the other way."

Archie looked at its fur and noticed that it did indeed go the other way – the wrong way. It had to be stroked from back to front, from tail to head. Naturally that would have made swimming rather unpleasant for the duckorpuss. Archie mentioned this.

"You're not kidding!" it replied. "In fact, it's more comfortable for me to swim backwards, but I can't catch much food that way. Yeeeooowwlllquaaack. Oh, what will become of me? I'm neither one thing nor the other. Quuuuuaaaawwwlll."

"Why do you have a plaid bill?" Archie asked while stroking the wet fur back to front.

"How am I supposed to know?" cried the poor animal. "Maybe one of my parents was Scottish. That's the only reason I can think of."

The old man still felt confused by the creature's ancestry and said: "Don't you realise that ducks and cats can't make babies together."

"Well, if that's true, how do you explain the fact that I'm here then? Hey? Answer me that!" Archie had to agree that whatever it was certainly had a point.

"Quuuaaaooowwllll," it wailed again. "Oh, I do wish there were more plaid-billed duckorpusses in the world so that we could make kitlings together. It gets so lonely being the only one of your kind."

Archie continued stroking the sad creature from tail to head, even though he found it unnatural to do so. However, the duckorpuss seemed to enjoy the attention because it closed its eyes and made a quackpurring sound.

Hoping to cheer up the animal the old man said: "There must be more like you somewhere. You'll just have to go and search for them. If there's one, then there's no reason why there can't be others."

"Oh, I hope so," replied the duckorpuss, wistfully. "I'd love to find a wife. When I'm not hungry any more I'll go and look for her."

Archie had not noticed any sign that the creature was male but decided it was better not to mention the fact. He thought about its constant hunger and asked: "Why don't you try to catch mice, then you wouldn't get wet?"

"I wish I could but I can't run fast enough," sighed the animal. "Ah well, at least I suppose that makes the mice happy."

The old man smiled as he stroked and wondered why the creature had been created the way it was but could not find a reason. Maybe if I take it home, Edna and I could look after it, he thought. At least it would be warm and comfortable and have some milk and fish.

The more Archie thought about this, the more it seemed like the ideal solution to the unfortunate creature's inability to have the diet it yearned for. He was about to mention this when, without warning, the duckorpuss leapt up meowquacking and, before he could stop it, jumped into the creek, crying:

"Oh, I hate water, but I must get enough to eat so that I can search for a mate. Yoowwlllquaacckk."

The animal was suddenly filled with enthusiasm and swam rapidly away, head first with its fur sticking up, and disappeared. Archie called out that it could go home with him, but his words were lost in the bush. After searching unsuccessfully he finally gave up and went home.

Although he often returned to the same place, Archie never saw the plaid-billed duckorpuss again and could only hope that it had somehow found a partner to have kitlings with, even if the result was more unfortunate creatures who were neither one thing nor the other.

"If only I could have grabbed the duckorpuss before it got away," Archie said to his wife later, when telling her of his experience. "I'm sure we could have at least made its life more comfortable."

Edna thought that if he had never seen the duckorpuss then her husband would not have had to share its sorrow. Sometimes she wished that he did not experience all the things he did.

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The duckorpuss decided to take the human's advice and went in search of a mate. This was not an easy task, but desperation can be a great motivator.

The unfortunate animal, determined to escape from loneliness, swam awkwardly upstream for a while, trying to ignore the discomfort of the water's flow against his bristling fur. Every now and again he would drag himself onto the bank and meowquack hopefully in case there was another of his kind in the vicinity.

After persevering for some time the duckorpuss became even more depressed and decided that there was no reason he would find a mate upstream rather than downstream. He stopped paddling and gratefully drifted backwards the way he had come, occasionally waddling over rocks or the sandy bottom when the water became too shallow for him to float.

When he reached deep water the duckorpuss, for a change, rolled over and floated on his back, gazing at the birds flying high overhead. The animal envied the birds' ability to fly and wondered why, if he was part duck, he too did not have wings to fly with. Being able to fly would have made his quest so much easier.

To add insult to injury, a drowning manuka beetle attached itself to the sad animal's fur as he floated past and laboriously clambered up onto his belly, mistakenly thinking that it would find sanctuary there. Feeling a tickling sensation, the duckorpuss glanced down in annoyance, noticed the insect and, although he did not like the species' taste, ate it.

While he watched the world drift by, the duckorpuss thought about how ridiculous most of the bush creatures seemed and could not imagine why they had been created the way they were. Individually, each one did not appear to have any reason for being what it was.

Forgetting himself momentarily, and the reason he was floating downstream, the animal felt scorn for other living things and was pleased he wasn't like them. Then he realised that no matter how useless the other things seemed, or how silly they looked, at least they had others of their own kind for company.

This realisation made the duckorpuss let out a mournful wail. The sound startled a pair of ravens as they flew overhead and caused them to swoop the floating animal in annoyance.

That was too much for the duckorpuss. Thinking he was just wasting his time and energy he turned over and paddled towards the bank, dragged himself from the creek, then lay down dispirited once again.

Watching tadpoles and little fish swim past, he almost wished he was one of them rather than what he was. Two dragonflies, joined tail to tail, sat on a reed airing their wings. The duckorpuss watched them scornfully. What a stupid thing to do, he thought, then realised that, even if it was ridiculous, it might be pleasant to be able to join tails with another duckorpuss

As fate would have it, this was the time and place that Steve Clough, who lived in the town of Sale, had chosen to spend an afternoon in the Freestone Valley practising his bagpipes. He loved the solitude, especially as there was no one to complain about the sound of his music.

The plaid-billed duckorpuss did not realise that the man was nearby, and the first wail from the bagpipes startled him so much that he almost leapt back into the water in fright, but

instinct stopped him. There was something reassuring about the sound although, other than a lyrebird who found it intriguing, it did not have the same effect on the other bush creatures and caused them to scatter in terror.

Unfortunately, the flora was rooted in the earth and could not escape. The grass cowered, trees and bushes cringed and leaves curled, while a few of the more fragile rocks shattered.

But the man was unaware of the effect his music was having. He kept playing happily, at peace with the world.

The duckorpuss listened, entranced, deeply gratified by the sound that upset almost everything else. It was a sound the creature could not recall ever having heard before, yet felt it was something he had waited for all his life. It was a voice of love – although wombats trying to sleep in their burrows did not think so as they hurriedly plugged their ears with soil.

The lyrebird stood transfixed, quivering upon its mound, unsure whether to flee or practice the new noise. A bee that was peacefully buzzing by, minding its own business, had a heart attack and dropped dead.

The sky desperately searched for clouds so that it could weep while the duckorpuss, for the first time in his life, smiled. He was in love with something he had not known existed, and the sound of its call almost caused him to swoon with joy.

The new feeling that caressed the happy creature's heart blessed him with acceptance for all other living things, making him feel ashamed that he had been so critical towards everything he shared the earth with. He even felt guilty about having eaten the manuka beetle.

The duckorpuss was so at peace he never considered that the sound he heard might not come from one of his own kind. The creature just knew that whatever was singing sang with a voice he wanted to listen to forever.

After listening in fascination for some time, the duckorpuss became eager to meet the answer to his yearning so he waddled towards the source of the sound. As the animal approached, Steve, much to the bush's relief, decided to take a break and have some refreshment.

It was an unfortunate coincidence that the first sight the happy duckorpuss had of the bagpipes was when the man finished playing the last few notes of a tune on them then, as they gave a final wheeze, he laid the pipes on the ground.

The duckorpuss was shocked, even though what the man held looked only vaguely like what he expected to see. He thought the intruder had been choking his intended mate.

Maybe the exquisite song was a lament caused by the anguish his beloved felt while trapped in the man's cruel embrace. Had unrequited love caused the man's jealousy? The duckorpuss was enraged. How dare the man try to kill what he had convinced himself he had been searching for all of his life.

Innocently, Steve, feeling a wonderful sense of fulfillment, began walking to where he had left a picnic lunch when he was startled by a quackscreetching noise that was unlike any sound he had ever heard before, or ever wanted to hear again.

As he turned in surprise he was confronted by the amazing sight of a wild, deranged-looking creature with tufts of fur sticking up from its body waddling rapidly towards him. It was the furious duckorpuss, determined to avenge his beloved.

Steve instinctively ran away as the creature snapped at his ankles. Seeking the safety of a tree he attempted to climb it, concerned that what was attacking him may have a poisonous bite. But, although he may have been an expert bagpipe player, Steve was hopeless at climbing trees.

Managing to clamber a metre from the ground, he clung there desperately hoping that he was out of harm's way, but could not stop himself from sliding back to earth. However, he need not have worried.

After his initial attack, the duckorpuss rushed back to where his intended mate lay. Grabbing a bony black leg in his bill, he dragged the bagpipes through the bush until he reached a rocky promontory above the creek.

The animal felt that even though, like himself, the mate he had rescued probably hated getting wet, she may also need water to help her survive. The duckorpuss decided that, as soon as she recovered sufficiently, he and his new-found partner would dive into the creek and escape.

The design on the other creature's body enraptured the happy duckorpuss because it was similar to the one on his bill. He thought that, even though they did not look very much alike, they must be from the same species. Finally, he had found another of his own kind.

Feeling a tenderness he had never felt before, the duckorpuss placed a webbed paw onto what he thought was the plaid stomach of his mate. The remaining air forced from the bag emitted a soft, low moan that sounded like a comforting lover's sigh to the concerned suitor.

The duckorpuss began quackpurring in contentment and stroked the bag from back to front, too overjoyed to realise that she did not have fur that like his went the wrong way, or that her stomach was deflating.

In the meantime, Steve had recovered his nerve and was peering around the tree, wondering what had attacked him. Seeing no sign of danger, he cautiously crept back to where he'd left his bagpipes, but they were nowhere to be seen. He searched the clearing and then began looking further along the creek until he came to the rocky outcrop, unaware he was interrupting the duckorpuss's tryst with his bagpipes.

Suddenly the frightening quaaackscreetching sound rent the afternoon again and Steve felt the strange creature bite his leg. Kicking out instinctively, he sent whatever had attacked him flying through the air and into the water.

Wasting no time, he grabbed the bagpipes and hurried away, leaving the furious duckorpuss splashing and wailquacking in the creek, desperate to reach the bank before the man could escape with his newfound love and do her more harm.

By the time the duckorpuss had struggled ashore his love and the man had disappeared. He was never to see them again.

The lonely animal returned to where he had first seen his love, thinking bitterly how unfair life was that he had come so close to finding a partner, even if she was not the partner he expected to find, only to lose her so soon.

The duckorpuss tried to recall his beloved's features and realised that she had seemed rather peculiar. She had been all body, arms and legs, with no head. For a moment, this disconcerted the mourning creature then, in a flash, everything became clear. What he had tried to rescue must have been the mother of all duckorpusses! The Queen Duckorpuss! Like a queen bee! What a tragedy the man had kidnapped her. Why had she been treated so cruelly? And what would become of her kitlings?

This awareness filled the animal with determination he had never known previously and he vowed to make it his life's mission to rescue the Queen Duckorpuss. He had finally found a reason for being; a cause to fight for. He did not care if he had to struggle through his life alone.

He imagined being hailed as a hero when he rescued the mother of all duckorpusses, and become a legend that future generations of kitlings would be told about as they nested by the banks of rivers and streams throughout Gippsland.

Unfortunately, knowing nothing of the existence of towns and cities where people who played bagpipes might hide, the duckorpuss did not search the obvious places therefore, although he searched diligently, the poor creature was always disappointed.

The sun and moon continued rising and setting. Days and nights drifted into years. Dreams faded into eternity. Life continued living, unconcerned with the strange creature wandering through the bush in search of something he did not realise he would never find.

One night, exhausted from having struggled all day through unfamiliar territory, the duckorpuss lay down wearily beside a river. While examining his bruised and blistered webbed paws, the creature wondered why he bothered putting himself through such hardship. He sighed and gazed across the dark water.

A rare positive aspect of being a duckorpuss was that he had good night vision. He was about to swim out and try to find a midnight snack when a distant flash of fire appeared to leap from the water. It glowed briefly and then disappeared. Forgetting his weariness, he peered into the night, hoping to see more of the amazing flashes of fire.

Another flame flickered from the river. The duckorpuss was intrigued. Was it possible for water to burn? Hope flooded into him. If it was possible for water to burn then there may indeed be more duckorpusses somewhere out there in the night.

More flashes of fire flickered in the distance. The animal could barely restrain himself from paddling out to investigate, but decided that if this water could burn then he was safer where he was

Continuing to gaze intently into the night, he did not realise that what he had observed was something that had rarely been seen since a channel was dug to connect the Gippsland Lakes with the sea. What he had briefly witnessed were fire fish. But that is another story.

The duckorpuss scanned the river but everything had returned to normal. Overcome by tiredness, the lonely creature curled as cosily into himself as was possible and slept. While he slept he had a dream; a dream so vivid that it remained with him long after he awoke.

In this dream he was resting upon the same river bank watching flashes of fire leaping and dancing upon the dark water, like a spectacular ballet, when a melancholy sound penetrated the night and seemed to extinguish the flames. It was a keening sound similar to the one he had heard his beloved make when trapped in the man's arms.

The sound drifted through his dream, growing in intensity until it seemed to fill the universe with its lamentation. The hapless creature thought that the Queen was calling to him for help. But he could not move. He felt as if he was stuck upon the earth like a block of stone.

Overwhelmed with frustration the duckorpuss looked up at the sky and noticed that the full moon had a tartan design. It even had black spindly legs. It was the Queen Duckorpuss!

As soon as he saw her the sound changed from one of sorrow to one of celebration, and the duckorpuss moon began to pulsate and beat like a heart. Faster and faster it beat in time with the music. The faster it beat the more it glowed. The more it glowed the brighter the night became.

Suddenly, there was the sound of an explosion, and for a few moments everything went black.

The distraught animal lying on the riverbank thought that the Queen had burst. Then he noticed that the moon had reappeared as normal, but the sky was full of hundreds of tiny kitlings floating down towards him. Each of them was meowquacking happily and, wonder of wonders, they had wings! Then the duckorpuss awoke.

Feeling invigorated by the memory of his dream, the animal stretched contentedly and believed that what he had experienced must have been an omen. He could not wait to continue his journey.

Unfortunately, the further he travelled and the more time passed the less confident he felt that he would be successful in his quest, until it began to seem more and more unlikely that he would ever become a hero.

His enthusiasm waned with time, weariness, and the fading of love's flush from his heart.

The duckorpuss kept searching for something for the rest of his life but the search lacked purpose and direction.

In old age he became resentful, critical of life once again and so cantankerous that he could barely put up with his own company – disillusioned that he was still the same as he had always been, neither one thing nor another.

Nowadays, sounds resembling those of bagpipes playing snatches of a lilting Scottish air can occasionally be heard drifting through the bush near the Freestone Creek. Fortunately, these sounds are muted and do not have the distressing effect on nature that the originals did. Had the lyrebird learned to mimic the sound and passed its knowledge on to its descendants?

Steve Clough never mentioned the strange encounter he'd had, although there were often times he would have liked to. Because he was one of the district's most prominent businessmen he had decided to be discreet. He knew that if he did mention the weird creature he had seen people would think that the pressure of work was affecting his judgement.

However, the unfortunate affair did have one positive outcome. After that day Steve began losing interest in playing the bagpipes because, from then on, every time he blew into them he imagined he could hear distressing meowquacking sounds that spoilt his enjoyment.

For the rest of his life he wondered whether the nip he had received that fateful day had somehow infected him. His friends and neighbours never enquired as to the reason for this wondrous turn of events. They were just grateful it was so.

No more was the bush tortured by the sound of bagpipes, other than occasional imitations that could have been made by lyrebirds. Fortunately, these were not loud enough to give bees heart attacks, or make the flora cringe.

Although Steve became even more successful in business over the years, something seemed to be lacking in his life. He was never again the optimistic, happy-go-lucky man he had been before his encounter with the duckorpuss and, strangely, became obsessed with trying to secretly crossbreed cats and ducks.

If you are ever invited around to his place for a barbecue, try and sneak a look into the old chook shed near the back fence. It is littered with duck feathers and cat fur. But, whatever you do, don't mention to him that you noticed anything unusual. And, for goodness sake, don't comment on the tattered old set of bagpipes lying in a nest amongst the debris.

No one other than Archie Hair ever claimed to have seen a plaid-billed duckorpuss. However, Jess Morley once found a large unidentified nest containing a broken egg in the bush not far from the Avon River near the low-level bridge at Valencia Creek. From the shell protruded an unusual embryo that appeared to have features similar to both a duck and a cat. Caught in the weave of the nest were a few tufts of what looked like cat fur. Perhaps a cat had raided the nest? – Then again...

THE FIRE FISH

One day Archie Hair and Harry Treasure, who was patriarch of the Dargo High Plains mountain cattle family, were taking a break from droving a small mob of cattle along the Insolvent Track towards the town of Stratford. Even though Harry rarely needed to call on Archie's assistance, they worked quietly and efficiently as a team.

However, there was one problem. Whenever the two men stopped for smoko Archie always seemed to feel the need to tell a yarn. Anything could start him off, although a mug of tea was usually the worst culprit. As soon as the first refreshing sip flowed through him it began to awaken memories of experiences that Archie had once had, or stories he had heard.

That in itself was not a problem, every bushman loves a yarn. What annoyed Harry was that Archie's yarns, although interesting when they started, tended to get so drawn out and convoluted that one story would invariably lead into another, until Archie became so involved in them that he occasionally forgot the task at hand.

The men had been travelling for four days, during which time Harry felt he had heard enough yarns to last him for the rest of his life.

The old cattleman was an easy-going person but had learned to be firm in order to keep the job moving steadily along. Whenever he considered smoko had gone on long enough, he would invariably remount his horse and begin readying the cattle for the next stage of the journey – sometimes leaving Archie so absorbed in a yarn that he did not realise he was telling it to himself.

It was only after Harry had cracked his whip that the yarn fled, leaving Archie with a puzzled expression on his face for a moment until he realised where he was. Then he would put out the fire and was keen to get back to work.

Although Harry tried to be careful and not encourage Archie into telling a yarn, during this particular day's smoko, for the first time, the old man happened to notice a prominent scar on the palm of one of his companion's hands.

Without thinking, he asked what had caused it. Archie showed him a similar scar on his other hand but seemed reluctant to talk about them. This was a relief to the cattleman because he thought he had almost blundered into yet another interminable yarn.

When the billy had boiled and the men were sitting on the ground with their mugs of tea, Archie suddenly blurted out: "It was a fish that burnt my hands," then, thankfully, he lapsed back into silence.

Harry did not bother commenting on that statement although, not surprisingly, he found the explanation difficult to believe.

After his first sip of tea Archie gazed into the fire and said: "Do you remember how I reckoned that the best fishing was to be had when the mullet were running?"

"Yep," replied Harry, feeling on safer ground because he was a noted fisherman himself and reckoned he could better any yarn than Archie came up with on the subject.

"Well, what I'm going to tell you has nothing to do with that."

Archie had some strange ways of wandering into a story.

Harry sighed, realising that he was trapped. Only partially interested, and totally disbelieving, he listened as Archie asked:

"Have you ever heard of the Gippsland fire fish?"



Flying fish similar to a fire fish

Harry would have preferred to say yes and spoil the story, but reluctantly admitted that he had not.

"Well," continued Archie, secretly pleased to be one up on the old man who seemed to know something about everything when it came to fishing, "to my knowledge, fire fish haven't been seen for years. In fact, I do believe that I was the last person to have ever encountered one.

"That only happened because I was in the right place at the right time – or the wrong place at the wrong time. It depends on whether or not you were one of the unfortunate people who lost everything they owned, even if it wasn't very much, including their lives, in the tragic bushfire of '39. But that was just fate. I couldn't help what happened, although I do wish I'd stayed home that particular day and helped Mum with the washing instead."

"For goodness sake, will you just get on with it!" snapped Harry, uncharacteristically impatient. Although he would never have admitted it, the old man was curious to hear the tale but was worried about Archie's tendency to drag a marathon out of a sprint.

The story of the fire fish was one yarn that Archie felt uneasy about telling. Even though the mug of tea was weakening his resistance, he still felt dubious about sharing his secret with Harry because he did not want people suing him for the loss of their lives and all the damage the fire had done to their property and stock.

Although it had been a long time ago and Archie did not consider himself at fault, he knew it would be human nature to hold a grudge if you had been burnt to death as a result of another person's actions. However, he considered that, seeing as a majority of people seemed to have difficulty in believing his stories anyway, he doubted Harry would accept this one as the gospel truth – even though it was.

Archie took another sip of tea and could not help himself from continuing: "I'll start at the beginning," he said.

"Seems like a logical place," remarked Harry, dryly.

"Well," said Archie, ignoring the comment, "originally fire fish, or to use their Latin name, pyropisces, lived in the most inaccessible parts of the Gippsland Lakes. They're a type of flying fish, about 6 inches long. You know, the sort with wings that allow them to skip across the water's surface.

"When they're submerged, these fish are transparent and practically invisible. In fact, the only way you can tell one is there is by tiny markings that look similar to blushes on its cheeks, but you need exceptional eyesight to see them. However, when they leap out of the water their appearance changes dramatically.

"The transformation is quite magical and they glow brilliantly; beautifully coloured iridescent orange, red, yellow, blue and green, and flicker like flames when seen above the water's surface at night. But that's not how fire fish got their name."

Harry sighed.

Archie enjoyed gazing into a campfire while telling yarns because it refreshed his memory and made him feel part of the story – and so it was on this occasion. He looked through the flickering flames into the past and said:

"One day, way back in The Dreamtime when aborigines first arrived at the Gippsland lakes, a couple of children were fishing from a bark canoe on what is now called Lake King when one of them threw his spear at a fish but missed. It was only after the spear floated up and lay on the surface for a while before being retrieved by the children that they noticed something glowing. They realised that impaled on a prong of the spear was a little fish that looked like fire.

"Naturally, the kids were excited, especially as they hadn't caught one before. In fact, none of their tribe had. After removing the beautiful fish they put it in a woven reed basket that, besides holding any fish they caught, also contained their play lunch.

"The children watched in awe before noticing that not only did the little fish look like fire but also began to smell like fire as well – as if it was burning. It was burning! The fish and basket burst into flames, causing the children to jump into the lake. Fortunately, they were quick-witted enough to extinguish the flames by turning the canoe over and tipping the burning basket out.

"After righting the canoe, because it was half full of water, the kids clung to either side and managed to get it back to shore, where their angry parents were waiting. They were furious that the children had almost burnt the canoe and accused them of playing with fire-sticks without permission. Of course, the children protested their innocence and complained that it wasn't their fault the little fish had caught alight.

"Listening to their children trying to blame a fish for the fire made the parents angrier still and they refused to allow them to go to the next Saturday night corroboree, nor allowed them to have any witchetty grubs for supper until they told the truth.

"The young fishermen thought that this punishment was most unfair and said so in no uncertain manner – causing them to receive a few clouts around their ears. Outraged by this treatment the kids shot through into the bush, where they spent a few days pondering the injustice of life and the strange little fish they had caught.

"Naturally, the realisation that life was unjust became a valuable lesson that held them in good stead for the rest of their lives; and when they were older caused them to occasionally clout their own children. Anyway, the kids decided that the only way they would be able to convince their parents they hadn't told a lie was to catch another fish that burned and let the adults watch it burst into flames.

"Of course, this idea was easier to think about than it was to bring to fruition because, as I said, fire fish are extremely difficult to detect in water. While hiding in the bush the children thought long and hard about their dilemma but were never again able to catch another fish that caught alight.

"Many years later, when they were old, they would sit around campfires at night and fascinate new children with the story of the little fish that had almost burnt their canoe, and because they were old they were believed."

Harry couldn't stop himself from gruffly saying: "Not like a lot of the little bludgers around nowadays. They don't believe anything wise old people tell them."

The cattleman may as well have been talking to himself because Archie was too engrossed in his story to hear the comment.

"The parents were unconcerned with the whereabouts of their offspring," he continued. "In fact they quite enjoyed the break and went about their business. They knew that the children had enough bush skills to be capable of looking after themselves – besides they had other kids to worry about.

"This happened back in the good old days, long before white people arrived in Australia and decimated the natives before teaching them country and western music, or built schools so they could be educated about arithmetic and what have you. The absconders didn't realise how fortunate they were not to have to worry about getting a few cuts of the cane from a headmaster for wagging school."

Harry glared at Archie, annoyed that he had the frustrating habit of telling yarns as if to children. "Stone the flaming crows," he said in loud exasperation, "of course there weren't any country and western singers or schools around in those days. Anyway, what's that got to do with anything?"

"I only wanted to fill you in on the details," replied Archie, dragged from his narrative by the cattleman's ire and put out at being interrupted when full stride into a story.

"Forget the details," exclaimed Harry. "Just give me the facts and get on with it."

The cattleman's attitude hurt Archie's sense of artistry because to him telling a yarn was a fulfilling and integral aspect of life. To be able to relate one properly meant having the ability

to spin a myth from an anecdote, or a book from a sentence, and weave infinity from a moment. However, although he was a bit miffed, he continued gazing into the fire and did get on with it.

"Eventually, the parents relented and brought their recalcitrant offspring from the bush with the promise of a picnic up on Mount Bogong, where they could stuff themselves with toasted Bogong moth sandwiches. Apparently, before Big Macs were invented aborigines considered moth sangers a rare treat, so the children were pacified."

Harry was about to ask Archie where the natives got their bread from, and whether it was already sliced, but thought better of it.

Unaware that he had almost been interrupted, Archie remained immersed in his yarn.

"One night, probably a few hundred years down the track – then again it could have been ten thousand years later for all we know. Not having watches or calendars or being able to write down dates, it was a bit difficult for aborigines to be precise about time – even if they had known whether it was BC or AD. In fact, they probably didn't bother about it nearly as much as we do. You see, they had different priorities and didn't have to worry about getting to work on time or being late for trains or anything like that. Anyway, on this particular night, another member of the Kurnai tribe accidentally speared a fish that caught fire.

"This resulted in tragedy because the fisherman hadn't noticed the transparent fish until he'd put the spear in his canoe and was about to paddle away to another fishing spot when the fish began to glow.

"Mystified by this phenomenon, the man watched as the fish glowed brighter and brighter – until it burst alight! This caused the bloke to fall from his canoe in shock and swim about a hundred yards before realising that he'd never been taught to swim so, not knowing what else to do, he thrashed around in the water for a while before drowning.

"Of course, if he hadn't realised he couldn't swim he most likely would have swum ashore and lived to a ripe old age. He might even have been the first aborigine to invent the wheel or a life jacket, or something useful like that. Still, fate being what it is, that wasn't meant to be."

A bush fly that had been annoying Archie distracted him from the story momentarily by trying to crawl up his nose. Archie was no stranger to bush flies so he did not take the intrusion personally. But that did not stop him from automatically slapping his nose with such force that it stunned the fly and made his eyes water.

While trying to regain its composure after falling to the ground, the insect lay wondering whether life might be easier if it became a vegetarian. The bushman sneezed (causing the fly to feel grateful that it was not still up the nose) and had a sip of tea before immersing himself in his yarn once again:

"As millenniums rolled by fire fish increased in numbers. Naturally, others were caught. The natives learned to keep them submerged until they reached shore, where they had kindling waiting. Then they would lift the impaled fish from the water and thrust it into the kindling, quickly withdrawing the spear so that it too didn't burn. In this way they were able to make fires without having to go to all the trouble of rubbing sticks together.

"This was a great technological leap forward for the natives. I reckon that if white people hadn't arrived, and stopped them from evolving naturally, they would have invented frying pans so that they could have fried fish and yam chips. Then again, they may have already thought about inventing frying pans back in The Dreamtime and decided that fried food was too unhealthy which, when you think about it, would have been a pretty smart decision. Still, that's something we'll never know the answer to.



"After wasting a lot of time stabbing their spears into the water in the hope of piercing the flesh of a fish they couldn't see the Kurnai came up with an ingenious innovation. They began building small fires in the rear of their canoes in an attempt to attract the fish at night because, by that time in history, they had become rather partial to their taste.

"This exercise was only moderately successful. You see, although the fires were built on pieces of wet bark and did attract the little fish, unfortunately they also burnt quite a few canoes as well.

"The realisation that the fish were not only useful for lighting fires but also excellent tucker came about as the result of an accident. One night, while preparing to light a fire with a fish, a fisherman was distracted by the sight of an extremely good-looking woman who happened to walk past.

"Naturally, he admired and fantasized about her for a while, not realizing until too late that the fish on the end of his spear had caught alight before he'd put it into the kindling. Quickly, he plunged the fish back into the water, extinguishing the fire and saving his spear.

"While removing the fish, a piece of half-burnt flesh came away in his fingers and was still hot. Instinctively, this bloke, who would eventually be féted as a culinary genius by his tribe, naturally stuck his fingers and thumb alternately into his mouth in an attempt to administer basic first aid and cool them.

"While sucking his fingers he was amazed by their delicious flavour – which was totally unlike the way they usually tasted. Pleasantly surprised, he kept sucking until their normal taste returned – which he spat out in disgust. Of course, it didn't take him long to realise that it wasn't his fingers but the burnt fish that was delicious, so he tore the remainder of it from his spear and devoured the snack greedily.

"The word soon spread that not only were the fish ideal for lighting fires, but made excellent eating as well. Ever since that day fire fish were only left in the kindling until they burst alight then, still impaled on spears, they were extinguished and eaten."

Archie pushed back his hat and scratched his forehead. After momentarily pursing his lips in thought he pulled the brim's shadow back down to keep the sun out of his eyes.

"This presents an interesting quandary," he continued, as if thinking out loud. "Why didn't the fish re-ignite when they were taken from the water and eaten? Maybe it was because they had used up all the combustible material in their glands.

"I've often wondered why fire fish burned after an extended period out of water. It seems to me that exposure to air must have somehow activated glands that caused them to glow in order to attract mates for breeding purposes. However, if they were forced to stay out of water longer than nature intended them to, then their glands would become hotter and hotter until the fish self-combusted.

"I doubt it's possible to do a scientific study of them nowadays because they are so rare. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they are so rare that they are extinct and I was the last person to have seen one.

"Anyway, the natives became quite partial to the taste of half-cooked fire fish and spent most of their spare time devising ways to catch them. They were so successful in this endeavour that by the time the Scottish explorer, Angus McMillan, first saw the Gippsland Lakes in 1839, fire fish were becoming extremely scarce.

"In fact, they were so rare that aborigines who lived in the Lakes region had begun worshipping them – although this scarcity didn't stop any unfortunate victim that was occasionally caught from being used to light a fire and eaten.

"The harassed fish had to resort to all manner of ruses to avoid being caught. This was particularly difficult for them during their mating nights because, although they were desperate to hide from humans, the species' biological make-up forced them to leap from the water and display themselves in order to attract mates.

"Pyropisces were solitary by nature and content to live alone while remaining virtually invisible and secure from predators, but their need to procreate would eventually overcome their fear."

Archie was suddenly ambushed by a memory from his youth that he had not thought of for ages. "A bit like us human beings," he muttered to himself under his breath before resuming the story.

"They used to engage in massed breeding displays at irregular intervals. I suppose they did this due to the danger involved and so the natives wouldn't know when to organise a special hunt.

"On this night thousands of fish would rush eagerly from the depths of the lakes and skim across the surface in a brilliant display of fiery colours that attracted mates waiting expectantly below.

"The fish below the surface swam upside down, skimming the surface in unison with those above. Of course, other than their cheeks, which must have blushed beautifully, the unexposed parts of the lower partners were invisible.

"While the fish on top warmed in the air, each pair would begin gently belly-bouncing from either side of the water's surface, briefly touching and parting. The body temperature of those exposed to the air rose higher and higher until they were in danger of self-combusting.

"Suddenly, masses of eggs would appear on the water, where they glimmered like drowning fireflies before sinking to the sandy bottom and waited to hatch. Then all the fire fish dived back into the lakes to lead solitary lives once again.

"By the living ghost, that must have been a remarkable sight!" Archie commented while pondering the imagined spectacle in his mind before continuing:

"In their enthusiasm for procreating, some of the fish stayed out of the water too long. Although this fervour attracted the most dominant and suitable members of the opposite sex for breeding purposes, and might be thought to create a stronger breed of fish, unfortunately, in the case of pyropisces, it had a negative effect. While the boldest exposed themselves the longest and enhanced the depth of their colours they invariably remained too long in the air.

"The result of this bravado was that, as some of these particular pairs sped along both sides of the surface, those on top perished in a spectacular inferno, leaving only their soggy remains and the partners' singed bellies behind in the wake of their desire.

"This was the reason that, unlike other creatures, fire fish were not able to strengthen the gene pool of their species by the survival of the fittest. Thus they never progressed beyond a certain point in their evolution because the strongest pyropisces became victims of their own rashness.

"Of course, it was mayhem on the lakes when the natives realised it was the fishes' breeding night and they rushed off to hunt them.

"When the hunt was over and its surviving participants had returned to shore, many of them suffering spear wounds or burns, feasts began and corroborees were held to celebrate the hunt – and the memory of those who had drowned or been speared to death – while a future generation of would-be hunters looked on in awe from the security of their childhood.

"Due to this slaughter and the drastic depletion of their race the fish were eventually forced to dramatically alter their mating procedure. They began to only flash themselves spasmodically in the hope of attracting mates.

"Unfortunately, the safest time for them to do this was on the most miserable nights when the weather was too inclement for hunting. It was only on these nights, while the Kurnai were snuggled up in beds of possum and kangaroo skins with their dogs as hot water bottles, that fire fish took the opportunity to leap from the water.

"This alteration to their breeding program caused a major problem. Only exhibiting themselves in the foulest weather meant that their mating became perfunctory, and the illumination of their colours never had the chance of reaching the brilliance previously achieved.

"The outcome of this was that, besides having difficulty in seeing prospective partners, the displays of those that did leap from the water became less attractive. In consequence, the fish who may have bred with them often preferred to continue chewing on mouthfuls of food, or dreaming of the good old mating days, rather than go through all the bother of swimming to the surface and exposing themselves to the lousy weather just to mate with a partner they didn't find very alluring anymore.

"Even when nature got the better of them and they did mate, over time their offspring's colours became muted – like washed-out reflections of their ancestors' former glory. Despite this they still created quite a spectacle for human beings, who are used to things not being as good as they once were. Before sinking, fire fish eggs still glimmered briefly, but as though through a mist."

"The more the unique little fishes' numbers decreased, and the rarer they became, the more they were venerated by their persecutors. The natives began carving effigies of them out of wood and modelling them from clay. On special nights of celebration these were thrown into bonfires that had been lit near the lakes' shores.

"When the ceremonies were at their height selected rocks that had been collected from waterways, so they would shatter when exposed to extreme heat, were also thrown into the fires.

"The natives gathered as close as possible to the flames; every one of them hoping to be hit by a piece of the exploding rocks' fragments. There was great excitement as the rocks became hotter and hotter until they finally shattered, causing the onlookers to let out an almighty roar – especially those struck by a piece of rock!

"Anyone fortunate enough to be injured in the ceremony was overjoyed because they thought that the spirit of a fire fish had blessed them.

"To be actually killed by an exploding piece of rock was considered to be the ultimate glory. The body of that lucky person was immediately thrown into the fire."

Archie briefly wondered whether any of the sacrifices had only been knocked out and were cremated before regaining consciousness and being able to protest.

"When the fire had burned down the embers were scooped up with pieces of bark. These were then thrown into the air over the water so that they fleetingly resembled glowing fire fish eggs before being extinguished. I dare say the idea was that they were supposed to represent eggs that would hatch on the bottom of the lake and rise up to recreate the little fishes' halcyon days. Needless to say, that theory wasn't successful in practice.

"It's still unknown whether it was male or female pyropisces that took the dominant position during courting and flashed themselves above the lakes. Come to think of it, determining the sex of a fire fish would be rather difficult. You wouldn't be able to do it underwater, and you'd have to be pretty quick to examine one out of the water before it incinerated itself."

Archie chuckled at the mental picture that thought conjured up, unaware that earlier during the story's progress Harry Treasure had decided to practice the difficult art of dozing off to sleep with his eyes open in an attempt to fool long-winded yarn spinners.

Pleased that his narrative had not been interrupted for some time Archie felt confident enough in having captured his partner's attention to take a break for a moment and drink some more tea, which by this time was lukewarm. He smacked his lips and thought that life wasn't bad at all when you were in the bush telling yarns and drinking tea.

Glancing up to see if he still had the cattleman's attention Archie was gratified to see the glazed look in his eyes. He noted with satisfaction that they reminded him of similar looks in other of his audiences' eyes while he mesmerised them with his yarns. This caused him to happily resume the story.

"After the channel was dug through to the sea at Lakes Entrance in 1889, lake water became too salty for fire fish and most of them perished – although a few must have survived by swimming up rivers and creeks.

"I did hear once of a fisherman who thought he had caught something while fishing upstream in the Nicholson River because the tip of his rod jerked as if he had a bite. He reeled in his line but couldn't see any fish on the hook. The mudeye he was using for bait had a pink patch on it and was moving as if it was alive.

"Deciding to try some different bait, this bloke went to his tin and was about to dig out a worm when he heard something sizzle. Looking around, he was naturally surprised to see that his bait was on fire, and so was a fish that had materialised on the hook. As he watched, the fish burned through his line and fell to the ground where it self-combusted.

"He mentioned this strange occurrence to old Wally Clark one evening in the Metung pub. You should remember Wally, Harry. He was the bloke who trapped rabbits on your property up on the high plains during the depression. Naturally, Wally gave this fellow larry-do, and wasted his time advising him to try and lay off the grog for a while.

"The story of the burning bait and magically appearing fish was quite popular around the area for some time, although people seem to have forgotten about it nowadays. Anyway, that brings me to the reason for these scars on my hand."

Archie glanced at Harry again, still unsure whether or not to share the rest of the story with him. However, seeing what appeared to be an enthralled look on his companion's face, he turned back to the fire and could not resist resuming.

"As you know, the summer of '39 was very hot in Victoria and the countryside tinder dry. In fact the conditions were so dangerous that male crickets had stopped chirping by rubbing their wings together for fear of self-igniting.

"Unfortunately, one morning when I would have been better off staying home and helping Edna with the washing I decided to drive Mag – that was the old car we owned at the time – up into the hills and try my luck at a spot of fishing. I should have known better because the weather was far too hot to catch fish but, foolishly, I decided to give it a go.

"There were quite a few blackfish around in those days and Edna and myself were rather partial to a feed of 'em. In fact, if I hadn't said I was going after blackfish, I reckon Edna would have insisted I stay home and help her.

"Anyway, it happened that on this particular day I was fishing in my favourite blackfish stream – which shall remain nameless of course – when I noticed something that seemed to be a small flat, pinkish-coloured pebble at the bottom of a crystal-clear waterhole.

"Thinking it might be a little gemstone, I lay on my stomach, reached down and grabbed hold of what was actually a fire fish – although I didn't realise that at the time. It must have been dying otherwise it would have swum away when it saw my dirty great paw closing in on it. When I picked it up and lifted it to the surface I had the strange sensation of having hold of something invisible.

"Naturally, this struck me as curious and I was rather disconcerted – especially when I felt something start flapping around in my hand. After a while what I held began to glow, and I was surprised to see that it was a little fish.

"Not knowing anything about fire fish in those days I was fascinated as it glowed brighter and brighter with flame-like colours, as if I held a small fire in my hand. Never in my life had I seen such a thing before and couldn't wait to take it home to show Edna.

"I'd left my knife back in my creel and was on my way to get it so I could put the fish out of its misery when, to my amazement, the strange little creature burst into flames in my hand.

"Even though I was stunned by this extraordinary occurrence, what with the bush being so dry and not wanting to start a fire, I still had the presence of mind to hang on to the fish. Not surprisingly, I was experiencing rather severe pain in my palms as I rapidly tossed it back and forth from one hand to the other.

"I was determined to get back to the creek and throw the burning fish into the water so the fire could be safely extinguished. Unfortunately, in my haste I didn't notice the root of a tree poking out of the ground and tripped. This caused me to unwittingly toss the fish onto a patch of dry grass that immediately caught alight.

"The fire spread so rapidly that I had no chance of putting it out. In fact I was lucky to be able to rush back to the car and drive off before being incinerated myself. Within minutes, the bush was a roaring inferno. That was how the tragic bushfire started in that area."

Archie absentmindedly picked up a stick and stirred his memories in the fire.

"Fortunately I got home in time to evacuate Edna before our place burned to the ground. For some strange female reason, or maybe she was just in shock, I don't know, but the thing that seemed to upset Edna most was the likelihood of having the clothes and linen she'd spent all morning washing burn on the line not long after she'd finished hanging them out to dry.

"Before we escaped I managed to secure some of our valuables, including my box of wonders, down a mineshaft.

"When we reached the relative safety of Briagolong Edna and I went to the pub. Because I have weak lungs due to being gassed in the First World War I wasn't able to help fight the fires.

"While we were having a drink I was tempted to show the other people gathered there the blisters on my palms and tell of my encounter with the strange little fish, but decided not to. Everyone was in such a highly-charged emotional state that they probably wouldn't have believed what really happened. In fact they may have blamed me for making up the story as an excuse for starting the fire while boiling the billy, or some other unlikely reason."

That was the end of Archie Hair's story about the Gippsland fire fish. Harry Treasure had been so successful in practising sleeping with his eyes open that, unfortunately, he had given himself away by snoring as well. Archie was surprised when he heard the snore, then became annoyed when he realised that the cattleman had fallen asleep.

He vowed that never again would he share a story with someone incapable of appreciating it. This was a vow he soon forgot.

One thing did please Archie – at least he did not have to explain to Harry that he knew so much about fire fish because a Listening Tree had told him.

The only other people Archie told about fire fish back in those days were his immediate family and his adopted step-grandson, Jess Morley. Although Jess had the greatest respect for Archie and realised that he probably knew more about bush secrets than anyone else, he found that particular story difficult to believe. At least he found it difficult to believe until one day, a few years after Archie's death.

*

Jess was helping Harry's grandson, Doug Treasure, and a few other drovers bring a mob of cattle down from the Dargo High Plains before the first snowfall of winter.

One evening, while his mates were setting up camp, Jess had gone to fill a billycan with water from a creek so they could brew up some tea. He had taken after old Archie in feeling that a cup of tea after a hard day's work was one of life's most enjoyable pleasures.

After filling the billy, Jess was on his way back to camp when the water inexplicably started splashing, as if being disturbed by an invisible hand. In the gloom he didn't notice pink cheeks thrashing around beneath the surface.

Surprised and confused, he instinctively emptied the billy's contents onto the ground and returned to the creek to refill the can.

While on his way back to the camp once again Jess heard an unusual sound. Looking around he saw what appeared to be a small fish glowing and sizzling on the ground. It dawned on him that what he was witnessing was probably the same type of fish Archie had talked about. Then it burst into flames.

The cattleman watched in awe until all that remained was a small pile of ashes.

When they had cooled he put the ashes in a pocket of his Drizabone. Having inherited Archie's box of wonders he intended putting them in a small jar and including them in the treasured collection.

Jess decided not to say anything to his companions about the strange experience because he doubted they would believe him. But he couldn't wait to tell his wife, Cynthia, and their son, Gordon, and he regretted not being able to share the experience with Archie.

Since that day, no one else has mentioned having encountered a fire fish although, over the years, a few people have reported seeing flashes of fire glowing at night above the more inaccessible parts of rivers and streams in the Gippsland bush.

A biochemist once explained the reason for this strange phenomenon as bursts of gas, emitted by rotting matter, bubbling to the surface and inexplicably catching alight. Maybe the biochemist was right, however, that does not explain Jess Morley's jar of ashes, nor Archie Hair's story and the scars on the palms of his hands.

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Angus McMillan with guides Combon Johnny (left) & Jimmy Gibber

While attending a farewell dinner being held in his honour after resigning from the Victorian parliament in 1860, Angus McMillan recounted some of his experiences as an explorer of Gippsland.

During these reminiscences, the Scotsman mentioned an unusual ceremony he had witnessed being performed one night by a native tribe on the shore of Lake Wellington. Apparently he and his party of fellow explorers were camped in the bush when they noticed a fire's glow in the distance.

Angus decided to investigate, but knowing how wary the natives were when confronted by white men (especially since the time they had seen him dismount from his horse and thought that he and the horse had magically become two separate parts of the one creature) he was cautious in his approach.

After a while Angus heard eerie wailing sounds coming from the direction of the fire's glow, as if the tribe was in mourning. Creeping closer he came to a clearing, in the centre of which a bonfire was burning.

Around the fire aborigines were chanting and stamping their feet while waving burning sticks. Others were throwing what appeared to be carvings and rocks into the flames. The explorer had never witnessed such a sight as that before and, secure in the cover of the bush, watched in fascination as the celebration, or mourning, he was not sure what it was, became more frenetic.

Suddenly, so abruptly in fact that Angus thought for a moment his hiding place had been discovered, a hush descended upon those gathered around the fire. From the shadows of the bush appeared two men carrying a large painted rock. The crowd parted, allowing the men to approach the fire unimpeded.

As if they had been assisted by the inhalation of the expectant breath of those around them, the men lifted the rock above their heads and then, to the sounds of great rejoicing, tossed it into the flames.

Immediately, all of the participants, young and old, male and female, rushed towards the fire and gathered around it as close as they could without burning themselves, as if waiting for something important to happen.

The Scotsman was intrigued, and wondered what he was witnessing.

As time passed and the flames died down due to a lack of fuel, those gathered around the fire stopped rejoicing and became restless. The longer nothing seemed to happen, the more restless they became. Eventually the natives began drifting off dejectedly into the night.

What Angus did not know was that the large rock tossed so expectantly into the fire had not exploded as it was meant to, and those waiting in anticipation of a blessing from the spirit of the fire fish were disappointed at not having been injured or killed.

Because the Scotsman came from a different culture, having a rock explode in his face would only have caused him inconvenience and pain, at the very least. He would never have accepted that any injury it caused might have been a blessing from the spirit of a fish, especially a fish that could burst alight.

One evening, some years later, Angus was thrown from his horse while riding near the Avon River. A flash of fire suddenly appearing above the water had spooked the horse. At the same time, unbeknown to Angus, a strange-looking creature that seemed to be a cross between a cat and a duck hurriedly scrambled from the river.



While Sidney Block continued gazing, as if hypnotised, into the flames' watery depths the stranger briefly wondered whether to share a long story about Archie with him. Because it was one of his favourites he could not resist.

After putting more wood on the fire he sat back on his swag, gazed at the new-born sparks whirling up in the brevity of their existence before disappearing into the night and, unaware of a slater desperately scurrying along a piece of wood he had placed on the fire, began the story of the wee bards.

THE WEE BARDS

Archie Hair enjoyed writing poetry while sitting in the bush so one fine spring morning he made a flask of tea and, with a pencil and notepad in his coat pocket and Bonny the dog by his side, set off to visit one of his favourite places.

It was an area of ancient beauty and leafy calm that the old man would visit whenever he felt in need of respite from the pressures of life. There were pleasant experiences and magical journeys through his imagination available in places such as that, where poems seemed to write themselves and the wonderment of Nature was unimpeded by other human beings and the shackles of everyday concerns.

After walking along the valley of the Freestone for a while the old man and his dog turned down an overgrown track and headed towards the creek. While the twitter and call of unseen birds drifted through the air, the gurgling of water over rocks cheered Archie's heart and sang to him as he neared the peaceful place of dreams.

When they reached the creek Archie sat down on the warm sand and leaned back against a rock. Bonny, knowing instinctively that on occasions such as these the old man preferred to be alone, wandered off to a grassy hollow in the shade of a wattle bush and lay down to drift into a canine dreaming.

Archie unscrewed the cap from his flask and poured tea into an enamel mug. After gratefully taking a sip he smacked his lips in appreciation. The liquid relaxed his tired muscles and soothed his spirit, allowing him the freedom to drift and dream.

He took another sip and felt the restraints of daily cares begin to slip from his consciousness; freeing his imagination and allowing it to float away to places of enchantment.

The old man wondered where the things he had experienced previously in places such as this came from. Did he magically conjure them up like a wizard of old? Or were they always there, waiting in his mind to be set free?

Archie never had to close his eyes to witness the amazing scenes projected by his imagination; they took shape as if they actually existed – and he was not convinced that they did not.

On the opposite bank a shelf of rock glistened as the sun shone on it, while a water boatman insect rowed erratically around a sheltered pool.

Grey, coarse-haired lichen clung to the shady side of a rotting tree whose long life ended abruptly many years previously when it had fallen, crashing to the ground; its roots ripped from the earth that had nourished it from the time it had been a seed.

That seed had burrowed there back in the far-off days when native Braiakualung people still trod the creek's banks. Now it lay as a gift from the past, a bridge over the sparkling water. (*Author's note: Floods have since carried the fallen tree away.*)

In the distance a wallaby thumped soft, twig-snapping bounds while a wattle blossom fell, golden as silence, onto the water and floated past the old man who was drifting into his imagination and did not notice.

Archie drank some more tea and then pressed the mug into the sand so that it did not fall over. He took out his notebook and pencil and let his mind wander. He had just begun composing a poem when he heard the approaching sound of two arguing Scottish voices.

"Och, ye ken I'm the best poet that ever lived."

"Nay yer noo, I am. Ye're nothing but a plagiarising liar. Ye steal my ideas and then use them for yer own poems."

"Dinna call me a liar, ye liar!"

"Just look at yer wee nose, 'tis getting smaller each time ye tell a lie. Soon ye'll have nay nose at all – and good riddance, I say!"

"I have the noblest nose in the whole of Gippsland."

"That's nothing, mine is the noblest in the whole universe."

"Hah, yers is only a pathetic imitation of a nose. Just look at the fine purple hue of mine, will ye?"

Out of the bush came two of the strangest little men Archie had ever seen. If it were not for their clothing he would have had trouble telling them apart. They looked like identical twins with huge noses that obscured a majority of the rest of their faces. They also had moustacheless beards and tufts of grey hair sticking out from under tam o' shanters.

The little men stood about 18 inches tall and carried bottles of what the labels proclaimed to be 'poemjuice'. They were dressed in grey collarless shirts, green waistcoats and brown jackets. Tartan socks hung over the tops of their dusty black boots.

They wore kilts that were too large for them and were held up by lengths of twine. One little man wore a red neckerchief and the other one wore blue. The only other distinguishing features were their different coloured tartans.

However, it was difficult for Archie to take much notice of anything other than their noses, for they were remarkable. Each one was about half the size of its owner's head and tinged reddish-purple with lots of veins, lumps and tiny craters on it – putting Archie in mind of the moon's surface. From all four nostrils sprouted grey hairs that appeared to have been singed.

Suddenly, the little men noticed Archie watching them, and quickly hid the bottles behind their backs



"Ye'll noo get yer hands on any of our drink, if that's what ye're thinking," said one of the little men aggressively, not noticing Archie's flask and mug.

"That's right," agreed the other. "Ye should have brought yer own if ye wanted a drink." Then he saw the notebook and said indignantly: "And ye've another thought coming if ye think ye're going to plagiarize my poems!"

"I don't need to copy poems. I write my own," responded Archie.

This statement caused both little men to burst out laughing. When their hilarity had subsided, without giving any explanation as to what had caused it, one of them asked: "Anyway, who are ye?"

"I'm Archie," replied the old man. "And who might you two be?"

The little man with the blue neckerchief tried to stand taller than he could, thrust out his chin and, with a defiant gleam in his eye, said:

"I'm just a wee lad's dirty sock.

I wished I were a shoe,

But I don't care much for getting wet

Or treading in doggies' poo."

"Ach, dinna take any notice of him," said the little man with the red neckerchief, dismissing his companion with a wave of a hand, although he still kept his bottle held firmly behind his back. "He thinks he's a poet, but as ye could tell by that pathetic wee versie, he's even less talented than a dirty sock. We are the wee bards. I'm Hamish, the famous poet, and he's Dougal, who is of nay consequence. Ye must be pleased to make my acquaintance."

"That's right, I am. How did you know?" asked Archie.

"Och, a poet knows everything worth knowing," said Hamish, with a nonchalant shrug. "But making my acquaintance won't do ye any good if it's the drink ye're after. Ye'll nay be getting any of mine."

"Mine, neither," butted in the little man called Dougal.

"Don't worry," said Archie, reaching down and picking up his flask and mug. "I brought my own, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Hamish and Dougal turned and looked at each other as if the man was mad, or at least well on the way to insanity.

"Are ye sure ye're who ye say ye are?" enquired Dougal, dubiously.

"Well, to be truthful, I can't be positive, but I think I am who I think I am at the moment," replied the old man before taking another sip of tea.

"Ach, nay," said Hamish with a disgusted look on his face. "Dinna tell me ye're another one o' them humans searching for themselves. I canna stand all yer long faces and questions. Bloody great miseries ye are. Did ye have to come here? Couldna ye go and look for yerself elsewhere instead of disturbing an innocent gentleman in the pursuit of art?"

"Hoots, ye're noo a gentleman, Hamish," Dougal protested. "Ye're just a thief and a liar, stealing a man's ideas for yer poems. Dinna ye have any shame, mon?"

"Ah, ye're just jealous of the magnificent thoughts I think in my head and the wondrous poems I make from them," replied Hamish, dismissively. He turned to Archie and said, "I bet ye canna wait to hear some of my versies, can ye, young feller?"

Archie was a bit taken aback at being called a 'young feller,' in fact it was difficult for him to recall when he had been one. However, knowing that, as in everything, in the realm of imagination time was relative he did not bother making a point of it.

"Of course ye canna," continued Hamish without waiting for an answer. "It might help ye in the search for yerself – although by the look of ye ye've got a terrible long way to go."

"Will ye look at the wee nosie on him!" laughed Dougal. "I'd be ashamed to be seen exposing something as small as that for all to see."

"Ye do it all the time, so I dinna see what ye have to laugh about," responded Hamish spitefully.

"That's enough," said Archie, emphatically, sensing that another argument was brewing. Not wanting the peace of his afternoon to be disturbed he reassured them: "I'd love to hear both of you recite your poems."

"Go on, Dougal," said Hamish. "Resuscitate another of yer pathetic wee versies for him first. It will make him appreciate mine all the more."

Dougal ignored the slur and proudly recited:

"There was a young man from Meerlieu Who hit himself on his head with a shoe But, to make matters worse, He yelled out with a curse And then did it with the other one, too!"

"Well," he asked the old man. "What do ye think of that sample of my brilliance, young man?"

"Very commendable," commented Archie.

"Ah, that's nothing," said Hamish. "Wait 'til ye try to wrap yer feeble human brain around this masterpiece." He took a drink from his bottle and then recited:

"There lives a man noo far from here, Who sticks his fingers in his ears And then complains that he canna hear. Now the thing to do, as we all know, Is to stick yer fingers up yer nose."



"That's disgusting!" cried Dougal. "Ye'll never make a poet."

" 'Tis noo disgusting, ye fool. Ye just dinna understand art," responded Hamish angrily, stamping his foot on the ground and startling a ladybird that had just alighted on a nearby branch. Within the ground a worm tunnelled blindly, disregarding a minor earthquake.

Dougal pursed his lips in thought and stroked his beard. A light flashed in his eyes and, enthusiastically, he said:

"I knew a Christian who took great care In blowing smoke rings through the air. On Sundays, when his mouth was closed, He'd piously blow them from his nose."

"That's very clever," said Archie, noticing that the wee bards' brogues were not so distinctive when they recited.

"Ah, that's only for cretins!" snorted Hamish in disgust. "Wait 'til ye hear my nature poems." "He doesna want to hear them," interrupted Dougal, concerned because, although he would never admit it, he liked Hamish's nature poems and wished he had written them himself.

"Of course he does," said Hamish. "I'm beginning to think to myself that there might be a scrap of intelligence inside that bald head, even if he does keep it well hidden, as if it's a secret treasure he's afraid to show anyone for fear they'd steal it.

"Ye dinna have to worry, mon," he commented, looking at Archie. "What's inside yer head is safe. There's nay one desperate enough to want to steal it – unless it was another human being of course. By the way, where did yer hair go? Did ye worry it away by fruitlessly searching for yerself?"

Archie could not understand why he was imagined to be bald as well as young and was about to protest when Hamish continued:

"Och, never mind. It canna be important, except to yerself of course and that's of nay importance to anyone else. Now, where was I before yer bald head interrupted me? Ah, yes, I recollect what I was about to impart to ye." He cleared his throat, looked meaningfully at Archie, and recited:

"'Tis boring watching gum trees growing by the creek I havena seen them grow at all, And I've been watching for a week."

Hamish waited for Archie to applaud, but Dougal butted in: "My turn!" he shouted.

"Wait!" protested Hamish, infuriated that the bald young man had not had an opportunity to show his appreciation. "I have to do another nature poem. Anyway, ye did two first."

"Well, get a move on with it then," replied Dougal, impatiently. "After that we go back to the rules."

Hamish looked at the trees, which did not appear to be taking any notice of him, and recited:

"'My goodness,' said the ant, 'Gum trees grow so high.' 'Rubbish!' said the eagle, Soaring in the sky."

The little man, lost in the pride of his imagined brilliance, continued looking at the trees while Dougal wasted no time in taking the opportunity to recite one of his poems.

"Here's one especially for human beings, although I doubt they have the intelligence to comprehend it:

How little there is I understand, How much there is to see. How short the time I've left to search The incredible world of me."

Archie thought about how true the sentiments expressed in the poem were, and how far too many people wasted their lives, never even attempting to search their own incredible world. Not only did they waste their lives but harmed others through their ignorance.

He did not dwell for long on the thought though because he realised that one of the little men was talking, and the voice was growing faint due to the momentary distraction of his mind. Archie returned his concentration to what was being said. It sounded as if the bards were duelling with poems. Hamish was reciting:

"The caterpillar looked at a butterfly Fluttering through the sky, Then he turned to his mate And said: "There but for fate Could have gone you or I'."

Immediately Dougal responded with:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall And winked at the farmer's daughter, But then he fell down And broke open his crown 'Cos his boots were full of water.

Quick as a flash the girl ran away With noo a twinge of regret. Back home she ran For a frying pan To make a fresh omelette."

Not to be outdone, his opponent launched in with:

"Young Gerald was a tadpole Who turned into a frog, Then leapt from the water And sat upon a log.

He was so astonished At what he had become That he decided to jump back in again And congratulate his Mum.

But a kookaburra saw him And said: 'Goodness gracious me, I do believe young Gerald Has grown big enough for tea!' "



Before Dougal had the opportunity to open his mouth, Hamish continued with another poem:

"'Hullo, hullo,'
Said the short-sighted crow,
'What is it that I see?
Why, 'tis a big, juicy worm
Who soon will learn
That 'tis going to be my tea.'

After a victory loop
The crow swiftly swooped
Down to the shore of Swan Lake.
It grabbed the worm in its beak
But let out a shriek
When it was bitten by a snake."

"That's noo fair," protested Dougal. "Ye did two poems. Now I'm going to do two as well," Without waiting for a reply he proceeded, unaware that he was actually reciting a nature poem:

"The flea sat on a dingo's back And wailed: 'Why am I so small? To be as tiny as I am Seems to have nay worth at all.'

'We all have our problems,' Said the dingo to the flea. 'How could I support ye If ye were as big as me?'"

Seeing his protagonist take a deep breath Dougal yelled out: "I've got one more to go." Not to be thwarted, but realising it was not one of his better poems, he blurted out:

"There was a hairdresser from Sale Who was frequently heard to bewail That his toupe, without fail, Would blow off in a gale – So he hammered it on with a nail."

"If that's the best ye can do," said Hamish scornfully, "ye may as well give up." Before Dougal could protest at the insult his opponent recited:

"'Hullo,' said the cockatoo.
'G'day,' replied the gang gang.
'Was it ye I saw on Tuesday
In a tree at Lang Lang?'

'No,' said the cockatoo.
'It must have been my brother.
I had to stay home on Tuesday
And crack some nuts for Mother'."

And once again he recited another poem before his frustrated opponent could begin.

"A raindrop fell into the creek And, when it felt the water,

Said: 'Hullo Mum, I must be yer son.'

'No,' said the creek, 'ye're my daughter'."

Dougal was furious. "Ye cheat," he bellowed in indignation. "Ye ken the rules are one poem at a time each. Anyway, I bet ye canna beat this one:

There was a ewe called Godiva

Who was courted by a ram known as Ivor.

But, when shorn of her frock,

He got such a shock

He found that he couldna abide her."

Dougal was so impressed with his poem that he bowed and then, lifting up the sides of his kilt, curtsied for good measure.

Archie began to feel overwhelmed by all the poetry and his eyelids started drooping.

"I think that's enough of yer silly wee versies," said Hamish. "Canna ye see ye're making the young man's eyes glaze over with boredom?"

"Nay, I have one more cultural delight for him," said Dougal, not at all discouraged. If he thought a rock could hear him, he would have recited to it, whether it understood his poems or not:

"Last night I stepped into a stare
Then kept on walking through the air.
There was nay-one here and nay-one there –
In fact there was nay-one anywhere.
Suddenly I felt an awful dread
And screamed out loud inside my head,
But I never heard what I never said,
'Cos I was already asleep in bed!"

"There ye go, Hamish, what do ye think of that one?" asked the little man, proudly.

"I'll tell ye what I think of it," replied his companion, glaring at him:

"The clouds are white, the sky is blue,

When I tread in a cowpat, I think of ye!"

"Listening to ye," responded Dougal, "makes me think that:
"Tis good to know that a chicken is a useful bird.
The more I think of that the less ye seem absurd."

"Ah, that's pathetic," said Hamish. "Try this one on for size:
Although time has had its way with ye,
Wasting yer hopes and memories,
Wasting yer body and wasting yer dreams
'Til nothing is ever quite what it seems.
Wasting yer wit and wasting yer money
'Til everything's a laugh, but nothing is funny.
Ye dinna care, ye'll have revenge,
Ye'll waste the time ye've left to spend."

When he had finished, Hamish proudly danced a few steps of a jig, jumped in the air and clicked his heels. Then he took a bow and, to the other little man's outrage, recited another poem:

"Hop, hop, hop went the kangaroo Leaping the way kangaroos do, Across the paddock and over a fence With heart beating fast and features intense.

Although longing to rest, it dare not stop For it had to flee with each bounding hop – Just the same as you would do If a hunter was shooting at you."

Dougal was furious that his partner kept breaking the rules by reciting out of turn so he recited continuously. Hamish did the same – neither poet taking any notice of what the other was saying.

Archie felt dazed by the continuous poetry. He reached over and scooped a handful of cool water from the creek and splashed it onto his face. The effect was delightfully refreshing and made him feel that he had heard enough poetry for the time being.

He tried to think a different scene into his mind, but found it difficult because the little men would not stop reciting and distracting him from the edge of his consciousness. He called to the poets who were now standing nose to nose, trying to outpoem each other.



"I think I've heard enough poetry for one day," he declared.

Both of the little men stopped in midpoem, turned their noses and looked at him in disgust – as if he had uttered a profanity. Their glares were so intense and scornful that Archie felt he should feel ashamed.

"What do ye mean, ye think ye've heard enough poetry?" hissed Dougal through gritted teeth. "'Tis noo possible to hear enough poetry. Even an eternity of lifetimes would noo be enough."

"Ach," said Hamish, scornfully. "That's typical of humans. They're all afraid of hearing the truth, and ye ken there's nay truth like poetry." He looked at Archie with distaste. "Do ye think we recite day in and day out just to hear the sound of our own voices? Of course not! We do it to try and bring ye humans some enlightenment. We wouldna bother if we didna have such generosity of spirit."

The more he thought about human stupidity the angrier the little man became. He thought of something else which made him angrier still. "Dinna ye ken how vital poetry is?" he blustered, getting up such a head of steam that he could not stop himself from launching into another poem:

"And dinna forget young Johnny," he bellowed.

"Who to his mother said,
'Mummy, I dinna want to go to bed.
I want to be a bird and fly
Up and away, into the sky.'

His mother said she'd never heard Anything really so absurd. So Johnny, never doubting that he might, Opened the window and flew into the night."

"I'll try not to forget," Archie sighed, thinking he might have caught himself in a trap of his own creation and felt that he had to let what was happening run its course.

"And remember," Dougal butted in, not to be outdone, so caught up in the moment that he did not realise he was creating another nature poem:

"'Tis good to remember the birds in the air When yer gold ye're storing. For ye canna buy one gram of the sky Wherein those birds are soaring."

"Remember also," said Hamish:

"'Tis grand to walk on a sunny day Beside a rippling stream, It can make ye think of strawberries And lovely fresh whipped cream."

"Thank you," said the old man, realising he could not blame the little men for their poetry, considering it was his fault, or so he thought, that they were there. Telling them that he thought he had heard enough poetry seemed to spur them on to new heights of enthusiasm.

Archie's gaze strayed away from the diminutive poets while he had that thought and looked through a bush at the mottled sky. Suddenly he felt something tugging at one of his trouser legs. He looked down and saw Hamish pulling on it.

"Dinna ye ken," the little man said in an aggrieved tone, "'tis bad manners noo listening to a poet when he's reciting to ye?" When Hamish realised that he had Archie's attention he said, earnestly:

"There's another thing ye should always ken, Something that canna be doubted. Nay matter how much noise ye make, The truth doesna have to be shouted." When Hamish had finished Dougal looked up from a flower he had picked and recited:

"Sanity found me Sunday, Deep in conversation With a friendly little garden gnome And a charming pink carnation.

We didna waste our time Discussing mankind's woes, But talked with fascination, About the nakedness of toes."

The longer Archie listened to the little men the more real they seemed to become. He stood up to get rid of a cramp he could feel beginning to tighten a muscle in one of his legs. He was always fascinated by what his mind was capable of and thought that a fertile and vivid imagination could be one of life's blessings – so long as it did not mean forever listening to poetry.

"Before ye go," said Hamish, under the impression that Archie was about to leave, not realising that he may cease to exist once the old man did go, "I'd better tell ye what happened to me tomorrow in case ye havena been paying attention to my wisdom and still have trouble finding yerself."

He took another sip from his bottle, wiped his lips on a sleeve of his jacket and said, "Och a wee dram of that would make a rabbit pee on a dingo. Now, where was I before I interrupted myself? Ah, yes."

He looked at Archie, who had decided that he had no choice but to settle in for the duration of his imagination. "Brace yerself for this masterpiece, Mr Whoever-ye-think-ye-are:

About the middle of next week
I went down to Toora fair,
But noo long after I arrived
I found I wasna there.
Now, being sane and sound of mind,
I felt a certain apprehension,
If I dinna arrive before I left
I wouldna get the pension.

With this thought I began to sweat, I began to curse and mutter, I tore my hair that wasna there And my heart began to flutter. 'Tis just a state of mind, thought I, I'll return before tomorrow, And if I dinna arrive by then, I'll see who I can borrow.

But tomorrow came and went away Without a sign of me.

Dear God, I thought in anguish,

Wherever can I be?

Then I spied an old man

Talking to a tree

And I asked in desperation If perhaps he had seen me.

He smiled and said: 'Of course, my son, Ye be everyone I know.
There's a bit of ye in all of us
Although it might not show.
So dinna deny a one of us,
No matter who we are,
For we're all a part of everything
Upon this fragile star'."

After he had finished reciting, Hamish said to Archie, "There, ye can go now. I feel inspiration tapping on my brain so I need privacy to write another masterpiece."

"Thank you both very much," said Archie with relief. "I hope to meet you both again one day."

"We doubt ye will," replied Hamish.

"Och, but we wish ye well," said Dougal, feeling a twinge of sympathy for the man. "Although, by the look on yer face and the size of yer nose, 'tis going to be a bit of a struggle." A gleam came into his eyes and he looked at Hamish's nose, then turned and asked: "Before ye go, who do ye think has the most noble nose of the two of us?"

Archie had not expected his imagination to put him in such a predicament. He scratched his forehead, as if that would aid his thought process. Because the little men's huge egos had annoyed him and he wanted to deflate them, something perverse made him say: "I think you both have very noble noses, in fact, they are almost the noblest noses I have ever had the good fortune to feast my eyes upon."

Dougal and Hamish were stunned. Had they heard correctly? Had he said 'almost the noblest noses'?

"What do ye mean, **almost**?" they shouted together, aggressively, while anger glinted in their eyes.

The old man was enjoying taunting the little would-be poets, so he decided to get another jibe in while he had the opportunity.

"Well, there's a fellow called Jerry Rose," he replied, 'who has the most magnificent proboscus I have ever seen. In fact it is so famous that someone once wrote a poem about it."

Maybe it was only the heat of the moment that made him continue in a foolhardy manner, causing him to recite:

"There's a legend that will go down in story and song Around the world and back to Briagolong. For we have a proboscis so fine and so grand, That it is the best in all of the land.

The Spaniards may have Cyrano de Bergerac And the French a hump on Quasimodo's back, But us, we've been blessed, 'though why, Gawd knows, By a miracle of nature that we call 'Rosey's nose.'

Once, while Rosey was lying asleep by the road, A drunk driver swerved and drove up that nose. 'That's funny,' he thought, 'there's no tunnel around here,' So he quickly reversed – and swore off the beer. There are folk the world over quite sick with fear Of mad politicians with their bombs nuclear, But when the holocaust comes we'll run helter skelter To our friend Rosey's portable air raid shelter.

There's many a brave man been known to freeze, Screaming, 'Lord help us now, Rosey's going to sneeze!' Oh, the National Trust should give it an 'A' classification, For it's a credit indeed to our once mighty nation.

Well, a nose is a nose is a nose, I suppose, But we have the miracle of a nose on a Rose And he follows it everywhere it goes. Oh, it's a good old friend is Rosey's nose."

The devil in Archie made him smile and take a bow when he had finished the poem, but it went unnoticed. The little men just stood where they were, aghast. Their mouths hung open and shocked expressions filled their eyes, while the proud noses appeared to deflate. The poemjuice bottles slid from their hands and fell to the ground. It was as if the man's words had destroyed their spirits and turned their bodies to stone.

There was not a sound from the bush, except for the gurgling of the creek – and even that seemed to be trying to sneak down the valley as quietly as possible in deference to the little men's feelings. The bards just stood where they were, with collapsed faces, as if they had nothing left to live for.

Archie felt appalled at what he had done. He hadn't really meant to hurt them as much as he obviously had. He only wanted to take them down a peg or two. It was the enormity of their egos that made him respond the way he had.

As the old man looked at Hamish and Dougal, and the ugly once-proud noses that sagged over their open mouths, he was ashamed at belittling what they seemed to treasure most.

What did it matter to him if they had to believe they had the biggest noses in the world? They had not harmed anyone and besides they did not even exist – although Archie was beginning to have his doubts on that issue. He found it strange that he was going to apologise to what he considered were figments of his imagination, but he knew that he would always feel guilty if he did not.

"I'm very sorry," he said to the sad little stone-like statues that would not have seemed out of place on a suburban front lawn if they had not looked so forlorn. "I only said that to hurt your feelings because I was jealous of your talent and your noses. Rosey's nose is even smaller than mine. In fact, I have never seen noses that could compare with yours. They are, indeed, the noblest noses in the world and you must be very proud of them."

"We knew it! We knew it!" cried the little men, suddenly coming to life and jumping up and down; their noses proudly erect once more. They were so happy they forgot their animosity towards each other and danced around together hand in hand, skipping and jumping in circles on the creek bank.

The bush came alive with birdsong once again and the water flowing past resumed its normal gurgling. Archie felt pleased and amused – even the afternoon seemed to smile in his heart.

Eventually, the dance slowed and then stopped as Dougal and Hamish ran out of breath. The little poets went back to where their bottles lay, mercifully unbroken and magically not having spilt a drop of liquid. They picked them up and drank a toast to their noses and good fortune.

"'Twas a terrible thing ye did," said Dougal, addressing Archie while wiping a few stray drops of poemjuice from his beard.

"Aye," agreed Hamish. "And to try doing it in verse was even worse. Dinna ye ken that poetry is the soul speaking to ye? And ye should always respect yer soul."

"He'll never make a poet, anyway," Dougal said, scornfully. "Only dreamers are poets and he wouldna recognise a dream if he fell in one."

"This might come as a surprise to you but I am a dreamer," Archie said defensively, trying not to get annoyed again.

"Hah!" said Hamish. "If ye're a dreamer, which I highly doubt, then would ye do us a favour and kindly dream yerself away from here."

"Yes, dream yerself elsewhere and take yer tiny nose with ye. Canna ye see 'tis making Hamish jealous?" the other little poet said, spitefully.

"Making who jealous?" replied Hamish angrily. "I dinna care if that Rosey feller has the third largest nose in the world, ye still come a poor second Dougal because mine is, without a doubt, the noblest nose ye're ever likely to see in all yer dreamings." He then untied his neckerchief and began proudly polishing his nose, provoking Dougal even more.

"Mine is the noblest," protested Dougal, and his nose began to flush violently. Archie was amazed to see sparks begin spluttering from it.

Hamish's temper rose as well and his nose also began sparking while he re-tied his neckerchief.

Both of the noses appeared to take on lives of their own. Veins pulsated, capillaries burst, sparks fizzed and what looked like cinders drifted away on the breeze. Wisps of smoke appeared from all four nostrils and Archie was sure he could smell something burning, as if the nasal hair was being singed.

"That's it!" yelled Dougal to his opponent. "Ye've made me grumpy. Ye're really for it now Hamish. This is yer last chance. Do ye admit that I have the noblest nose?"

"Never!" his adversary cried. "Ye're about to regret yer ignorance." Hamish turned around and said: "Where's that streak of human misery who started all this?" Seeing Archie, who was trying hard not to laugh, he said: "Here, make yerself useful for a change and hold my jacket while I teach this fool a lesson."

"Hold mine as well," demanded Dougal.

The wee bards hastily took off their jackets and flung them at the old man, who picked them up and put them on a rock. Then each bard reached behind his back and withdrew a rosella tail feather from the twine around his waist.

Holding the feather sword-like in front of him, Dougal growled: "This is yer last chance, Hamish, do ye admit that I have the noblest nose?"

"Never!" Hamish hissed. "Let's be having ye, mon!"

They faced each other with the feathers outstretched.

"Ye and yer knobbly wee nose are going to be sorry!" sneered Hamish, rolling up the sleeve of his sword arm.

"Ye have the gall to call that thing on yer face a nose? I was thinking to myself that it must be a mosquito bite," replied Dougal scornfully while also rolling up a sleeve.



The little men circled warily, staring into each other's eyes. Suddenly Dougal lunged and got in a strike to Hamish's ribs. Hamish slashed at his opponent's legs in return, causing him to leap out of the way. Dougal rallied and was about to stab Hamish in the stomach when he trod on one of his bootlaces and fell over.

"Ha, ha. I've got ye now," cried Hamish, about to strike out with a vicious slash towards the other little man's head. Unfortunately for him a blade of grass tickled his nose before he could deliver the blow and stopped him in his tracks.

The wee bard just stood there, unable to defend himself, as a sneeze welled up in his nose. His eyes began to water and he wiped them with his neckerchief.

"Na, naa, na, naa!" Dougal taunted gleefully as he tied his bootlace and then arose, waving his feather wildly. He did not realise that his intended victim was about to sneeze and, to make the situation worse, he jabbed Hamish's nose. That was enough to free the sneeze.

"Ahh, ahhh, ahhhh..."

Dougal suddenly saw the danger he was in and tried to run for shelter behind the nearest tree, but before he could get there Hamish sneezed. It was a sneeze of such intensity that the force of it knocked both bards off their feet.

Hamish was only blown back onto the grass but Dougal was slammed into the tree he had intended hiding behind. His tam o' shanter fell from his head, revealing that the only hair growing there was that which had stuck out from beneath the cap. The rest of his head was bald.

Hamish stood up quickly. He had the advantage now that his sneeze was out of the way. He levelled the feather at his opponent.

Although stunned by the force of his collision with the tree, Dougal picked up his cap, put it back on his head, and struggled gamely to his feet while preparing to ward off the attack. He managed to parry the first thrust, but the second poked him in an eye.

"That's it!" he roared. "Ye've made me really grumpy now," and charged at his opponent with one watery eye closed and his nose sparking furiously.

Hamish sidestepped nimbly and assisted Dougal in his headlong rush as he passed by kicking his backside. The kick, and his own momentum, carried Dougal, still flailing the air with his weapon, to the water's edge and threw him in.

His nose submerged first in a sizzling frenzy, while bubbles and steam clouded the rest of his body as it followed the nose into the creek. He recovered quickly and stood up waist-deep in the water, then squelched ashore. Steam rose from his momentarily extinguished nose but his anger was unabated.

"That wasna fair!" he bellowed with rage. "Ye ken that's noo in the rules. I'll get ye for that, ye cheat!"

Dougal attempted to charge Hamish once again. Unfortunately, the saturated kilt clinging to his legs impeded his progress, giving Hamish plenty of time to defend himself.

The momentum of the fight increased with Dougal's rage. It did not take long for his nose to dry out sufficiently for the fizzing of sparks to once again reflect the depth of his emotion.

The adversaries hacked, slashed, thrust, poked, parried, jabbed and stabbed with the feathers. Their fury was so great that at one stage their nasal hairs caught alight and the noses had to be rushed off and dunked in the creek – almost incinerating the water boatman that had rowed over to investigate the commotion.

The little men continued the battle, although their vision was impaired for a while by the sizzling noses steaming in front of their eyes.

Archie noticed that the sparks had ignited a few small grass fires. He stamped on them before they got out of control. He could imagine the looks on the faces of the members of the Briagolong Country Fire Authority if he tried to explain to them how a bushfire had started there.

When the fight was at its most furious, the old man even had to fill his hat with water and throw it over the combatants to put out a fire at their feet – although they did not appear to notice. He wondered if he would find patches of burnt grass the next time he visited that place.

High up in a gnarled old gum tree, a sulphur-crested cockatoo's black beady eyes glared down, delighted by the antics below. With wings half-extended and crest erect, it enthusiastically bobbed its head up and down, screeching encouragement while hopping from foot to foot.

A lyrebird watched intently from the bush and practised Scottish swear words with which to seduce a mate. It also tried a few steps of the strange dance the little men were doing but found them too complicated.

An emu strutted past, pretending to be disdainful of the proceedings, but it was secretly jealous of Dougal's and Hamish's fiery beaks.

Archie was fascinated by what he was witnessing and felt it well worth all the poetry he had to put up with. Eventually the combatants only had enough energy left to stand and try to tickle each other with their feathers, noses being the preferred targets.

The nose tickles made them sneeze, although weariness had caused the sneezes to lose most of their force and did not blow either of the bards over but only briefly distracted the sneezer.

Dougal struggled out of a sneeze and attempted to tickle Hamish on the nose but missed, tickling him on an ear lobe instead. This caused his opponent to start laughing and drop his guard.

Dougal moved in and attempted to thrust his feather deep inside one of his opponent's nostrils. Hamish stopped laughing and sidestepped in desperation, holding out his feather in an effort to ward Dougal off.

Fortune was on his side because the tip of the feather tickled one of his attacker's ear lobes. Dougal could not help himself, he began to chuckle and then laughed but managed to summon up the strength to tickle Hamish.

The bards stood there, tickling each other and roaring with laughter – sounding like a pair of kilted kookaburras – until they were exhausted by their hilarity.

While the tears streaming down his face sizzled with the remnants of his nose's spent rage, Hamish collapsed and fell laughing to the ground.

"I win! I win!" Dougal chuckled jubilantly, wiping tears from his eyes.

Hamish was laughing too much to protest.

The featherswords were now bedraggled and broken and had been discarded. Archie bent down, picked one up and put it in his pocket as a memento of the afternoon. He thought that it would have been a wonderful sight to experience the fight at night with the noses glowing, sparking and fizzing in the dark.

Feeling that he had shared enough of his imagination for one day, the old man decided it was time he left. He walked away, but had not gone far when Dougal called out after him:

"Never forget that a man could do a whole lot worse

Than to spend his life writing silly verse."

"That's right," agreed Hamish. "And remember:
There's something we have trouble accepting,
Although I know it to be true,
The less we need, the more we have,
And the same could be said of ye."

Throwing caution to the wind, Dougal responded:

"I am an elf, My name is Alf, My brother's name is Fred, We drink the dew from buttercups And sleep in garden beds."

"Ye're noo an elf, Dougal," said Hamish, angrily. Ye're lying again. And just look at how tiny ver nose is getting. I can hardly see it."

While walking away, Archie wondered whether it was possible that the little men had somehow escaped from his imagination and taken on lives of their own. He could still hear them arguing and trying to outverse each other at the edge of his consciousness.

Bonny saw him leave and, having found it impossible to sleep with all of the commotion, got up gratefully and started to follow.

Unaware that the experience had also affected his dog, the old man had a recurring thought that intrigued him: *Is it possible that things only exist when you think of them and when you stop thinking about them they cease to exist? Do things only exist in a person's awareness?*

Suddenly, it seemed that the voices he was hoping to escape from were following him. Archie turned around and saw Hamish and Dougal jogging towards him while discussing something that seemed important to them.

As the little men came closer he heard one of them say: "Ye'll have to take a peek inside his head if ye want to find out if there's anything worthy of attention in there, but ye'd be wasting yer time."

"Ye take a look and I'll keep guard," replied the other.

"What do ye mean, keep guard? What do ye think ye'd be guarding us from, an escaped thought from the Sassenach's brain? Anyway ye're the one who was doing the wondering."

"Nay, ye do it," said Hamish. "It could be dangerous," and he looked around cautiously, as if danger lurked within the bush.

"How could it be dangerous? Look at the wee nose on him."

"If 'tis noo dangerous, why dinna ye look in there?"

"Hoots, mon, ye were the one who wondered what went on in a human's mind. Go on, it canna take long."

The little men almost bumped into Archie before realising that he had stopped and was watching them.

Dougal was the first to recover. He looked up and said: "Excuse us, but would ye mind if Hamish took a wee peekie inside yer mind? He's wondering what ye think about."

"No, of course not," replied Archie, amused by the request.

"Go on, Hamish," said Dougal, grabbing the other little man's arm and dragging him forward.

"Alright, mon, there's nay need to force me! Promise ye won't go away?"

"Of course I won't go away, now get a move on, will ye."

"Ye'll have to lift me up," Hamish said to Archie. "Ye canna expect me to be able to look in yer mind from here."

The old man sighed and put his flask under one arm; then he bent down and lifted Hamish with the other arm until their heads were close together.

"Is that better?" he enquired.

"It will have to do," replied the nervous bard before taking a drink from his bottle, hoping it would ward off any possible danger that lurked inside the man's head. Then he braced himself and, before fear overcame his curiosity, thrust his head towards Archie's. The old man had the disconcerting sensation that the little man's head had momentarily merged with his own.

The expression on Hamish's face suddenly changed from inquisitiveness to terror. "Aaarrggghhh!" he screamed. "Put me down!"

Archie lowered the shocked Scotsman in surprise, wondering what could have caused his distress. As soon as he was safely on terra firma, Hamish ran and hid behind Dougal's back.

"What did ye see? What did ye see?" cried Dougal, infected by Hamish's fright and trying to hide behind his back also. Both little men were hanging on to each other while going around in circles.

"I canna tell ye. Even though I dinna like ye, I still canna tell ye. T'was too awful."

"Tell me, tell me," pleaded Dougal.

"Nay, I daren't. It would give ye nightmares for the rest of yer life."

"Was it a terrible beastie ye saw, mon? C'mon, ye have to tell me, I'll go crazy with wondering if ye dinna."

"It was worse than a terrible beastie. It was the most awful sight it's ever been my misfortune to set eyes upon. Ooohh. It was horrible."

"Ye have to tell me," cried Dougal. "I'm terrified of what I dinna ken."

"Ye'd be more terrified of what ye did ken if ye saw what was in there. It was unnatural. It was enough to frighten the devil himself out of the fires of Hades. I'd never forgive myself if I told ye. Ye'd never have a moment's peace again. Be grateful for yer ignorance, mon, 'tis a blessing I dinna appreciate myself until I saw what I did, and it's the like of something I'll be seeing in my nightmares' nightmares forever more."

"Was it more horrible than the big old, terrible Hairy Thing?"

"Och, that must be something of exquisite beauty compared to what I saw."

"Nay, it couldna be. The Hairy Thing is the most horrible monster in the world."

"I thought it was 'til I looked in the human's mind. Now I ken that there must be more terrible things in a human's mind than I could ever have imagined possible. 'Tis noo surprising they have such awful lives. I tell ye, Dougal, I almost feel sorry for them."

The little men stopped running around in circles. Dougal was beside himself with worry: "Couldna it be killed?" he asked hopefully.

"Aye, I suppose it could be but then ye'd cease to exist."

"How could that be?"

"Because it makes ye live with it for all of yer life and ye canna get away from it, nay matter how hard ye try. And all the pleading, prayers and poems in the world wouldna help ye."

"Ooohhh, dinna say that. I'm frightened. Canna we run away from it?"

"I could," replied Hamish. "But ye canna."

"What do ye mean?" screamed Dougal. "Why canna I run away from it? I havena even seen it yet."

"Doesna matter. Ye'll never get away from it even if ye spent the rest of yer life running."

"For crying out loud, mon, why couldna I run away from it? Please tell me, Hamish, so that at least I ken what I canna run away from."

"Alright, but it wouldna do ye any good."

"Canna I even imagine it away?"

"Aye, ye might be able to imagine ye can do that for a while, but it will always be there waiting to haunt ye again when ye stop imagining."

"Oh, mon, what a terrible thing it must be. I canna think what it is."

"I'll give ye a clue. Think of the most important thing in yer life."

"I've nay mind for guessing, Hamish. Just tell me what terrible thing ye saw."

For the first time in his life Hamish felt a twinge of compassion for Dougal before saying: "Ye."

"Me?" exclaimed the other little man, shocked by the answer.

"Aye, Dougal, 'twas ye I saw inside the human's mind."

"Ye're joking!"

"Nay, 'tis as true as ye thinking ye're here. 'Twas yerself I saw, and what was even worse he was writing yer poetry for ye. Nay wonder 'tis nay good."

"But that canna be possible, I'm here with ye, and I write my own poems."

"Ye may think ye're here, but I've a mind ye're only a figment of the human's imagination."

Dougal thought about what Hamish had said, but couldn't make any sense of it. Then he thought of something else and shuddered. "I canna be inside his head," he said. "Ye ken I'm afraid of the dark. Anyway, ye said there was a horrible monster in there, and I'm noo a horrible monster." He thought again and began to smile: "Ah, I get it, Hamish, ye were just playing a wee jokie on me, weren't ye? Very funny, I like wee jokies."

"Maybe I was, and maybe I wasna," replied Hamish. 'Ye'll have to take a look for yerself to find out, won't ye?"

"But supposing ye're noo playing a jokie? I'll see what ye saw."

"That's a chance ye'll have to take, mon, just like I did."

"Alright, but promise ye'll stay here."

"Aye, I'll do that right enough. I canna wait to see the expression on yer face when ye see what's in his mind."

Dougal lifted up his bottle in trepidation and tried to gulp some courage from it but did not feel any braver, so he had a change of heart.

"I'll take yer word for it, Hamish. I'll just go and think up some verse instead."

"Ye do that and ye'll be forever wondering about what ye dinna see."

Dougal reflected briefly on the statement then, realising he had no choice, motioned to Archie with more bravado than he felt. "Will ye get yer human head down from out of the clouds for a moment young man and bring its sorry contents closer to reality so that I can peruse its confusion and try to see what upset Hamish?"

The old man sighed but did as he was bidden and reluctantly lowered his aged body. As soon as Archie's head was within range Dougal took a deep breath and put his head next to it – apparently so he too could peek inside the bemused man's mind. Then he also screamed, even louder and as if in more distress than Hamish had been. Hamish was not surprised by his partner's reaction.

"Aaaaarrrgggghhh!" Dougal screamed again, running off while Hamish tried to grab the terrified poet as he passed and ask what he had seen.

Hamish ran after Dougal and dived at his waist, bringing him to the ground with a flurry of kilts and thumping of noses on the hard earth.

"Ouch! What do ye think ye're doing?" asked Dougal angrily, rubbing his nose.

"I told ye that ye canna run away from it, dinna I!" yelled Hamish, rubbing his nose as well. "What did ye see?"

"Aaahh," cried Dougal, sitting on the ground and shaking his head in anguish. "I couldna get out of there quick enough."

"But, what did ye see?" asked Hamish, anxious to have Dougal admit that he had seen himself.

"Ye're noo going to believe this, but I saw ye!" came the unexpected reply.

"What do ye mean, ye saw me? Dinna lie. 'Twas yerself in there."

"Nay, Hamish, I'm sorry to have to tell ye, but it was ye inside his head and he was writing yer poems. What can it mean if ye saw me and I saw ye? How can we both be in there and out here? I tell ye, 'tis noo natural."

Both little men stared into the bush as if the answer to their dilemma was to be found there. Archie was astonished by their reactions. He walked up to them and asked: "Is something wrong, gentlemen?"

"How can ye bear to live in yer head?" enquired Dougal, looking up at him.

The old man replied:

"Between each ear I persevere Otherwise you would not be here."

"Aaarrrgghhh!" the wee bards cried in unison. "He's trying to be a poet."

"Ye canna trust humans who try to be poets, Hamish," said Dougal.

Both little men quickly stood and raised their fists, as if to defend themselves.

"Why can't you?" asked Archie.

"Because they take themselves too seriously," replied Hamish, retreating a few paces.

Dougal followed him for safety.

"But you two take yourselves seriously," said the old man.

"We dinna!" responded Dougal, outraged. "We only take our art seriously, and art shouldna be taken any other way."

"Why not?" Archie asked.

"Dinna be flippant, young man," snapped Hamish. "Although I suppose flippancy is the realm of human youth."

How they could take him for a youth was beyond the old man's comprehension but he did not bother pursuing the matter, nor did he mention how seriously they took their noses in case they started fighting again. He simply said: "But art isn't only poetry."

"Of course not," replied Hamish. "That's just our art. It has to be taken seriously because art is the soul made visible."

"Or audible, as in our case," contributed Dougal.

"Ye ken what I mean," said Hamish, turning angrily to Dougal.

"Of course I do, mon, there's no need to get yer kilt in a tangle, but he wouldna. Anyway, if he dinna have any art in him, he may as well be invisible."

Hamish had an idea: "If we close our eyes he will be invisible."

"And if we ignore him he might go away," said Dougal. "Ye ken humans hate being ignored even more than they hate noo being able to create poems."

"Ave," agreed the other little man.

Both of the wee bards closed their eyes simultaneously and started humming a lilting Scottish air.

Old Archie was watching them in amusement when, without warning, a poem began to form in his mind. As each verse took shape he unconsciously recited it aloud, forgetting that he was being ignored. After a while the droning of the man's voice caused Hamish and Dougal to drift off to sleep, while the melody they had been humming turned into ragged snores as Archie recited:

"As I was out walking one sunny spring day By the banks of a river I heard something say, I heard something say, as sad as a sigh, 'Oh, why did it happen, can you tell me why?'

I stopped in my tracks and listened again, But all that I heard was a thought in my brain. 'Why did what happen?' was the question I heard Then it fluttered away like a migrating bird.

The sun warmed my face as it shone through the trees, But when I tried to walk on, I fell to my knees. Why that had happened I could not understand. It wasn't the movement my body had planned.

As I knelt by the banks of the river that flowed Dirty and brown like a muddy old road, I put my hands to the ground to lift myself up But found I was stuck there like a quizzical pup.

I turned my head to the left and then to the right And started to worry in case I was stuck for night. I pulled with my arms and I pushed with my knees, Then the sound came again and I felt myself freeze.

'Oh, why did it happen, someone must know why?' It came from the sky – 'twas the sky I heard sigh! I lifted my head up as best as I could, But couldn't see as well as I could when I stood.

Then the sigh came again and I felt my heart pound For the very same question was being asked from the ground. Without thinking I plunged my head to the earth Where my ear became stuck on the dew-dampened turf.

Now, you may find this hard to believe But I swear that while stuck there I heard the earth breathe. Its breath seemed as tired as an ancient old man's When he feels life trickle away with time's sands.

'Oh, why did it happen, someone must know why?'
Now the words seemed to plead from a breeze passing by.
'Why did what happen?' I heard myself ask
While my face was contorted in a comical mask.

No answer was offered, although the question of 'Why?' Seemed to fill the whole world as time passed me by. It came from the heavens, from far and from near. It even came from the grass tickling my ear.

It came from a sunbeam that danced through the trees.

It came from my heartbeats. It came from my pleas. It came from the river – a query of fear – Yet it came without the answer I needed to hear.

While trapped in myself, stuck to the earth, I struggled for freedom for all I was worth. 'Oh, why did it happen?' I heard myself cry. 'Why am I trapped here without knowing why?'



I can't recall how long I crouched on the ground Waiting for an answer to the questioning sound. The question that came from the leaves on each tree Then wept all alone like a tear within me.

'Oh, why did it happen?' I heard myself sigh In the very same voice I had heard from the sky. In the very same voice I had heard from the leaves, From the earth and a heartbeat in the passing-by breeze.

'Why did what happen?' murmured the day While gathering moments to store far away. 'Why did what happen?' mumbled the earth In a voice from the ages, chortling with mirth.

If something was funny I could not see the joke And anger formed the words that I spoke: 'It's not my fault I'm trapped without knowing why!' Then laughter, like thunder, rumbled high in the sky.

'Why did what happen?' giggled the leaves As a joke, like a magpie, warbled high in the trees. 'Why did what happen?' chuckled the world around me 'And what are you listening to, there on your knees?'

I pondered the question that was now asked of me, Feeling that the answer could set myself free. Although, if I didn't stand before it was too late I'd be trapped there forever questioning fate. I pondered the question and then pondered again But only a smile took shape in my brain, A smile that grew with no reason for mirth While I yearned for the answer to be given birth.

However, the smile helped me stand in the prison of 'Why?' And lifted my head that was freed with a sigh. Then I lifted my feet and went on my way Different to the man who had entered that day.

I've travelled for years, not quite sure why, Like a wingless bird yearning to fly. Feeling the answer was simple, although the question was not Until life had unravelled like a thread from a knot.

I felt the answer was as simple as an answer could be If only, if only I had not been me Where I hid, disguised, in questions unasked Waiting to be revealed in a life lived unmasked.

I've since heard it flutter without making a sound And accepted the journey on which I was bound. I've touched it in wonder on a faraway face And felt it touch me with an answering grace.

I've felt it in the caress of a kiss passing by That answered a question as it disappeared in the sky. I've seen its soft sparkle deep in lovers' eyes As they gazed at each other like sweet, fleeting sighs.

Many are the questions I've heard myself cry Since that long-ago day, without knowing why. From within and without, from below and above, Oh, the questions were many – could the answer be love?"

Expecting favourable comments from the little men, Archie turned his gaze towards them. However, he was disappointed because both of them were sound asleep on their feet while snoring in unison. He clapped his hands together, snapping his audience from their slumbers and causing them to fall disoriented to the ground.

"Aaarrgghhh!" screamed Dougal in terror, as he clamped his hands over his ears. "The Horrible Hairy is trying to eat my dreams!"

"Nay," said Hamish, "'twas just a clap of thunder, ye ninny. Horrible Hairies canna eat dreams."

"Horrible Hairies can do anything they put their minds to!" cried Dougal.

"Only if ye let them," said Hamish, suddenly realising that the human was still there. "Did ye happen to see an old Horrible Hairy?" he enquired, looking up at Archie but not expecting an intelligent answer.

"No," replied the old man, even though he didn't know what a Horrible Hairy was. "But I did hear someone burst a snore."

"Did ye just?" asked Hamish dubiously, getting up from where he had fallen, while rubbing an elbow that had been injured due to its sudden and unexpected contact with a rock. "Well,

would ye mind telling us who would do such a stupid thing? Everyone knows 'tis dangerous to burst a snore."

"Why is that?" Archie asked, innocently.

"Why is that!" exclaimed Hamish in disgust. Then he turned to Dougal, who had also stood up and was shaking his head in bewilderment. "Will ye listen to him, mon? Only a fool would ask such a question," Hamish continued. "I thought even humans would have the sense to know that snores are sounds made by sleep to keep nightmares away."

Turning his attention back to Archie, he said, "Nay, there's noo a nightmare has the courage to sneak into yer dreams if ye snore loud enough."

Archie took in this information with a grain of salt and changed the subject. "What did you think of my poem?" he asked.

"What poem?" enquired Dougal.

"The one I was reciting before you started trying to keep nightmares out of your dreams," replied the old man, annoyed that what he considered to be his imagination had not bothered to take any notice of him.

Both little men burst out laughing simultaneously.

"Och! Did ye think that was a poem?" Hamish chuckled. "How could it be a poem when it didna make sense?"

"It didna even make nonsense!" cried Dougal, doubling up with mirth. "Just because ye make words rhyme doesna mean that ye ken what ye're talking about." Then he began jumping up and down in delight. "Och, humans can never be poets nay matter how much they try to make things rhyme."

"I hate to admit it, Dougal," Hamish agreed, "but for once in yer life, ye be right!"

Then the wee bards began dancing a jig together, as if their joy at human ineptitude could not be expressed in laughter alone.

"But you didn't even have the decency to listen to all of it. You went to sleep," complained the old man.

"We heard enough to know 'twas nay poem," replied Dougal.

"Well, if that wasn't a poem," retorted Archie in exasperation. "What was it?"

"Ach, if ye have to ask that question ye wouldna understand the answer, and that makes what ye think is a poem even more ridiculous," chuckled Dougal while his dance partner began joyfully performing uncoordinated pirouettes, much to the amusement of a family of kookaburras perched in a tree on the opposite bank of the creek. They joined in the little men's hilarity, although for a different reason.

"And if ye canna understand the answer then there's nay point in asking the question," giggled Hamish.

"But how could I know that I wouldn't understand the answer if I didn't ask the question?" queried Archie in frustration. "Why do you have to talk in riddles?"

Both little men stopped dancing and the glee disappeared from their faces.

Hamish looked at the human with pity. "Och, mon," he said gently. "Canna ye see? If ye understood poetry ye wouldna think we spoke in riddles. That proves ye can never be a poet, nay matter how hard ye try. What ye think are riddles is obviously common sense to poets. Why dinna ye just concentrate on trying to improve other aspects of yer life that ye be good at, like worrying about why ye were born and what ye're doing here, instead of wasting yer time and ours trying to make up stupid wee versies that no-one, not even yerself, can understand?

"Tis noo yer fault ye be an ignorant human being," he continued in out-of-character concern. "Just as some poor pathetic beasties have to be slugs or snails so do ye have to be what ye are. 'Tis unnatural to try and be what ye're noo.

"Why dinna ye just go away like a good boy and do what nature forces ye to do – like search for yerself – rather than hang around here interrupting an artist in pursuit of enlightenment?"

In a more characteristic, dismissive, tone Hamish concluded by saying: "Ye can go now. I dinna have any more time to waste listening to yer ignorance."

Archie grunted in annoyance at the diminutive bard's apparent contempt. He was about to leave when Hamish, blissfully unaware that anything he said could have been considered offensive, noticed the flask and commented:

"Hoots, mon. 'Tis a strange bottle ye've been drinking out of."

"That's not a bottle, it's a flask," replied the old man, sharply.

Hamish briefly pondered the difference in size between his bottle of poemjuice and the flask. "And what might it contain?" he enquired.

"It contains the most wondrous beverage ever to have wetted the lips of man or woman," came the terse reply.

The little man was intrigued but dubious. "If it's so wonderful, how come it canna make ye create a poem then, hey? Answer me that!"

"Because it's a poem in itself. The most glorious poem ever tasted," enthused the old man, forgetting his annoyance as he turned to go.

Hamish was taken aback by the unexpected reply and looked at the flask greedily, realising that if it did contain a vast quantity of magic elixir with qualities akin to the contents of his bottle of poemjuice, then it was wasted on the human. But it could be transformed by his own incredible ability into a masterpiece of such poetic brilliance that it would stun everyone who heard it.

His vanity overcame any doubts he might have had about the value of anything treasured by human beings, and consumed him with a desire to drink as much of the flask's contents as possible.

"Ach, bide a while longer, mon," purred Hamish, hopefully, while placing his bottle of poemjuice on the ground. "Ye canna have anywhere important to go, and a wee dram of yer flaskjuice might make me feel more kindly disposed towards ye – although dinna expect it to make me like ye."

Archie sighed, realising that the little man's huge ego prevented him from understanding how rude he was. "Alright, one sip and then I'm going home," he said, unscrewing its cap and lowering the flask towards Hamish who, convinced he knew what the contents were, stood before it in eager anticipation – like a pilgrim awaiting a benediction.

"The water of life is wasted on ye," smirked the eager poet. "After I have supped from this holy well I'll astound ye with its wondrous properties and, by the beard of the bards' bard, dazzle ye even more with the brilliance of my artistry."

The old man muttered to himself that he would have preferred to be dazzled by humility, although he did consider 'the water of life' an apt name for his favourite beverage.

Hamish was too preoccupied to notice the negative effect he had on Archie and stood with his eyes glazing over and mouth open wide, as if before a sacred shrine.

Archie correctly surmised that he was expected to tip some of the flask's contents into the eager orifice, so he controlled his temper, knelt down, and carefully poured a measured flow down the supplicant's throat.

The bard had deluded himself into believing that he was consuming nectar that would cause the seed of his imagination into blossoming forth an incomparable masterpiece; one that he felt sure would astound the world with its wisdom. The sensation of liquid flowing into him numbed the thirsty poet's senses and caused him to disregard caution.

Hamish deliriously flung his arms and legs around the flask, as if embracing a long-lost lover, and slurped more desire down his throat than he was capable of controlling. He gulped and spluttered valiantly, as if willing to drown for his art. Archie tried to lift the flask away, but Hamish clung to it desperately while being soaked by the water of life's sudden surge.



"My turn! My turn!" shouted Dougal in agitation while hopping from foot to foot, worried that his foe's ferocious thirst might drain the contents before he himself had the opportunity of sharing its magical properties. But Hamish would not be denied and glugged away frantically, oblivious to what he was drinking.

On the verge of desperation, Dougal fretted, fearful that a potential masterpiece could be growing inside his adversary; a poem he would never be able to compete with, no matter how long he lived or how much he rhymed; a poem that would be revered forevermore as The Poem of Hamish – a poem that could eclipse his own noble efforts to such a degree that he may as well never have bothered composing them in the first place, causing his life to have been a waste of time.

"My turn! My turn!" Dougal repeated frantically, in between hops and attempts to disengage Hamish from what he now decided must be the font of poetry if his enemy's reaction was anything to go by.

Archie was astounded by the little poets' behaviour and was about to prise Hamish from his limpet-like attachment to the flask when, suddenly, the enamoured poet stopped glugging. His eyes opened wide, as if startled by a revelation so repulsive that it caused them to roll despairingly in their sockets before stopping to stare out in abject terror from within some indescribable horror.

"Aaarrgghhh!" he screamed, as spasm after spasm wracked his body, causing him to let go of the flask and fall to the ground.

Hamish lay there, stunned. His face quivered and contorted in a frightening manner while his complexion fluctuated between mottled shades of grey, green and yellow. Tortured breath wheezed from the little man's throat, gravely worrying both Archie and Hamish – although for different reasons.

Archie knelt beside the fallen bard, at a loss to understand what could have caused such a reaction.

Still hopping from foot to foot Dougal was mortified, sure that a poem, possibly a poem too profound to be articulated, was attempting to escape from Hamish – a poem that might render every other poet in the world redundant if it did escape.

Tortured by concern and jealousy, yet not knowing what to do, Dougal continued hopping, although more desperately now. This action began annoying the worm in the ground beneath his feet and it became concerned that the constant thumping might be causing it to get a migraine.

It also annoyed the cockatoo that had been watching the little men's antics with bemusement from the tree. The bird thought that Dougal was mimicking its own actions and shrieked with rage – aggravating the worm's headache.

Curiosity caused the water boatman to row closer to the disturbance than discretion would normally have allowed.

Torn by conflicting emotions Dougal stopped hopping and wrung his hands. He didn't want a poem to kill Hamish, yet neither did he want him to be able to speak it. He wanted himself to

be remembered as the poet who had created the greatest poem ever. But he was sure he didn't want it to be one of such intensity that it might kill him before he was famous. Fear of the power of poetry grew in his heart while desire for recognition waned. He decided that versifying was far less dangerous than writing poetry.

Tentatively approaching his protagonist, who was now making ghastly retching sounds, Dougal watched in dismay as the person he thought he hated more than anyone else in the world feebly clutched his throat, as if trying to strangle himself.

Suddenly, Hamish went limp and silent.

Gravely concerned, Archie decided to try and do something practical. The patient seemed to have stopped breathing so the old man loosened his neckerchief, unbuttoned his shirt and administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. *This is ridiculous,* he thought, realising that he was attempting to breathe life into a part of his imagination he wanted to be rid of.

"What have ye done to the poor wee mon?" asked Dougal angrily, raising his fists and glaring balefully at Archie.

"Will you shut up and do something useful for a change!" the old man snapped testily. "Can't you see your friend is seriously ill?"

"He's nay friend of mine," retorted Dougal instinctively, and then felt ashamed. Remorsefully, he wailed. "I remember. I remember. Hamish is choking on a poem. We have to dislodge it before it kills him. Quick, lift his feet and thump his back, 'tis the only thing to do."

Relieved to hear the positive suggestion, although highly dubious about the supposed cause of the wee bard's predicament, Archie responded immediately and lifted Hamish up by his feet until he was suspended above the ground – exposing a pair of grubby, frayed tartan bloomers. Then he began patting the patient's back.

Although at a loss to understand what had caused the grave state of Hamish's health, Archie discounted Dougal's reason about choking on a poem. He had enjoyed the pleasure of drinking tea for many years, yet had never been bothered by a dangerous poem lurking in it.

Even though he did not consider he had any reason to feel guilty, the old man had a worrying sense that he would never be forgiven if the poet did not recover, so he continued patting the patient's back, fearful that ignorance on his part may have unwittingly contributed to a tragedy.

"Spit out the poem, ye fool!" cried Dougal, enthusiastically assisting Archie by punching Hamish on the nose before being pushed away.

"Tis noo worth dying for the sake of art, ye selfish idiot" the frustrated bard ranted. "I'll have nay one to hate and beat at poetry if ye die. Come on Hamish. Breathe mon – just one wee breath for yer old friend. If ye dare die and leave me alone I'll get the Horrible Hairy to eat yer snores so ye won't ever be able to escape from nightmares – even if ye do be dead from choking on a poem that should have been mine. Ah, come on, mon, I'm only joking. Ye ken I like wee jokies."

Desperate, Dougal grieved and raged impotently.

The water boatman was astounded by the scene and slapped its oars on the water's skin in encouragement. The insect could not wait to tell other members of its species what it had witnessed, and trembled with anticipation at the thought of how popular it would be while recounting the day's incredible activity.

The cockatoo kept dancing from foot to foot while bobbing its head and shredding bark from its perch in excitement.

"Remember how I always laughed at yer pathetic attempts to make up poems, Hamish?" Dougal cried, hoping that a change in tactics might somehow elicit a response from his fallen foe. "Well, I thought ye were trying to be funny. Are ye trying to be funny now, Hamish? Ha, ha. See, I'm laughing."

He turned to Archie – who had the distressing feeling that the little poet was past reviving – and pleaded: "I think the fool's playing a wee jokie on us and he'll be disappointed if we dinna laugh. Just you wait and see. If we laugh at him, he won't be able to pretend any more. Come on, mon, laugh."

Worried about Dougal's irrational behaviour, yet not knowing what else to do, Archie lowered Hamish to the ground, smoothed his kilt down over the limp knobbly knees and stroked the ashen brow as he tried to chuckle, but it seemed pointless, so he fell silent.

"Come on mon, laugh," choked Dougal between forced guffaws of compassion and loathing. "Just ye watch, Hamish will start laughing soon and everything will be alright. He loves to play wee jokies; dinna ye Hamish? Hamish? Ye can stop pretending now. This is a funny jokie. Ha. Ha."

Dougal's voice wavered with doubt before continuing in a pleading tone: "Hamish, ye be making me angry. I dinna want to laugh anymore. The jokie is so funny I need to have a rest from it otherwise I'll use up all my laughies and won't have any left to use for laughing at your poems. Would that be alright? Yes, I think that would be a good idea. Ha. Ha. I'm going to stop laughing now."

The little man's hysteria petered out. He looked up at Archie in desperation and asked: "Canna ye try and say something nice to him for a change? He may be feeling offended because ye've done nothing but criticise him from the moment ye made yer unwelcome appearance."

Archie was tempted to react to the unwarranted criticism but felt emotionally drained, so he searched his mind for something soothing to say instead. He was about to admit that he couldn't think of anything when, without knowing why, he uttered, "Robbie Burns".

Dougal had returned to where Hamish lay, and was kneeling compassionately beside his enemy while cradling the unconscious head in his arms, when he heard Archie speak.

"What was that ye said?" he enquired from within his distress.

"I said Robbie Burns," replied the old man, surprised that the famous Scottish poet's name should have popped into his mind.

A pathetic groan wheezed from Hamish's pallid lips.

"Whist, mon," said Dougal hopefully. "The poor wee thing seemed to recognise The Bard's name. Say it again while I pour some of my poemjuice into him.'

Without much hope Archie softly crooned 'Robbie Burns' into Hamish's ear while Dougal tipped drops of liquid from his bottle between the hated lips of his mate. Hamish again groaned weakly.



The sound encouraged Dougal to trickle more of the precious contents of his bottle into his enemy's mouth. "Och, mon. Just because I dinna like ye doesna mean that I want ye to die."

"Robbie Burns. Robbie Burns," repeated Archie over and over like a mantra while wishing he could think himself away from the situation, yet knowing he could not leave things in an unfinished state. Before he returned to what he thought might be reality, he wanted to be reassured that the condition of his imagination lying in such a tragic state upon the ground wasn't fatal and could be rehabilitated.

Slowly, Hamish's features began to change colour, as if life was seeping back into them. The nose twitched slightly and the eyelids flickered. This movement filled the old man with hope that whatever had caused the little poet's indisposition might be passing. Dougal, on the other hand, was overcome by mixed feelings of relief and resentment.

"I should have known!" he yelled. "Ye just wanted to drink my poemjuice! I bet there never were any poems in the human's flask! Ye're a devious man with nay scruples. I'm never going to waste a poem on ye again, Hamish."

Furious at what he considered the ultimate deceit, Dougal stood up abruptly and dropped the semi-conscious head he had been nursing to the ground. Outraged, he bellowed: "Tis noo fair! I'll never save yer life again. Ye're just a useless thirsty man with nay talent."

Unaware of the anger his apparently miraculous revival had caused, when his head hit the ground again Hamish lapsed back into unconsciousness.

The water boatman rested on its oary arms in anticipation, while the cockatoo continued glaring – although it had stopped demonstrating.

The old man was at his wits' end. He felt that he had been about to escape his imagination only to be thwarted by Dougal's irrational attitude. Unable to control his frustration, he dragged Dougal away from Hamish's seemingly lifeless body.

"What do ye think yer doing?" spluttered Dougal, outraged that he should be treated in such an undignified manner.

"I think Hamish might be dead!" replied Archie.

"Dead?" gasped Dougal, on the rush of his anger's rapid ebb. "But he canna be dead, he's my friend. I'll have nayone to hate and be better than if he's dead. "Tis noo fair, mon. Besides, he drank my poemjuice!"

Dougal was distraught at the prospect of a future without his sparring partner and returned to kneel by his side while blubbering inconsolably. "Dinna be dead, Hamish. 'Tis nay funny to be dead," he cried. Then, almost choking on the words, he lied hopefully: "I think ye be the best poet that ever lived – even better than me – but 'tis a waste of time being the best dead poet."

A wave of compassion flowed through Archie as he realised how worried Dougal must really feel to be desperate enough to make such an astonishing statement. When the lie that had been wrenched from the core of his being caused no reaction, Dougal put concern before pride and blubbered something that the old man found even more astonishing.

"Och, Hamish, ye have the grandest nose in the whole universe. Mine is just a wee pimple compared with the majestic nobility of vers."

When this tremendous gift of self-sacrifice produced no response either, Dougal's shoulders slumped and he began slipping into a deep depression; an abyss of despair from which the forlorn little man felt there would be no escape.

Tears streamed down both sides of the dejected promontory of his nose as he stroked his fallen enemy's brow. Gently, he admitted: "I only pretended to hate ye, mon. Of course I could never really hate ye. How could I have ever hated someone so worthless?"

While Dougal mourned, Archie commented sadly:

"I can't understand what could have happened to him. He seemed to be really enjoying the drink from my flask of tea before..."

Dougal's sorrow turned to rage. "TEA!" he screamed shrilly in utter disgust.

The word reverberated through the bush and caused all the creatures within earshot, other than the cockatoo, to scurry away in search of sanctuary – fearing that the terrible cry they heard was a warning of some imminent catastrophe.

A sharp pain pierced the worm's headache.

The water boatman instinctively pulled on its oars with such force that it broke through the water's skin like a torpedo and grazed itself on the creek's stony bottom before realising it was in danger of drowning. The insect frantically rowed back to the surface, where it gratefully gasped a mouthful of air.

Hamish's prostrate body shuddered violently and then jerked upright, Lazarus-like, into a sitting position. His eyes snapped open and stared at Archie, as if from the pit of an indescribable hell, then he too screamed: "TEA!"

"Aaarrgghhh. TEA!" both little men wailed.

Archie was astounded that such a mundane word could cause so strong and, in Hamish's case, so miraculous a reaction.

Hamish leapt to his feet and tried to hide behind Dougal, who tried to hide behind Hamish. The bards ran around and around in circles while hanging onto each other.



"TEA!" shrieked the cockatoo, impressed by the reaction the sound had caused. "TEA!" it repeated with malevolent glee as it again swayed from foot to foot, bobbing its head with yellow crest erect, while continuing to shred its perch. "TEA, TEA!" it shrieked joyfully, bruising the afternoon air while enjoying the little men's distress immensely.

Beneath the bards' pounding boots, the worm cowered in the earth it had once thought of as home and wished it could massage its aching migraine.

On the earth's surface, exhaustion slowly brought Hamish and Dougal to their senses. Too tired to run any more they stood panting in the cloud of dust their desperation had created.

The cockatoo continued shrieking the hated word overhead, disappointed that it seemed to be losing some of its impact.

With their hands resting on bended kilted knees, and faces contorted with expressions of fear and loathing, the poets glared at Archie.

The old man had an uncomfortable feeling that he must have committed a sin; a sin so vile that it was beyond mortal comprehension.

Dougal managed to scrounge a few weary words together and, in between gasps of breath, directed them at Archie in unspent fury: "What heathen desire made ye do such a terrible thing?"

Before Archie had a chance to answer, Hamish coughed, causing his eyeballs to protrude so violently they seemed to be on the verge of leaping out and attacking the human.

"He tried to poison me!" cried the bard "I canna believe it! The devil tried to poison me! 'Twas a diabolical thing ye did!"

The enormity of what had happened was too much for Hamish. He collapsed, and then pounded his fists and feet on the earth in desolation. The worm winced.

Archie, curious to find out what had caused the incomprehensible reaction to such an innocuous statement, approached the bards with the innocent intention of enquiring why tea seemed to be such an anathema to them.

"Stay where ye are ye disgraceful mon," Dougal said, threateningly, while holding his hands up as if to fend off a dangerous adversary.

Archie shook his head in bewilderment but kept his distance.

"He tried to poison me!" sobbed Hamish in outraged incomprehension. "He tried to poison me!" repeated the distraught poet into the earth, convinced that all the tea he had innocently drunk would forever ruin his ability to create poetry.

"Dinna worry," replied Dougal, compassionately. "I diluted the poison with my own poemjuice, so ye'll survive. Yer wee versies should be safe, but with that monstrous liquid flowing around inside ye, I think ye'll have to forget about ever writing another poem – still, that will be nay loss to the world."

"Ooohh, I wish I was dead," sighed Hamish.

With conflicting emotions of remorse and righteousness, Archie muttered: "But I only gave him a drink of tea."

"Only gave him a drink of tea!" yelled Dougal in disgust, turning again to reproach the human. He spoke with such scorn that Archie took a few steps backwards as if the sound might harm him if he stood too close to the source of its venom.

"Ye should be ashamed of yerself. How could ye have wanted to poison a pathetic poet like Hamish just because ye were jealous of his verses? 'Twas me ye should have tricked into drinking yer vile brew. Ye're a cruel and stupid man with nay understanding of talent."

Convinced that he was the only poet worth poisoning Dougal was hurt, and resented that the human had not realised the value of his art.

"By the Spirit of the Glens," he continued in revoltion, "may ye live to rue the day ye did such a dastardly thing as to make a poet drink tea! Tea is the curse of poets! It pollutes the source of their talent!"

"I didn't make him drink it," replied Archie, defensively, annoyed at the way things were turning out. "He was happy to accept a drink. In fact he asked for it and was so eager that I was worried he might drown himself."

"Of course I was eager to accept what I thought was a kind offer," butted in Hamish, slowly recovering from his shock. "But I didna think ye were going to try and poison me because ye were jealous of my poetry!"

"I wasn't jealous of your poetry and I wasn't trying to poison you. What did you think was in the flask anyway?" snapped the old man.

"Why, whisky of course! The water of life," responded Hamish indignantly. "I should have known that only a human without any understanding of the intricacies of poetry would drink such a devilish brew. Nay wonder ye look lost. How do ye ever expect to find yerself if ye poison yer body and spirit with... Ah, I canna even bear to utter the abominable word. Would ye kindly do it for me, Dougal?"

"TEA!" Dougal spat the word out again. Nearby flora seemed to shudder as the sound lashed the air. The cockatoo, however, was overjoyed and continued shrieking its raucous rendition of the word.

"Thank ye," sighed Hamish, grateful not to have to utter the unnatural sound. He stood up once more, raised his arms to the sky in a gesture of defiance and, gaining strength from the knowledge of the evil that had been done to his talent, boomed out a curse in a voice of barely-controlled rage:

"May his bladder shrink to the size of a pea So that he's always bursting for a wee. And may his hell be spent for eternity Drinking never-ending cups of...cups of..."

The little man began gagging, causing Dougal to yell out: "TEA!"

"Thank ye," spluttered Hamish. As an afterthought, he smiled and said: "While we're in Heaven drinking whisky."

"And reciting poems, of course," butted in Dougal.

"That goes without saying," agreed Hamish, feeling kindly disposed towards his opponent while his rage was directed at the human.

"That's it!" said Archie gruffly. "I'm never bringing you here again. You're both ungrateful and conceited. I don't understand what caused me to think up poetry for you this afternoon, but you can be assured that, if I have any say in the matter, I'll never do it again. It's not worth the aggravation."

Hamish and Dougal looked at each other as if the man was mad. Dougal, with a hint of compassion in his voice that surprised him, said:

"Och, mon, drinking that terrible concoction in yer flask just addles yer brain. I know 'twas a terrible curse Hamish put on ye, but 'tis yer own fault for being ignorant. The next time ye travel in yer mind don't be so affected by human thoughts and desires or ye'll go even more insane than ye already are and totally lose touch with reality."

"Maybe he'd be better off insane," commented Hamish. "The reality of the human world must be a terrible thing."

"That's true," agreed Dougal.

Not sure that he wasn't going insane, Archie shook his head as if trying to clear his mind of what was happening. He realised there was no point in prolonging his stay so, without bothering to farewell the bards, he turned and walked away.

When the old man reached the track he noticed that Bonny wasn't following him – although he was pleased that the little men weren't. He stopped, thinking that she was probably sniffing the bush scents that dogs found intriguing. Then he thought about the strange little poets of his imagination, and was amazed yet again at what the human mind was capable of conjuring up when it was unencumbered and allowed to roam free.

He wondered whether another reason for the bards being so argumentative was because, by the look of their tartans, they came from different clans. Then he had the disturbing thought that they may have been different aspects of his own mind, but immediately dismissed it.

Archie looked around for his dog, but she was nowhere to be seen, so he decided to give her a whistle. He put the tips of two fingers into his mouth and blew...

A shrill sound pierced the air.

"Aaarrgghhh" cried Dougal. "What was that mon?"

"Maybe it was one of yer wee versies committing suicide because it was depressed at its inability to compete with my works of art," commented Hamish as an excuse for the fear the unnatural sound had caused him.

Dougal clutched his head: "Nay. 'Tis happening! 'Tis happening!" he screamed. "The Horrible Hairy is starting to eat my poems! I knew it would only be a matter of time before it realised how succulent they were – especially compared to yers"

Bonny, hearing the whistle, wandered from the bush and trotted happily up to Archie. The further the old man travelled from his dreaming place, the more convinced he became that the wee bards had only been figments of his imagination, and he tried relegating them to memory.

Unaware they were fading from Archie Hair's mind, and may be on the verge of disappearing, the wee bards once again began arguing about which of them was the best poet.

Dougal, feeling a literary thirst flow through him, rushed over to where he had left his bottle of poemjuice. He picked it up and returned to face his opponent.

Hamish, noticing Dougal's advantage, did likewise. When they faced each other once again the bards lifted their bottles and drank deeply while still keeping eye contact – like two punch-drunk boxers warily awaiting the opening gambit of a bout. Their noses began to spark and throb in eager anticipation of the poetic jousting that was about to ensue.

Hamish felt at a loss for words, but did not betray the fact. He glared at his adversary while searching his mind for a poem – not realising that Dougal was having the same problem.

To give himself time to compose his thoughts, Hamish took another swig from his bottle. As if by magic a verse formed spontaneously as the liquid flowed down his throat, almost causing him to choke on the poem as he spoke:

"As ye live yer life, so ye choose yer death, That is what I've read. So here's a toast to a few pleasant years And an eternity of sober ones, dead."

With that poem out of the way, Hamish felt more confident and began to circle Dougal in an attempt to put him at even more of a disadvantage.

Dougal also began circling in time with the other little man, while staring him in the eyes as he racked his brain for a poem. He had never felt so desperately in need of a poem to rescue him, and was being overwhelmed by a sensation that he would cease to exist if he could not think one up soon.

Frantically, he rummaged through his mind in search of fragments of rhymes or scraps of cast-off verse, but all he found were shadows of words and husks of leftover letters. He even peered behind the shadows in the hope that they might be hiding ideas that had eluded him in the past. The more desperately he searched, the more at a loss he felt and less likely to be able to create a poem.

On the verge of despair, the increasing panic in Dougal's mind was fortuitously disturbed by an irritation deep within his nose. Not realising that an unwitting ally was about to save him from being outversed, the bard said: "Wait a minute. I canna think. There's a bogie up my nose."

"Yah!" remarked Hamish, contemptuously. "Ye're just using that as a pathetic excusie for yer lack of talent. Anyway, if there's a poem in everything, let's hear ye make up one about a bogie!"

Dougal briefly contemplated his protagonist's doubt while sending a forefinger on an exploratory probe into the wilds of the right nostril of his proboscis.

The finger's sensuous movement up his nose seemed to cast a spell over Dougal. This allowed the muse he feared had deserted him to glide serenely into his mind and begin brewing poemjuice words that flowed like nectar onto his tongue as naturally as song from a lyrebird.

Relieved, the wee bard licked his lips in anticipation – as if he was a starving gourmet who had been unexpectedly dragged from a dungeon and seated at a banquet table. With the searching finger up his nose he gratefully recited:

"Hullo, little bogie up my nose, Naked as a bairn without any clothes. I hate to disturb yer sweet repose, But ye are annoying me.

For, although ye lie there quite content, Spending yer life pleasure-bent, Ye are annoying, not Heaven-sent, And besides, ye've paid nay rent.

I canna think with ye lying there Deep within yer palatial lair, Far from trouble, toil and care, For ye're tickling a nasal hair.

And, although comfortably curled behind a node In the warmth of yer cosy abode, Ye are nay gift that wisdom sowed, Nor a prince in the guise of a toad.

So, I must disturb ye from the deep And distant well of yer sleep, For I have harvests of art to reap And appointments with poems yet to keep.

It'll do ye nay good to cringe and curl For, unlike grit in an oyster shell, Ye will never turn into a pearl And adorn the neck of a pretty girl.

Oh, be ye a coward or be ye brave, Be ye a hero or lowly slave, To me ye are an irksome knave That I must evict from my noble cave.

Ah, ye devil, there ye are! No more my poems will ye mar. Prepare yerself to be a shooting star And yearn for noses from afar."

A blissful expression softened Dougal's features and he fluttered his eyelids while smiling enigmatically. With great satisfaction he withdrew his finger that had the guilty bogie impaled upon the end of its nail. Between thumb and forefinger the gratified hunter rolled his soft, defenseless prey into a tight little ball and contentedly flicked it into the air, calling after the projectile as he completed his poem:

"And ponder yer sad, fickle fate. Never choose a poet's nose to hibernate, For nay muse will ever tolerate Such an annoying ingrate."

Forgetting the fact that a muse had tolerated a bogie, and even created a poem from it, Dougal wiped his finger on his kilt then, with a self-satisfied smirk, turned and faced Hamish.

"See," he commented, "there is a poem in everything. Ye just have to be clever enough to know where to look for it. Nay wonder ye have such difficulty in finding one."

"I'd give up poetry if ever I was so desperate that I had to search up my nose for a poem!" scoffed Hamish, conveniently forgetting that he had used a nose to create one soon after meeting Archie. "Anyway, bogies are important, too. 'Twas noo the poor wee thing's fault it was up yer nose. Ye breathed it in. That's where bogies are supposed to live. A bogie is part of nature and now ye've killed it just because it was annoying ye. Nay wonder ye canna compose nature poems like me."

"It was distracting me from creating important works of art." remarked Dougal, unconcerned about the bogie's fate, although he was secretly pleased that it had eventuated into a poem when he badly needed one – even if it was of dubious literary merit. Suddenly he was struck by a thought he'd never had before, and one he could not help blurting out immediately after it had wandered into his mind from wherever thoughts came.

"Everything is a part of nature, and if there is a poem in everything then every poem I compose from the dazzling brilliance of my mind must be a nature poem!" the awestruck poet cried triumphantly.

The surge of relief Dougal felt at not being outversed caused him to comment: "Anyway, yer weenie nose would barely have enough room to accommodate a bogie, let alone a poem."

Hamish was so outraged at the viciousness of the slur that it caused his belligerent reply to disregard common sense. "That's what ye think. I could pick a masterpiece from my nose whenever I wanted to."

"Bet ye canna," taunted Dougal, turning his back on Hamish and walking towards the bush, as if whatever poem his foe came up with would not be worth listening to.

The bush, not realising that Archie Hair was trying to think of other things so that he could get the little men out of his mind, was worried that another fiery confrontation might be about to ensue. However, it relaxed when it noticed that the combatants seemed to be slowly disappearing.

Although still rambunctious, the poets were becoming transparent, their voices only audible to each other, and they were moving in slow motion, as if in a dream.

Eventually, all that remained of them were two spectral noses, reminiscent of lingering mist, floating above the ground until they also faded from view, leaving only a few sparks fizzing in their wake then, with a final splutter, they too were gone.

The bush was grateful that everything appeared to have returned to normal and it could go about its business undisturbed, and never have to listen to the wee bards again.

Unaware he was disappearing, Hamish gazed into the sky for inspiration and angrily shoved a finger up his nose, unaware that it was barely visible.

This was the precise moment that a poem was alighting in Archie Hair's mind.

To his surprised relief, the little man began reciting:

"I'll think of this and I'll think of that, Like Carroll who ..."

Archie and Bonny walked side by side along the homeward track. The old man gazed at the bush around him, blissfully unaware of what was happening back at his special place of dreaming. For the sake of harmony he was dismissing the bards from his mind and allowing other thoughts, like exotic butterflies, to flutter in and out.

Archie felt at peace with the day. Bonny wandered over to sniff a wombat dropping that had been deliberately placed upon a rock beside the track, then she trotted back, satisfied, to her master's side.

Everything is as it should be, thought the old man, contentedly.

Not far away an echidna saw them and, not feeling everything was as it should be, slowly dug itself to hide in the sanctuary of some sandy soil.

As he walked home a poem suddenly arrived in Archie's mind – or was it his heart? The old man wasn't sure. All he knew was that something had unexpectedly alighted within him, causing him to recite aloud, as if it was important that the world outside should also share what he felt within.

Unaware that the bush did not feel the same way, Archie released the poem:

"I'll think of this and I'll think of that,
Like Carroll who thought of a Cheshire cat,
Until my thoughts are all thought out
And I've nothing left to think about.
And when I've nothing left to think about
What's within will be what's without.
Then a drop of rain my life will be,
Dropped in the ocean of eternity."

*

"... Then a drop of rain my life will be Dropped in the ocean of eternity."

Overwhelmed and confused by the poem's content, Hamish withdrew the finger from his nose, but kept gazing at the sky in the vague hope that there might be something out there that would help him understand the words he had spoken, but no assistance was forthcoming.

Determined not to allow his foe to detect any of the doubt he felt Hamish aggressively puffed out his chest and, acting as if Dougal was beneath contempt and not worth looking at, declared: "After hearing that ye must be ashamed of the trite doggerel yer poor excusie for a nose inspired ye with."

There was no response to this statement, which surprised him. He thought the recipient of his barbed comment would be livid and try to flail his tormentor with abuse in an attempt to compensate for a lack of talent.

Trying to appear nonchalant, Hamish clasped his hands behind his back and continued staring into the distance, impatiently waiting for a reply. Eventually, he decided that his protagonist must be so overcome with shame at not being able to compete on such a lofty artistic level that he was speechless.

Setting his face in a sneer of contempt, Hamish turned and looked to where he'd last seen Dougal, but was disconcerted to find that he wasn't there.

"Where are ye, mon?" enquired the proud poet, eager to extract as much satisfaction as possible from the glory of the moment and a poem he did not really understand. "Ye can hide all ye like, but sooner or later ye are going to have to face up to the fact that I am the grandest poet who ever opened his mouth. Dougal? Come on out, mon. I know ye must feel a terrible shame, but ye canna learn anything from hiding. Dougal? Where are ye?"

Hamish looked around the bush in annoyance. The longer he searched unsuccessfully for his sparring partner the more the pleasure he felt for the poem's creation waned and his anger grew. Thinking that Dougal was playing a childish game the exasperated bard called out:

"Alright ye idiot. I suppose ye're trying to play a wee jokie. I'll close my eyes and count to ten, then ye can reappear as if ye were here all the time. Here I go." The little man made a deliberate show of closing his eyes and covering them with his hands. "One, two, three..." he

counted aloud, while wondering whether he might actually be better off if Dougal did not reappear.

"Four, five..." Hamish could not resist the temptation of opening his eyes to peer between his fingers before he finished counting and watch Dougal sneak from his hiding place to pretend he had never left.

When he did open his eyes the little man was totally unprepared for the terrible shock he experienced. Not only could he see between his splayed fingers but could see through them as well! There was only the outline of bones to hinder his sight. Even his fingernails appeared to be floating, disconnected, like leaves, between himself and the bush.

A scream rushed from the depths of his being, but Hamish clamped his jaws shut before it had the chance to escape and alert Dougal that his foe had a weakness. With a monumental effort he gulped the scream back down his throat, closed his eyes again, and attempted to ponder his predicament without giving in to fear.

His experience in creating poems had taught Hamish that there were many inexplicable occurrences in life; strange aberrations that seemed to be briefly trapped in a warp of time.

Reasoning that some things were only beyond his comprehension because he did not understand them, the shocked poet took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself – but he did not reopen his eyes or remove his hands.

Inside the dark of his head Hamish contemplated what had happened but could not come to any conclusion. His thoughts just kept going around and around in circles. He felt there were explanations for everything, even the myriad wonders of nature, if only one knew where to look for them. The problem was that he did not know where to look.

The answer eluded him until, with what he considered to be a blinding flash of insight, he reasoned that he must have been blessed with X-ray vision so that his poems would become even more profound than they already were.

This thought fertilised the little man's already formidable ego. With an exquisite sense of trepidation, unconcerned whether or not Dougal ever materialised again, Hamish took a deep, expectant breath and prepared to open his eyes.

The water boatman rowed around languidly, annoyed that life was back to normal. Even the danger to its existence caused by the strange creatures' outbursts seemed preferable to the boredom it now felt. As a diversion, it tried to break through the water's surface again, determined to row upside down beneath the creek's skin for a change and see what the world looked like from that perspective – forgetting that it would probably drown if it did achieve its objective.

As previously it still needed the adrenalin of fear to give it the power necessary to break through the water's surface. Since the wee bards departure the boatman did not feel afraid or excited. In a futile attempt to create some enthusiasm it rapidly slapped its oars on the creek, attracting the attention of a fish that could not abide the taste of water boatpersons.

The insect's uncharacteristic movements caused the fish to think that it was a tasty morsel from a species of prey it was partial to. With a flick of its tail, it leapt onto the insect and devoured it.

At the same time as the fish was having a disappointing snack, and the water boatman departing life with so much adrenalin belatedly rushing through it that the insect could have achieved its desire with ease if only it had not been about to die, Hamish drummed his fingers on his forehead to reassure himself that they were still there.

He opened his eyes, only to realise that now even his finger bones were not there to see through, nor were his palms or nails. They had totally disappeared. The bard stared wildly out at the bush. This time the scream was not to be thwarted and rushed out shrieking silently into the afternoon.

"Waaagghhh!" bawled out the poet in despair. "Where are my poor wee handies? They've disappeared!" Then he was struck by an even greater calamity, he could not see his nose either! Cross-eyed, he looked to where it had always proudly impeded his sight, but the magnificent proboscis was nowhere to be seen. What he considered his most precious organ had vanished.

This was a catastrophe. Hamish feared that with the loss of his nose went his ability to create poetry. "Waaagghhh!" he cried again. "If I canna be what I was then I dinna want to be what's left."

The distraught poet trembled with shock and wondered what to do. Unable to find an answer to his predicament, he flung himself on the ground and threw a tantrum. He pounded his fists and feet up and down upon the earth, only to realise that he couldn't feel anything beneath him.

He could see straggly blades of grass and dried leaves; he could see a borer beetle walking unconcernedly beneath him; he could see the world, but could not touch it, and it did not appear to feel him.

This was another shock for Hamish. Not only had his hands and nose disappeared but every part of his body that he could normally see was not where it should be either – although he could still feel it. He opened his mouth, preparing to bawl out a forlorn query, when a worried voice asked:

"Is that yerself, Hamish?"

Relief flooded into the invisible poet and he stood up when he heard his enemy's voice. "It is indeed," he replied. "Is that yerself, Dougal?"

"Indeed it is, Hamish. Where have ye been? I've been looking for ye."

"I was looking for ye as well," replied Hamish. "And now I've ended up looking for myself."

"Ye're noo making sense, mon. I heard a terrible scream. Was it ye killing another poor wee versie?"

Hamish was too upset to be offended by the snide remark. "Oh, Dougal. "Twas me screaming," he admitted.

"Ye dinna say, Hamish," said Dougal, surprised that his enemy had actually admitted to a weakness. "If 'tis noo too personal a question would ye mind telling me why ye were screaming and where ye are?"

Hamish was past caring what anyone thought. He was just pleased that he wasn't alone. "I'm noo here," he replied dejectedly.

Dougal contemplated the puzzling reply and glanced around, disturbed that, although Hamish sounded as if he was close by, he could not be seen. "If ye're noo here, then where are ye, mon?" he asked.

"I dinna ken, Dougal. I was searching for ye, then I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I wasna here." Memory of the trauma caused Hamish to blame Dougal for his predicament. "If ye hadna hidden I wouldna have lost myself."

"But I wasna hiding. I've been searching for ye."

Hamish peered in the direction Dougal's voice was coming from, but could not see any sign of him. Dubiously, he enquired: "If yer noo hiding, why canna I see ye?"

"Here I am, Hamish," said Dougal, moving closer to his enemy's voice.

"Nay, yer noo," replied the other little man, unsure whether to be pleased or disappointed that he could not see Dougal.

"Of course I am. Just because ye're noo here doesna mean that I'm noo here." To prove his point, Dougal held up his arms in a display of presence – and was stunned to see that they weren't there. "Aaarrghh!" he screamed. "I'm noo here either!"

"I already told ye that."

"Where am I?" wailed Dougal. "I'm here, but I'm noo here. Bits of me must have gone away while I was trying to ignore ye reciting a silly poem. Oh, Hamish. Ye ken what the most terrible thing is? My noble nose has left without me. Waahhh!" he wailed again.

"Mine did as well, Dougal," said Hamish, relieved that he was not alone in his anguish.

"Did yer wee handies disappear as well?" enquired Dougal. "If yer wee handies have disappeared like mine then we'll noo have fingers to pick poems from our noses with."

"Ye idiot!" bellowed Hamish in frustration. "We dinna even have noses, so what's the use of having fingers to pick poems from them with?"

"That's right, Hamish. I was forgetting. I'm too upset to think clearly. I dinna like being here without myself for company."

"Well, why bother staying. Why not go away and search for yerself like the human being?"

"Will ye come with me, Hamish? I dinna like searching for myself alone, especially with nay poems to guide me. Anyway, ye have to find yerself as well."

"I realise that, Dougal," replied the other invisible diminutive poet. "And where do ye think we should start looking? The rest of us could be anywhere."

The wee bards pondered the problem while high overhead the cockatoo shrieked out: "**TEA! TEA!**" frustrated that the sound was not having the satisfying effect it had previously. The bird glared down and screeched at the disinterested world. Hamish and Dougal were deaf to everything except their voices and poetry. Suddenly one of the voices said:

"I have an idea, Hamish. Where do ye think would be the most logical place for me to be?"

"I canna fit ye and logic into the same thought," responded Hamish, brusquely.

"Stop making jokies. I'm serious. Naturally, if I'm noo here then I must be at the source of poetry. That makes sense, doesna it?"

"It would make sense that I was at the source of poetry, but I canna see why ye'd bother being there, Dougal," replied Hamish, unwilling to admit that he was impressed by the idea.

"Would ye come with me and hold my hand while I search for the source of my poetry? Not because I'm scared, ye mind, but I'm afraid ye might lose yerself, Hamish."

"How can I hold yer hand when ye dinna have any hands to hold? Ye ninny."

"But I can still feel where my handies were. Can ye feel where yer handies were, Hamish?"

"I can, Dougal. In fact, I can still feel my fingers that aren't there."

"I can feel my fingers that aren't there as well, even though I canna see them. And do ye know what?"

"What?"

"I can feel my feeties as well, although I canna feel the ground. Do ye think feeties can still walk even though they canna touch the ground?"

"Let's find out, Dougal. Where's yer hand?"

"It's on the end of my arm."

"I know it's on the end of yer arm, ye fool, but I canna see an arm that isna there."

"Oh! Sorry, Hamish. I forgot. Maybe if ye recite a poem I can follow the sound and find yer hand."

"I hate to admit it, Dougal, but I canna think up any poems to recite. I'm all deserted of poetry. The human's evil brew must have poisoned them."

"Me too, Hamish. In fact I canna even remember the poems I used to recite."

"Neither can I," replied Hamish with a sigh.

"Do ye know what else I canna do?" reflected Dougal.

"I dinna think I want to know," replied Hamish, feeling that he did not want to be acquainted with any more negative aspects of life than he'd already been forced to face since he'd last recited a poem.

"I canna hear any birdies," remarked Dougal, oblivious to whatever Hamish might be feeling. "In fact, other than us, I canna hear anything at all."

"Neither can I," Hamish agreed again, after listening to the bush.

"I'm glad we canna hear birdies together," said Dougal. "'Twould be a terrible thing if ye could hear them and I couldna."

"'Twould be even worse if ye could hear them and I couldna," commented Hamish.

"Whist, mon," urged Dougal. "If ye stop talking nonsense and put yer hand where yer voice was I'll be able to take hold of it."

"Ye're the one that's talking nonsense," replied the other little man acidly. "If I whist, how will ye know where my voice is?"

Dougal ignored his enemy and made a grab at where he thought Hamish's hand should be, but couldn't feel anything. Disappointed, he had the fleeting sensation that being able to touch an enemy was better than having hold of nothing. Undaunted, he reached out again and was rewarded with a howl of pain.

"Ouch," cried Hamish, angrily. "Mind what ye're doing! Ye nearly broke my nose that is noo here."

"Sorry," said Dougal, feeling no regret. Then he asked: "Have ye noticed that 'tis easier to view the world when yer nose has disappeared?"

Hamish rubbed the place where his nose should have been and remarked, "I canna understand why the bits of us that were visible have disappeared, yet they didna take their feelings with them. It doesna seem right. Either something is here or 'tis noo here. How is it possible to feel something ye canna see? And what about the ground? I canna feel it yet I'm standing on it." The wee bard thought for a moment before irrationally stating: "If I wasna here I'd fall through it!"

Dougal did not want to contemplate the possibilities of what Hamish was saying, so he changed the subject. "Leave yer hand that isna there in front of where yer nose used to be Hamish so I can take hold of it. We'd better go in search of the source of my poetry before it gets too late. Ye ken I dinna like searching for myself in the dark. I'm afeard the old Horrible Hairy might be waiting to hide in the night and attack me when I canna see it."

Hamish did not bother reassuring Dougal that the Horrible Hairy would have difficulty in attacking something that it could not see. Instead he managed to find his worried companion's hand before it connected with his nose again.

"Is that yerself?" enquired Dougal, as Hamish's fingers grasped his.

"Of course it is, ye ninny. Who else d'ye think it would be? The Horrible Hairy?"

"Dinna make jokies about the Horrible Hairy. Ye ken it scares me." Dougal looked around cautiously. "Which way do ye think we should go, Hamish?"

Hamish pondered the question without finding an answer. Not knowing why, he replied: "I think we should go the same way as the young human went."

"Why?" asked Dougal.

At a loss for any other reason, Hamish replied: "Because I doubt Horrible Hairies can abide the smell of human beings. C'mon, mon. Let's go."

While the day drifted away, the little men wandered hand in hand through the bush in the general direction that Archie had taken.

After arriving home, Archie was waiting for the kettle to boil when his attention was drawn to a portrait of the Scottish bard, Robbie Burns, hanging on the wall. The old man stood before the picture and reflected on the afternoon's events. What an incredible realm imagination is, he thought.

While the tea brewed, Archie told his wife about the little poets.

"I think all the tea you've drunk over the years must be starting to addle your brain," Edna commented, good-naturedly.

"You could be right," her husband agreed. "But it was tea well-drunk," he added contentedly.

A few days later Archie found the battered rosella tail feathersword in his coat pocket. *Life* can indeed be curious at times, he thought.

Out in the bush Dougal had a thought that he immediately wished he hadn't. "Do ye remember when we saw each other in the human's head?" he asked Hamish.

"How could I forget," shuddered the other little man.

"Well," continued his companion, "maybe he's stolen our bodies."

"Arrgghhh. Dinna say such things. They frighten me. I couldna bear to spend my life inside a human's head."

Dougal could not resist commenting: "At least ye would be used to drinking his poison."

Hamish shuddered again, sighed despondently and said: "Maybe that's why the tongue I dinna have is having so much trouble trying to recite a few bits of poetry so I'd know if I was getting closer to myself. I might be going the wrong way."

Poets are not renowned for having a good sense of direction and the wee bards were no exception. The light of day was fading, causing the invisible little men's gloom to deepen with the approaching night.

"Can ye hear any bits of my poems, Hamish?" enquired Dougal. "I'm afraid of looking for myself in the dark 'cos the things I canna see frighten me scared."

"But I canna see ye, Dougal," replied Hamish, "and that disna frighten me. What frightens me is noo being able to see myself."

"Ye ken what I mean, mon."

"Of course I do, Dougal. Now will ye just be quiet in case a poem's trying to tell me where I am."

"Sorry, Hamish, it's just..."

"Dougal, will ye shut up. 'Tis a shame yer voice didna disappear with the rest of ye and give me some peace."

"But how can we see when we dinna have eyes?" asked Dougal, unable to overcome his concern.

"For the same reason we can feel our bodies that we canna see!" Hamish replied in exasperation.

The longer the bards searched unsuccessfully for themselves the more grateful they became to share each other's company, and the tighter they held hands – not because they cared, they were just afraid of being alone.

Dougal stopped in his tracks, almost jerking Hamish's memory of himself over.

"I think I recognise this big tree," he said. "We passed it ages ago. We must be going around in circles."

"Maybe we're lost," lamented Hamish. "I dinna like being lost, Dougal. I thought only humans lost themselves. 'Tis noo natural for a poet to be lost."

"D'ye think it would be safer if we stay where we are and wait for tomorrow?" Dougal asked. He briefly contemplated the idea and then answered himself. "Yes. It would be a good idea to wait until tomorrow. Tomorrows are better than todays. I think it will be easier to find myself then."

"Ooohhh!" wailed Hamish. "What will I do?"

Dougal sat at the base of the towering gum tree and dragged Hamish down with him.

"Let's close our eyes, Hamish, and pretend we're noo here, then maybe what we canna see will noo scare us."

After Archie and Edna had retired for the night the wee bards joined them in snoring themselves into a deep sleep. Hand in hand, their dreams unmolested by nightmares, they contentedly dreamed of majestic, poetically enriched noses, noble noses.

Prior to falling asleep, Archie heard something bump against a windowpane. Although he thought it was probably a moth attracted to the fire's embers inside the house, he could not help feeling that it might actually have been a homeless poem in search of a mind to rest in. Tiredness overcame the old man and the thought faded into oblivion.

Arriving home from its travels the dawn drifted through the valley of the Freestone, sending nocturnal creatures back to their places of sanctuary. It awakened those who awaited its return and brushed Archie Hair's dreams from his sleep.

The old man eased his aged body out of bed and rekindled the stove's fire to boil the kettle in anticipation of a brew of.... For some incomprehensible reason – probably due to him still being partially embraced by sleep – the word 'poemjuice' replaced the name of his favourite beverage in Archie's mind. He shrugged aside what he considered must have been an aberration and went outside to greet the new day.

As soon as Archie opened the door, something within him felt like joining the birds' morning chorus in song, causing him to sing aloud:



"Oh, good morning, hullo happy day Our cares like stones we'll fling far away. Joy to the world we sing as we say Oh, hullo, happy day.

You'll do alright if you do no wrong And fill your heart with love's sweet song. Enjoy life now for you'll be long gone And say 'Hullo, happy day'.

Peace be with you wherever you are Sisters and brothers both near and far. Share the wonder of this fragile star And you'll always know happy days.

If you can't love, don't learn to hate. You'll get nowhere if you sit and wait. Like birds flying free learn to celebrate And enjoy another happy day." The song floated along the valley, waking Dougal who, for a moment, thought he was still dreaming. Letting go of his partner's hand, the little man cried joyfully, "Hamish, Hamish! Listen to that. Can ye hear it?"

The other little man almost choked on a snore as he struggled from sleep. "What? Is that ye, Dougal?" he mumbled groggily, "Ye're noo a Horrible Hairy, are ye?"

"'Tis a poem. A singing poem," replied Dougal, barely able to control his excitement. "Och, mon, we must be near the source of my poetry. Quick, there's nay time to waste. I have to find myself before it stops."

The wee bards leapt up and, deliriously happy, instinctively ran off in different directions – not questioning how they were able to hear a poem yet unable to hear birdsong.

"'Tis my songpoem I can hear," cried Hamish.

"Nay, 'tis mine," replied Dougal distantly.

"Nay, 'tis mine," called Hamish faintly. "Ye couldna sing a poem."

"I can now," yelled Dougal triumphantly from the limit of Hamish's hearing.

Unwittingly, the excited bards ran around in circles, arguing with each other whenever their paths crossed.

Archie sang the last verse of his songpoem:

"Don't weep, don't fret, don't moan, don't fear Just because you can't be here. When you die and go to Heaven you'll be quite near To dear old Briagolong."

When he finished singing, the old man scratched his head in bewilderment and asked himself: "Wherever could that song have come from?"

To his surprise, his wife had struggled out of bed without her husband's assistance and stood behind him, supporting her arthritic legs with two walking sticks.

"I don't know, Dad, but what I do know is that it's lovely to be sung awake," she replied fondly and leaned her head on the confused man's shoulder.

"That's true," agreed Archie. Although he felt pleased with the song he self-deprecatingly said: "But it was only silly verse."

"A man could do a whole lot worse than to start the day singing silly verse," replied Edna.

"What made you say that?" enquired her husband, feeling a sense of déjà vu.

"I don't know," she said. "It must have just popped into my mind."

"It's strange the things that pop into our minds," mused the old man. "Anyway, let's go and have a nice cup of tea."

"What a good idea," agreed Edna enthusiastically. Archie helped his wife back inside, seated her at the kitchen table and prepared the tea.

While Archie and Edna drank tea, the little poets stopped in their quest for themselves. They realised the songpoem had gone and were furious that the only sound they could hear was their own abuse.

"Ye idiot!" fumed Dougal. "Ye've made me lose myself. If ye hadna been running around in circles I would have found my source by now!"

"Ye canna blame me," raged Hamish. "I was just about to find my source when ye distracted me by going the wrong way!"

"I wasna going the wrong way," grumbled Dougal. " 'Twas ye noo being capable of knowing which way to go that caused me to confuse myself."

The wee bards argued until even they realised their dispute was pointless. "Alright," they asked together. "What direction do ye think we should take?"

"That way," they said in unison, pointing in opposite directions.

"We canna both be right," chided Hamish.

"And we canna both be wrong," said Dougal.

Each poet was so sure of himself that neither considered the possibility they could both be wrong. However, they decided to compromise and went off hand in hand once again in search of themselves in a direction neither had suggested. Sometime later they arrived at the Hair's home.

"That canna be the place of the source of poetry," commented Hamish, in disappointment.

"'Tis just a place where humans hide."

"Aye," agreed Dougal, overwhelmed by a sense of futility.

"I think the songpoem must have come from further up the valley," said Hamish.

"Nay," disagreed Dougal. "It came from down the valley."

"Och, mon," sighed Hamish. "The ears ye dinna have are deceiving ye."

"Well, if ye're so sure, go and look for yerself alone yer way and I'll go and look for myself my way. Then ye'll find out I'm right," snorted Dougal through the memory of a nose he yearned for.

"Ye'll never find yerself without me," commented Hamish as he turned disconsolately in a direction he did not feel confident in taking.

"I've more chance of finding myself even if I went the wrong way than by going yer way," snapped Dougal without conviction.

"Yah!" was all Hamish could say as he let go of Dougal's hand and wandered off, wilfully and miserable, alone.

"Yah to yerself and yer weenie wee nose, which ye dinna even have anyway," mumbled Dougal with no sense of satisfaction.

A feeling of despondency overwhelmed each little man as he walked away from his enemy without even bothering to abuse him anymore. Unbeknown to them, each lost poet kept in close proximity to Archie and Edna's home while they searched for themselves and the source of poetry.

Inside their home, the elderly couple were going about their morning routine when Bonny began running around in a circle while chasing her tail. Around and around she ran in what appeared to be a vain attempt to catch herself. Then she stopped and abruptly flopped down on the floor with her head resting on her paws and a mournful expression in her eyes.

"That's strange," the old man said to his wife, startled by the dog's actions. "She's never done that before."

"Do you know, Archie," replied Edna. "I've a feeling that's not the only thing that never happened before."

"Why do you say that?" enquired her husband.

"To tell you the truth, I don't really know," she responded. "It's just that ... it's just ... Oh, I don't know. But for a moment I had the strangest sensation that my thoughts weren't only mine. It was almost as if ... well, as if another person was going around in circles in my mind, confusing me. But that can't be possible. Can it?"

"I doubt it, Mum, although I must admit there have been occasions when I've had a similar feeling myself." Archie pondered for a moment "I wonder if we are not alone in our minds?"

"Don't say that" said his wife, with a shudder. "It's something I'd prefer not to think about. It's difficult enough sharing my mind with myself. I certainly don't want to share it with a stranger as well."

Her husband did not respond, although the concept had concerned him as well.

Later that day Archie was strolling near the creek when a poemthought popped into his mind. The old man could not resist reciting it aloud to the bush in a Scottish accent.

"I tried to be what I wasna

So I wouldna be what I was. When I wasna what I couldna be I said diddle le diddle le de."

I wonder where that came from? he thought. Maybe we breathe-in poems floating around in the air and have to recite them aloud to set them free again.

Flying above Archie, the frustrated cockatoo loudly shrieked: "**TEA!** TEA!" furious that its attempt to upset the poet was having no effect.

"TEA! TEA!" raged the bird until it irreparably damaged its vocal chords and became mute.

Hamish and Dougal rushed towards where they thought the poem had originated but arrived too late. All they could see was the bald, young man walking away from them in the distance. Once again they began arguing about whose fault it was the poem had left before they reached it.

The cockatoo swooped down and perched in a tree, unaware that beneath its malevolent glare the invisible wee bards were searching for themselves and the source of poetry.

When he arrived home from his walk Edna noticed that her husband was grinning. She asked him what was funny.

"I was just thinking," he chuckled, mischievously, "that we should make up a little parcel of used tealeaves and leave it where I saw the strange little men."

"Oh, Dad, do you think we should?" asked his wife.

Imagining the disgusted looks on the bards' faces warmed her husband to the idea and he said that they definitely should. He only regretted not being there when the parcel was opened. Neither one of the elderly couple gave any thought to the fact that they were acting as if the little poets actually existed.

For the next few days Archie and Edna saved and dried their used tealeaves. After wrapping them in a piece of butcher's paper Archie printed 'Hamish and Dougal' on the package. He took it to where he thought he had encountered the wee bards and left it in a prominent position, but did not linger. Although the little men had fascinated him he was not eager to meet them again because he had found the apparent interaction between reality and fantasy disturbing.

What became of the wee bards is unknown. Archie returned to see if the package was still there. It was, but it had been opened and tealeaves littered the ground around it. He also noticed that the jackets he thought he had left on a rock while the bards had their duel were no longer there.

A week after Archie had seen the scattered tealeaves, a gang of workers from the Country Roads Board stopped to have morning smoko beside the creek and noticed patches of burnt grass.

"Looks like there's been some bloody idiots lighting fires around here," commented one of the men in disgust.

As they sat down and poured mugs of tea from their flasks they were unaware of a mute cockatoo glaring down at them in expectation and frustration.



A breeze that had been playfully blowing along the Freestone track, whirling up dust devils and puffing over ants struggling beneath the burdens of their scavenged provisions, lost interest in those distractions and changed direction.

It rustled the leaves of trees that had been basking in the pleasant afternoon warmth. The leaves shook in annoyance and waited for the breeze to pass by before being able to settle contentedly once again.

When it reached the Blue Pool, unconcerned by what Sid was experiencing, the breeze rippled the tranquil surface, fragmenting the scene until it dissolved and disappeared.

The man was so absorbed in what he had been sharing that it took a while for him to realize it was over. With a feeling of disappointment he looked up from the water.

"Did you enjoy your meeting with The Storyteller, Mr Block?" enquired Rianna from where she sat beside him.

"Is that who he was?" asked Sid, looking down, surprised to find his companion gone and the faerie returned as if she had never left. "I thought he was an old swagman with severely bloodshot eyes. Anyway, where's the person you went to find who was going to tell me more about Archie Hair?"

"That was him; The Storyteller. Not much happens in the bush that he doesn't know about." "That's probably because he makes it up," said Sid, still unable to completely accept his experiences.

"No. It's because he is observant while traveling both inside and outside his self. Unlike someone I could mention," retorted Rianna.

"But where has he gone?" enquired Sid, ignoring the comment. "He disappeared so suddenly."

"I suppose he went to the next story."

"Will we meet him there?"

"I doubt it. You have to find your own stories. You can't keep relying on others to pander to your needs. Archie and The Storyteller had a lot of things in common to share because they found so many aspects of life interesting. They didn't waste most of their time worrying about themselves. You have a long way to go before The Storyteller would get any satisfaction from anything you had to share. That's why we don't have time to waste. Come on Mister Man-Who-Talks-To-Rocks."

"That's it!" exclaimed Sid, annoyed that he had not thought of it earlier. "I did have something to share with him. I could have told him about my encounter with the mountain egg. I'm sure that would have impressed him."

The faerie smiled, encouraged by his enthusiasm.

"And what about the old horrible hairy?" Sid continued, feeling frustrated that he had been left with unanswered questions. "What was it and where did it come from? That was something I wanted to ask The Storyteller."

"I'm not sure," replied Rianna, "but I have a feeling it could have been Archie Hair."

"There wasn't anything horrible about him," exclaimed Sid, surprised by her reply.

"Of course not," said the faerie, "but, just as many humans blame other people for their own inadequacies and fear of the unknown so too did the little men. They didn't realise that, like humans, what they really feared were aspects of themselves that they did not understand.

"Although Archie seemed to be a happy, well-adjusted person who didn't complain about life, like most people he must have had his worries and self-doubts. That could have been why he enjoyed the relief of going to his special place so that he could fantasize for a while and forget about what concerned him.

"He was also an old man with health problems. To make matters worse his poor wife was very ill and needed a lot of his care and attention.

"Archie's family name was Hair. His ancestry was Scottish, he believed in faeries and the little people, and enjoyed writing poetry. Possibly, the wee bards were figments of his imagination that somehow seemed to have briefly taken on lives and personalities of their own. He must have realised they would probably cease to exist when he stopped thinking about them and that could have worried him.

"Their bodies may have disappeared when they became just another of Archie's memories. All of these factors could have become mixed up in his mind and projected into Hamish and Dougal's fears so that they were also affected by the same negative feelings.

"Try and put yourself in the bards' position, Mister. Other than their animosity towards each other, which could have been caused by conflicts in Archie's mind, they blamed the rest of their problems on the old man, or the bald young man as they preferred to call him so that they did not have to face reality. Remember, he never told them that his surname was Hair.

"Who knows? Maybe the wee bards had unconsciously created the Horrible Hairy as something to be feared. They were unaware that Archie Hair was the hairy they feared and that his thoughts probably created their own. Anyway, you can't expect logical answers to flights of fancy."

"But how did the storyteller know they still existed after their bodies had disappeared?" Sid persisted, dissatisfied with the answer. "Archie Hair couldn't have told him, just as Archie couldn't have known all about the duckorpuss, or the other stories he told."

"Maybe a Listening Tree told him that the little men existed without bodies. Just as one probably related aspects of other stories to Archie that he had been unaware of. Anyway, why do you expect me to have all the answers?"

"Because you're a faerie," replied Sid, not thinking to ask what a Listening Tree was. Neither did he consider how ridiculous he would have felt under any other circumstances trying to seek explanations to implausible events from a creature he was not convinced existed.

"Ah, if you accept that then at least we have made some progress," she replied, with relief. "However, if the wee bards escaped from Archie's imagination and somehow continued to exist in spirit after the old man stopped thinking about them, then at least they had something worthwhile to pursue and would not have become horbgorbles. I hope they eventually became friends with other bush spirits and learned how to write poetry without Archie's help."

"What the heck are horbgorbles, for goodness sake?" The more answers the man sought, the more confused he became.

"Horbgorbles are beings who spend their lives wandering around aimlessly, without direction – somewhat like you seem to have been doing. Fortunately, unlike horbgorbles, you were not bereft of dreams.

"Horbgorbles' lives are a boring waste of time and responsible for the majority of dream faeries' broken hearts. They always have excuses and are quick to blame others for their failures and the futile state of their lives because they lack the vision and courage it takes to be an individual.

"Horbgorbles crave security and comfort and need the acceptance of their peers. They are judgmental without analysis and have a group mentality that finds it less threatening to be told what to think, without question. Whatever else happens to you, Mister, never become a horbgorble."

Sid did not respond, he just looked back at the pool. It was calm once again, the breeze having passed by to annoy leaves further down the valley. While he was thinking about horbgorbles the faerie asked:

"What did The Storyteller share with you?"

Sid turned to look at Rianna and told her what he had experienced.

"Didn't he tell you about his meeting with Archie, and how kookaburras learned to laugh? "No," he replied.

"What about Old Mister Fourtycoats or Karla Gilhal and her Listening Tree?"

"No," he repeated.

"What about the O'Donovan's?"

"No," he repeated again.

"Maybe he left them in the water for you?"

"He left so quickly he wouldn't have had time," Sid said, no longer surprised by such a suggestion. "Anyway, he'd have to be here to tell them."

"Not necessarily, I'll start them off. Just do as he requested. Empty your mind and look into the water. Not at the surface or the bottom but somewhere in between."

Sidney Block did as he was told. Although he thought he could vaguely hear the faerie's voice he was not conscious of listening to her. As previously, a scene began unfolding within the water and the man felt himself become a witness to what was happening.

THE O'DONOVANS

Archie rummaged around in his box of wonders until he found a worn, opaque marble. He held this up to the candlelight between his thumb and forefinger for all to see.

"This innocent alley* may have partly caused the death of my mate DeCourcey O'Donovan's grandpa," the old man said dramatically while looking around at the children's faces. He knew there was nothing better than talking about tragedy or ghosts for getting a child's attention – especially at night while candles burned in the darkened room of an isolated bush home.

"The O'Donovans were a farming family who lived on a property along the Marathon Road in the early 1900's. The whole family was a bit eccentric but they were good, kind-hearted people." The old man seemed to reconsider for a moment. "Well, they were until it came to playing marbles.

"My family lived near Rosedale. I met DeCourcey when our fathers took us to a cattle auction in Sale. We were both about the same age and became mates."

The old man put the marble on the table and began slowly rolling it back and forth from one work-worn hand to the other, as if rolling back gnarled years.



"Sometimes I stayed with his family," Archie said. "The railway line used to go through Briagolong in those days, so I could catch the train. DeCourcey would meet me at the station with a horse and cart.

"The O'Donovans were Quakers. That's a religion where the followers believe in peace and say 'thee' and 'thou' when they talk to you. They are also known as The Friends"

"What do they say when they don't talk to you?" enquired Cooper, innocently.

Archie stopped rolling the marble and looked at the boy. "They don't say anything," he replied with a chuckle, "unless they're talking to someone else. Quakers don't seem to talk a lot. They probably spend most of their talking time thinking."

"Not like you Mister Hair," said Cooper, unaware that his response might be considered offensive.

The other children and Edna giggled. Archie smiled and wondered whether the boy's naïve honesty ever got him into trouble.

"That's right, my boy; not like me," the old man agreed, knowing there was no malice in the boy's observation. "Now, don't confuse me or I'll lose my place. Anyway, even though they didn't talk much Mr and Mrs O'Donovan had lots of children."

When she heard what her husband had unwittingly implied Edna giggled again. The children looked at the elderly lady and wanted to know what was funny.

"Oh, I just tickled myself with the wool," she replied, holding up her knitting as if to prove what she had said, while trying not to laugh.

Archie, belatedly realising what had caused her amusement, glanced towards his wife and caught her eye. That did it. The elderly couple could not contain themselves. They burst out laughing.

The puzzled children looked at each other and then began joining in with the infectious laughter. The fact that they did not know what they were laughing about made the situation even funnier to Archie and Edna.

Eventually the laughter died down. Edna pulled a crumpled handkerchief from the bottom of one of her cardigan sleeves and dabbed the tears from her eyes.

"That was a funny joke," said Chloe.

"What were we laughing at, Mister Hair?" asked Robin.

His question almost caused Edna to start laughing again. She snorted into her handkerchief and then pretended to blow her nose.

"I don't know," replied Archie. "But whenever Mum starts laughing I can't help laughing as well." The old man realised it was probably an unsatisfactory answer but decided that for now it was better than the truth.

Archie gazed down at the marble. His eyes began to glaze over as if he was being transported back through time to the period he was reminiscing about. When he spoke again it was as if he was talking to himself.

"The farm was a haven for animals. In fact they were so friendly and peaceful I wouldn't have been surprised if they had been Quakers as well – although I never heard them say 'thee' and 'thou'.

"The animals were allowed to roam free and seemed to look after each other, especially at night when there was more likelihood of danger from foxes, cats or wild dogs. The only dog I ever saw on the farm was an old mongrel called Rastus that used to wander in occasionally. I suppose the family must have felt he was harmless.

"There were ducks, chickens, goats, geese, sheep and a ram known as Rameses the Great who was unaware that he was past his prime. A fearless male goat, Billy the Kid, looked after the nanny goats.

"The carthorse was called Benjamin. A huge Clydesdale that was used to pull the plough was known as Methuselah. He was called that because his mother had been in labour for so

long before his birth that it was reckoned the foal would have grown into an old horse by the time he was born. The dairy cows were accompanied by a docile but ferocious-looking bull that was jokingly called Buttercup.

"Besides the farm animals, a lot of native creatures seemed to find the place a sanctuary. Maybe it was because everything knew the O'Donovans were vegetarians that they felt safe there.

"Mr and Mrs O'Donovan, who were known locally as Pa and Ma O'Donovan, were renowned cheesemakers. They made cheese from sheep, goat and cow milk.

"Some of their children, after being told that the moon was believed to be made of cheese, tried trapping moonbeams in milk cans at night in what was to be an unsuccessfull attempt in making what they had intended marketing as 'fairy cheese'.

"They were disappointed when, after removing the tops from the cans the following morning, the moonbeams seemed to have disappeared.

"Mrs O'Donovan spun the wool her husband clipped from the sheep and used it to knit thick, showerproof winter jumpers, socks, scarves and gloves that were very popular in the area and another source of income for the family.

"Until they died and were buried in an animal graveyard on the property, the animals lived contented lives doing what animals do. However, of course the crops, fruit and vegetables had to be harvested.

"This was a distressing time for the family. I often heard them apologizing to whatever they were picking or harvesting. They'd say: 'I'm sorry, 'tis not thy fault thee were born what thou art'."

Archie smiled at the memory: "The family even apologised to weeds when they pulled them out of the ground. I asked DeCourcey why his family did that when weeds were such pests. He said that it was not the weeds' fault they had to be killed, and then mentioned a quotation by an American poet I had never heard of.

"DeCourcey wrote the poet's quote and name down for me. When I was back at school I asked my teacher about him. She was surprised and impressed that I had heard of the bloke, and almost seemed to like me for a while."

Archie stopped talking, as if remembering the change in his teacher's attitude towards him. Then he continued: "The poet's name was Ralph Waldo Emerson. What he was supposed to have said was: 'Weeds are only plants we have not yet found a use for'."

While his words recounted the past to the children Archie slipped back into his memory as if time had moved on and forgotten to take a boy with it.

*

Grandfather O'Donovan had once been a reasonably intelligent, proud, well-dressed man with what was considered to be a bright future ahead of him. However, time and circumstances had worn him down into a wizened, cranky, bent old fellow who walked around talking to himself while wearing a battered hat, grubby long johns and the remains of a pair of boots.

DeCourcey had told Archie that the grandfather saved his trousers for prayer meetings. The poor old bloke had forgotten that he wasn't welcome at prayer meetings anymore because he talked a lot of nonsense out loud to himself and disrupted the contemplative gatherings. His belief that he was talking to God had not changed The Friends' minds.

There was a large emu that seemed intrigued by the grandfather and followed him whenever he went wandering around the farm or through the bush. The old chap was too involved in talking to himself, or God, to notice that he had company.

The old man, who seemed long past caring about anything that was happening around him, still had one passion that had dominated his life since childhood, and that was for playing marbles. He even had a special pocket sewn onto the chest of his long johns in which he kept

his favourite marble – a worn, opaque alley that he had won in the distant past during an exuberant boyhood.

The O'Donovan children were well aware of the grandfather's passion and hated his intrusion into their games because he would get grumpy if he wasn't winning. To make sure it was safe to play the kids would take it in turns keeping watch. Because the grandfather was now short and bent it was easier to keep a lookout for the emu to know where the old man was.

On the day Archie was talking about the farm animals were relaxing in the pleasant morning sunshine – except for a hen that was late in laying her egg because she had slept in after a nocturnal tryst with a rooster.

The O'Donovan kids and a young Archie Hair had smoothed the playing area, made a circle in the dirt and, with the grandfather safely out of the way, were looking forward to a game of marbles.

Each of the children had a small calico bag containing their alleys and a piece of rag to polish them with.

The game began. There was little noise other than the pleasant clicking of alleys and the contented murmuring of chickens giving themselves dust baths.

A cockatoo alighted upon a limb of a nearby gum tree and shrieked out as if complaining that it had not been invited to play. After some of the kids threw stones at the bird it seemed to get the impression that it was not welcome so, with a final, defiant shriek, it flew away.

When it was young Archie's turn to play one of the other children would say: 'Tis thy turn, Archie.'

As time passed the game progressed and became more exciting, eventually reaching such a height of tension that everyone's concentration – including the person who was supposed to be on grandpa watch – was fixated on it.

Behind the circle of children farm animals gathered around to watch. Charlotte, a goat who had never been able to see any sense in most human activity, was drawn by her natural inquisitiveness towards the centre of the children's excitement. She stood looking over the head of a very keen participant, Ned, as he knelt near the dirt circle in intense concentration. The lad's finger joints were locked with his alley poised between finger and thumb, prepared for a shot that he was sure would win him the game.

The dark slits of Charlotte's emotionless pupils watched what was happening. Being a goat she instinctively knew it was her right to get the best possible view of everything the world had to offer. Just as Ned was on the verge of delivering his shot, she lifted up her forelegs and placed them on his back.

Unfortunately, Charlotte's curiosity caused the boy's shot to misfire. After watching his alley skew from the circle in a puff of dust without touching any of the other alleys, Ned stood up and angrily chased the goat away. That was an act for which she never forgave him and would later butt his backside whenever he knelt down to play a shot.

Ned began tying her up before the start of each game, causing more animosity between them. Eventually she kept away from the games and gave him the evil eye from a distance

His encounter with Charlotte may have contributed to Ned's loss of belief in vegetarianism as he grew older. In fact, he occasionally had wonderfully satisfying dreams of feasting on roasted goat meat liberally covered with gravy.

After Charlotte had been chased away, the game resumed with Ned being allowed to have another shot. Even the animals were quiet as he aimed his alley into the circle. Once again he was on the verge of shooting.

A blowfly buzzed past his head on its way to brunching on leftover porridge Mrs. O'Donovan had thrown out, but it did not affect the boy's intense concentration. Ned's whole being was poised as if he had been created for that moment.

There was nothing more important in the universe than the distance between his alley and its target. The trigger muscles of his hand had reached a peak of tension only acquired after many hours of practice. The missile was on the verge of being fired.

"MY SHOT. MY SHOT," screamed the grandfather as he unexpectedly burst into the backyard with the emu following close behind.

"MY SHOT," the old boy wheezed as he shoved animals and children aside in his frantic haste to reach the playing circle.

Once again Ned misfired.

Too feeble-minded to be worried about the finesse of playing the game he had loved since childhood, the grandfather withdrew the worn old alley. Instead of aiming it in the normal way he lifted up his arm and forcefully flung the alley into the ring.

From past experience the O'Donovan kids knew what would happen and had quickly retrieved their alleys before the grandfather stole them. But young Archie wasn't quick enough. Before he had time to save his alleys the emu had pushed the raving grandfather over and began eating them, as if they were large seeds from an exotic fruit.

The backyard was a scene of pandemonium. The grandfather was furious when he saw the emu scoop up his antique alley. He grabbed the bird around its neck in an attempt to stop it swallowing the marble.

The emu strutted off, dragging the old man along as if he was no more than an inconvenient bag of wind. This did not stop the bag of wind from protesting loudly, using words that for someone who professed to talk to God were unlikely to have been acceptable in Heaven.

To make matters worse the flap in the seat of his underwear became unbuttoned and, to the children's disgust, exposed his scrawny bum.

Even Rastus, the world-weary mongrel dog that wandered around the neighbourhood farms scavenging scraps of food, seemed revolted by it – and Rastus had sniffed more disgusting backsides on his life's journey than he cared to be reminded of.

But the silly old bloke refused to let go. At least he refused to let go until his head was bashed against a fence post. The emu then kicked the unconscious head and wandered off, leaving the old man in peace.

The children thought the grandfather was dead. Not knowing what else to do they ran around screaming and yelling, causing the animals to also react in noisy confusion.

The youngest of the children, little Kenny, wet himself and stood in the middle of the backyard bawling loudly while the dust around his feet turned into mud.

The flywire door banged shut behind the parents as they rushed outside to see what the commotion was all about.

When she saw her father with a bloodied head and his shrivelled, exposed bum slumped by the fence post, an embarrassed Mrs O'Donovan rushed over and buttoned up the flap in his underwear. As she did so the woman could not help feeling depressed when she saw what age had done to the flesh that had once been a forceful part of her creation.

Rather than waste a trip to hospital, Mr O'Donovan checked to make sure the old fellow was still breathing. Unfortunately he was, so the husband and wife carefully lifted up his frail body and carried it into the barn where their dray was parked. They lay the grandfather on some empty chaff bags in the back of the dray and harnessed Benjamin between the shafts.

When everything was ready DeCourcey was told to look after his brothers and sisters while his mum and dad took the grandfather to Maffra hospital.

While DeCourcey kept an eye on the other kids young Archie followed the emu, waiting for the alleys to pass through its system. After wasting time in this pursuit, and unsuccessfully digging through sloppy pooh with his fingers, he went in search of a long thin stick.

In the barn he found some bamboo canes that were probably going to be used to make fishing rods, or plant supports. He borrowed a cane and secured a chicken feather in its tip. He then filled his pockets with grains of wheat from a bin before returning to the paddock where the bird was pecking away at the ground.

While whistling softly to himself Archie strolled casually towards the rear of the emu. The bird was not fooled by the boy's seemingly innocent attitude and looked around at him with a warning glare before walking a few paces away to a new feeding place. Undeterred, Archie put the bamboo on the ground and approached the bird once again, scattering the wheat as he did so.

Losing interest in the boy the bird wandered over to peck at the grain, thus giving Archie the opportunity he had been waiting for. He picked up the bamboo but held it close to the ground so as not to spook the emu while cautiously creeping towards its rear.

When he was about 10 feet away Archie carefully knelt and, while the bird had its head down and bottom up, was about to tickle it on its behind when the bird unexpectedly stepped backwards.

Not realizing how precise his aim had been, Archie was surprised, but not as surprised as the emu, when the feather and first couple of inches of bamboo disappeared inside the bird's bum.

The unexpected shock caused the startled bird to leap further from the ground than any of its species had been known to leap previously.

Immediately after leaving the ground the bird's powerful legs automatically went into running mode in fright, so that when it landed the emu dashed off across the paddock as if it had been launched from a rocket.

Unfortunately, instinct tightened the bird's sphincter muscle around the bamboo in a vice-like grip, causing it to be dragged along behind.

Archie's intention had been to tickle the emu's backside in the hope that the surprise would force it to excrete the alleys. Now it seemed as if the stick had jammed the alleys inside the bird.

Watching forlornly, fearing that his alleys had been lost forever as each mighty panicstricken stride took the bird further away, Archie suddenly rejoiced when he saw the pole shoot back out of the emu, followed by a stream of waste matter that he hoped contained his alleys.

While the bird disappeared over a hill, never to be seen again, Archie ran to where the bamboo had been ejected. To his delight, in a mucky trail of emu pooh, were his alleys. Even the grandfather's worn old favourite was lying there. Pleased with himself, Archie cleaned them up as best he could with grass before putting them in his calico bag and returning to the farmhouse.

Young Archie told the O'Donovan kids how he had retrieved the alleys – just as an old Archie at the other end of his life was to tell children many years later in the little wooden house near the banks of the Freestone Creek.

Due to the pre-existing condition of his mental state, the doctors were unable to determine whether the grandfather had sustained any brain damage from his encounter with the emu and the fence post. However, because of the frailty of his body and mind, they decided that he should not live in the bush any longer.

Mr and Mrs O'Donovan discussed with The Friends what should be done with the old coot who, everyone agreed, was at an awkward age.

A kind, elderly widow, not realizing what she was letting herself in for, said that the grandfather was welcome to stay in a bungalow at the rear of her house. This solution was agreed upon and the rest of The Friends offered to help look after him in any way they could.

So it came to pass that the old boy briefly resided in Maffra. Unfortunately, his health deteriorated rapidly – although it did not stop him from occasionally shocking some of the local matrons by walking up and down the main street wearing his long johns while talking to himself, or God (or whatever was befuddling his mind) whenever he was able.

Nobody was surprised when the grandfather's landlady found him lying dead on his bed one day. But what did surprise them was that when she found him he was wearing clean boots, a tie over a fresh pair of long johns and a new hat – as if prepared for the next stage of his journey.

Mrs O'Donovan made sure the toilet flap beneath his bottom was buttoned up before he was placed in his coffin. She didn't want her father wandering around Heaven exposing himself and giving his family a bad name while talking to God in person.

Young Archie asked the family if he could keep the grandfather's alley. They had agreed, pleased to be rid of it after all the arguments it had caused. That was the first object Archie was to put in his box of wonders.

As the boys grew older and had more responsibilities Archie and DeCourcy saw each other less frequently, until they eventually lost contact.

Years later Archie heard the terrible news that DeCourcy had been killed, and Benjamin put down, one stormy night after the horse and cart had slid down a culvert and overturned as he was driving home along the Marathon Rd.

There were numerous stories told about the O'Donovans, but most of them have been lost with the passing of time and the people who had once remembered them. However, one story persists.

As the O'Donovan children grew older they went their own ways. The last to remain with his mum and dad was their eldest son, DeCourcey. Apparently he was satisfied to spend his life working on the farm, and the three of them had lived there contentedly up until the night of his tragic accident.

After their beloved son's funeral his parents were invited to live with one of their daughters and her family on their property on the other side of Briagolong.

Over the next few weeks the farmer and his wife discussed what they should do. Long before DeCourcy's death they had been missing the sounds and activity of their children about the farm. They accepted that as the natural process of life but without DeCourcey the loneliness caused them to lose heart in living there.

Pa and Ma O'Donovan decided to accept their daughter's offer and, although they were worried about the animals' welfare, put the farm up for sale as a going concern.

Having arranged for the remainder of their possessions to be delivered and the animals looked after until the new owners moved in, the farmer and his wife packed up the dray with what they wanted to take with them.

After bidding the animals farewell, the elderly couple drove slowly away.

Because they had been raised together, the animals looked after each other and had developed a strategy for times of danger when a dingo or feral animal approached the farm looking for prey.

The trespasser was shocked to find itself confronted by outraged honks and a rush of geese when it crept onto the property. This was a warning to every other living thing in the vicinity,

causing the more vulnerable animals to gather together for safety while Rameses the Great, Billy the Kid, Buttercup, Benjamin and Methuselah patrolled their perimeter.

The area's established predators had learned from past experience never to go near the farm no matter how hungry they were, but newcomers were tempted by the succulent meals they could see in the distance.

The ducks, geese and chickens had never had their wings clipped, so were able to fly. This they did above the predator, confusing it with noisy warning calls and frantic beating of wings until Billy and Rameses charged and butted the intruder.

To the victim's horror, Buttercup's huge, ugly head would then appear and, with a powerful toss of his horns, throw the hapless creature into the air. When it landed and, having lost its appetite, was about to drag itself to safety either Benjamin or Methuselah would help the victim on its way with a parting kick from a rear hoof.

Knowing from past experience that particular intruder would never bother them again, secure in their friendship, the animals relaxed once more.

Prior to realising that his stock had a defence system, Pa O'Donovan used to leap out of bed at night whenever he heard the angry honking, quacking and squawking, and load his rifle with the intention of shooting the predator. However, it did not take the farmer long to see that the animals were capable of looking after themselves. The cacophony still woke him up but he didn't bother getting out of bed. He would just lie there until he heard distressed yelping or wailing and then contentedly return to sleep.

Because the animals never seemed to want to leave the farm, the O'Donovan's didn't cage them and became lax in repairing the fences. Although they did not want to leave without them, the farmer and his wife felt they had no choice because the extra stock would have been a burden to their daughter and son-in-law.

As the O'Donovan's trundled away down the road behind Daniel (the carthorse who had replaced Benjamin) trusty, grey-whiskered Methuselah (now seemingly as old as his namesake) plodded faithfully along behind.

The farm animals must have sensed that the farmer and his wife would not be returning. Unwilling to be left, they had no difficulty in getting through the broken fences and forming a ragged procession strung out behind the dray.

With the sound of their horses and the dray clattering along the road it wasn't until the O'Donovans had stopped at the intersection with the Valencia Creek Road, and looked around to see if there was any other traffic, that they noticed they were being followed.

Besides the farm animals some native creatures were also following them. In the trees along the roadside birds that had joined the exodus alighted, waiting to see what would happen next.

Pa and Ma O'Donovan were stunned and overjoyed by the animals' loyalty. But they were worried about what the new owner's reaction would be when he found there wasn't any of the stock he had paid for left on the farm.

The situation was discussed briefly but both husband and wife knew that, even if there had been a way of restraining them, they did not have the heart to return the animals and leave them again. They decided there was no choice but to repay the new owner for his loss.

The couple put as many of the smaller animals as they could onto their possessions and set off once again with the rest following behind. To enable the animals to keep up with them they travelled so slowly that Daniel kept nodding off to sleep in his harness, while his hooves automatically clip-clopped, sleepwalking, along the road.

When the procession reached Briagolong the town's inhabitants emerged to watch it pass. Even the pub's most dedicated patrons could not resist going outside to view it – making sure they took their drinks with them.

Everyone knew about the O'Donovan's love of animals but what was now being witnessed had never been seen before and was unlikely to be seen again.

Feeling like royalty, the farmer and his wife waved regally to everyone they saw – even the pub's patrons – while the geese honked warnings at the onlookers.

Daniel, awoken from his somnambulate state by a call of nature, stopped outside the pub. With a blissful expression on his face he gazed at the patrons on the verandah as if they were a prompt, and then lustily emptied his bladder and bowels.

When the journey recommenced Methuselah trod in the steaming deposit but was daydreaming, and too old to care anyway.

As the contingent turned left at the general store on their way to Boundary Rd, along which their new home was situated, Edward Bennett poked his head out of the door, saw the passing parade, and uttered: "Struth!"



Edward Bennett cutting his final birthday cake

Edward, unaware that he was on his way to being recognized as the oldest man in the Commonwealth before his death, aged 109, in 1942, was so overwhelmed by what he saw that he forgot to take home a loaf of bread he had paid for. This oversight was to become a bone of contention between him and the storekeeper who refused to admit that Edward had paid for it.

After the O'Donovan's daughter and her husband overcame the shock of all the extra mouths they had to feed, the farm animals and humans settled down together. However, there was another interesting outcome to the O'Donovan's move.

During the days following the parade an extraordinary number of snails, caterpillars, slugs, aphids and various other insects were seen travelling the route that Pa and Ma O'Donovan had taken.

At first this was thought to be one of nature's amazing migratory events, which Briagolong's residents accepted with the equanimity of country folk. However, due to the amount of insects slaughtered by various forms of traffic, the roads became slippery with their mangled remains and dangerous for travellers.

Birds began arriving from far and wide to feast on the smorgasbord. When they were too bloated to eat any more they attempted to fly away, but most just crash-landed after take-off and had to rest until they had digested the food. This made them easy prey for cats that feasted on so many birds they became easy targets for dogs.

The insect trail was found to lead from the O'Donovan's old farm to their new abode.

Pa and Ma O'Donovan came to an amicable agreement with the purchaser of their property, who was pleasantly surprised when he noticed that it seemed to be free of insect pests.

What the O'Donovan's son-in-law thought about the influx of pests onto his farm, or how he dealt with it, is unknown.

*

"And that," said Archie to his audience of children one night, many years later, as he returned the old, worn marble to his box of wonders, "was that."

* Alley: Alleys were originally made from clay, and then stone or marble chips obtained from quarries. Later ally-tors were made of alabaster. It is presumed that ally-tor marbles got their name from the word tor, which is Celtic for rock or stone.

THE KOOKABURRAS' LAUGH

Archie Hair was feeling old. This was not surprising, he was old, but because he had always been young at heart it was unusual for him to be affected by the age of his years. However, on this particular day he felt as if he had been old all his life.

Archie mentioned the feeling to Edna who, without thinking, flippantly remarked that he probably felt a bit melancholy because most of his life was behind him. As soon as the words left her mouth she regretted them and compassionately told her husband not to take any notice, it was just her arthritis talking. Poor Edna had suffered from arthritis for years and used two walking sticks to help her get around.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said apologetically. "You're the youngest man I've ever known, no matter what age you are. There must be a reason why you feel that way. As you say yourself, there's a reason for everything."

Archie thought about why he should feel the way he did but could not find an answer. Although it had not been easy he was not unhappy with his lot in life. He loved his wife and where they lived. Their lack of money and material possessions did not concern him unduly.

Neither Archie nor Edna had ever cared for most things that money could buy because they did not need them to enrich their lives. The old man searched his mind for a reason why he felt the way he did but it was useless, he just seemed to be going around in circles. Not knowing what else to do he mooched about the house.

Edna tried to be understanding but could not help getting annoyed with her husband. He always seemed to be in her way while she was preparing the house for some children who were coming to stay for the weekend.

Finally she said, more for her own benefit than for his: "Look, Archie, why don't you go for a walk? You never know, you might just find the answer to your problems in the bush."

The old man decided to take her advice and said that he would try and catch a large eel he had noticed in one of the creek's downstream waterholes. Edna was not keen on eating eels, but agreed that it was a good idea. The way her husband was behaving made her feel she would have eaten an old boot if it made him happy – so long as he caught one that was tasty.

Archie collected his hand-line, put some worms from the compost heap into a bait tin, and set off. The worms were not pleased to be taken from their comfortable, warm home. They would have felt even less pleased had they known what was in store for them.

After wandering disconsolately along the track above the creek for a while, Archie arrived at the place where he'd noticed the eel. To reach the water he had to clamber down a hidden,

steep incline below a mark that had been cut into a tree many years previously but was now overgrown.

When he reached the waterhole Archie baited his line, which was made of strong cotton string, and dropped the unhappy worms into the creek. Earthworms have extreme difficulty breathing under water so, not surprisingly, they instinctively felt that nothing good was going to come from the experience.

Archie had his own special way of catching eels. He tied worms on about the last 6 inches of the string with light fuse wire so they would live longer and make an irresistible, wriggling feast for an eel.

He felt that moving bait would be far more enticing to prey than that which had been impaled upon a hook. Of course, if worms had a choice they would probably prefer to die quickly, rather than drown slowly while waiting for a dirty great big eel to devour them.

If an eel took the bait, Archie would pull the line in carefully so that he did not frighten his catch. When he had brought it close enough, and the eel was still engrossed in a mouthful of unhappy worms, the old man would flip the eel onto the bank and pounce on it before it could get away.

This was easier said than done because eels are notoriously slimy and difficult to get a grip on. Archie would quickly stamp his foot on its head while the rest of the body wrapped itself snake-like around his leg, slithering and squirming until the old man managed to get it into a sack he kept ready for the purpose.

Another of his tricks was to wrap a strip of hessian around his hand so that he could grip the eel more easily.

While waiting for the prey to take his bait Archie, still feeling old, sat on a large rock and gazed dejectedly into the water. He wondered why he had bothered wasting his time coming to that place.

A bee buzzed by, causing him to feel a pang of envy because bees always seemed to be busy doing something worthwhile.

A grasshopper clung to a grass stalk and stared up at the man, wondering if he was dangerous.

A kookaburra sat on a limb of a stringybark tree and watched the grasshopper.

Archie continued gazing into the water for no other reason than that it happened to be there. Water usually had a soothing effect on him and he could look into it for ages without noticing the passing of time. On this occasion, however, the longer he gazed into the water the heavier time weighed upon him.

A frog swam to a rock, climbed up onto it and squatted down. The day was a bush day like most others and trees grew in it slower than time.

Suddenly, Archie heard a voice that he thought came from the water into which he was staring.

"G'day," it said.

The frog leapt into a splash in fright and swam around briefly before realising that it didn't know where it was going. It climbed back onto the rock and sat, staring pop-eyed at something behind the old man.

The grasshopper jumped in surprise and fell into the creek where a waiting eel gobbled it up delightedly. The kookaburra, not being in the mood for frogs, flew away. The worms being sacrificed on the line beneath the surface were turning blue in the face from trying to hold their breath.

"G'day," repeated the voice.

Archie turned around and saw a gaunt, scruffy man with deep-set enthusiastic eyes standing at the edge of the bush. Why, it's an old swagman, he thought.

"G'day," he replied then, noticing the stranger's billycan, enquired if he had the makings for a brew of tea. The swagman assured Archie that he did and invited him to share a mug. Archie Hair never had to be asked twice if he would like a drink of tea.

Losing interest in eels he retrieved his fishing line just as a huge eel was about to take a bite at the terrified bait. After pulling the grateful worms in he left them gasping on the bank and wishing they had fingers so they could untie themselves and crawl soggily away.

The men set about making a fire and boiling the billy. They made idle chatter until they were comfortably sitting down and taking it in turns to share the mug of tea.

"You seem like a man well-acquainted with the mysteries of the bush," the stranger remarked.

"I have been fortunate enough to be given the honour of sharing a few," replied Archie, pleased that his companion had taken the initiative and, even better, broached a subject that was dear to his heart.

There was a twinkle in the swagman's eyes as he asked: "Well then, maybe you could inform me as to why kookaburras laugh."

"That's no mystery," replied Archie, surprised that someone who should be very knowledgeable after apparently spending many years roaming the bush would ask such a simple question. "It isn't a laugh at all. It just sounds that way to human beings. The kookaburras' call is territorial."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" laughed the stranger, sounding so much like a kookaburra that Archie instinctively glanced up into the trees, expecting to find one perched above him. Overcoming his hilarity the swagman continued.

"That's what you think! I thought you of all people would realise that things aren't necessarily what they seem."

Archie Hair was rather taken aback by that statement and was just about to contradict it when the swagman spoke again.

"What caused kookaburras to laugh," he said, "was a cause of much dispute long ago when indigenous people arrived in what eventually became known as Australia. Nowadays the magnificence of the kookaburras' call is taken for granted. What few people realise is that the birds' laughter is becoming weaker in comparison to that of their ancestors when it was at its peak. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll come back to that later."

His companion stopped talking and seemed to be collecting his thoughts. Archie reached over, picked up the mug and sipped tea while gazing at the bush.

A cheeky shrike thrush was perched close by on a branch, as if waiting for the story to continue. A gang of larrikin currawongs strutting on the ground scared away a family of blue wrens who, moments earlier, had been scratching around in the bush debris searching for whatever blue wrens liked to eat. A few bell miners tinkled in the distance. A cricket tuned up to serenade a hidden love. A leaf fell into the creek and floated away. A butcherbird sang its melodious song.

Archie threw some wood onto the fire and was about to enjoy another sip from the stained, chipped enamel chalice, when the traveller roused himself from his reverie.

"The reason for kookaburras' laughter," said the singular man as both he and Archie stared into the fire as if into a crystal ball, "like many important occurrences, originated way back in The Dreamtime. In those days their call was totally unlike the magnificent sound that we hear nowadays. In fact, the sound they made was little more than a squeak.

"To be one of the larger species of bush birds yet have such an embarrassing voice was a constant source of amusement to the other birds, but caused kookaburras a great deal of shame. Even the smallest birds' calls were sweeter and stronger than theirs. The only positive

aspect of the kookaburras' misfortune was that emus began to feel a sense of pride in their own unattractive voices.

"This lack of vocal ability caused the unfortunate birds to spend a majority of their time in depressed silence while listening enviously as other bush birds whistled, chattered and warbled to each other. Although kookaburras weren't consciously aware of it for many years, curiosity and the intensity of their listening caused them to develop the extraordinary ability to understand what other birds were saying.

"Being able to interpret all the different calls had mixed blessings because, although many things they overheard during these conversations intrigued kookaburras, they were upset by the constant references to their own inadequate voices.

"Although being able to interpret what other birds were saying helped break the monotony of kookaburras' lives, they yearned to have the lyrebirds' ability to mimic what they heard. The only sounds lyrebirds did not seem interested in bothering to copy were the kookaburras' squeaks."

Once again the swagman lapsed into silence, as if it was an essential aspect of the yarn. When he emerged from his thoughts he continued: "Time passed. Seeds fell to the ground and grew into huge trees that crashed back to earth hundreds of years later. The cycle of life continued, but kookaburras were always miserable. Besides listening wistfully to other birds, they only did what they had to do to survive and nothing more.

"Time passed then, one wild and stormy day which, as it turned out was to be an auspicious one for kookaburras, a migrating short-tailed shearwater was on the last leg of its flight to Phillip Island.

"As you probably know, they became known as mutton birds after white human beings began eating them and using their oil. Anyway, this particular bird had become separated from its flock while they battled severe weather conditions and gale-force winds down the southeast coast of Australia.

"By the time it reached a region that is now called Gippsland, the bird was close to exhaustion when a savage gust of wind buffeted it from the sky. This caused it to crash into a tree and drop, stunned, to the ground.

"When the weather finally abated bush birds came out of hiding and noticed the injured stranger. Except for a lone kookaburra that was concerned about the injured stranger's welfare, they were annoyed at its intrusion into their domain. The birds began chattering and squawking and complaining about the uninvited bird while criticising its features.

"Unaware that it was the cause of derision, the bird looked around for a place to shelter until it was ready to tackle the remainder of its journey.

"Mutton birds nest in burrows so this one was delighted to see that, not far away, was a large hole that looked like the entrance to a mansion in comparison to what it was used to nesting in.

"Wearily, the stranger dragged itself towards the hole. This delighted the onlookers, who were eagerly anticipating the outcome when the burrow's occupant discovered a trespasser. When it reached the entrance, the shearwater paused and peered into the gloom to reassure itself that the imagined place of sanctuary was unoccupied.

"This hesitation annoyed the other birds and caused them to think that the intruder might be changing its mind about descending so a currawong swooped, forcing its victim to scurry inside. As the shearwater scrabbled down it wondered what could have dug such a large home. Suddenly it bumped into something big and solid with coarse fur.

"The avian audience waited in silent anticipation as the trespasser descended, and wondered what could be happening. Suddenly the flustered bird reappeared, scrabbling out anxiously. It was closely followed by an annoyed wombat that kept pushing it with its nose

until the poor bird was some distance away before grumpily returning to its den. The shearwater was in a state of shock and didn't know what to do. Feeling even more distressed, it stayed where it was.

"The birds witnessing the shearwater's eviction from the wombat hole felt an exhilarating sense of satisfaction and abused the stranger. Only the kookaburra was silent, watching in growing anger, but it didn't dare protest in case its voice was jeered at.

"The foreign bird made sounds of distress that were alien to the mocking audience, causing them to ridicule it even more because they couldn't understand it. Hoping the object of their scorn was unable to defend itself some of the larger birds hopped around the innocent trespasser, occasionally pecking it and causing the shearwater to make more pathetic cries of distress.

"This was too much for the kookaburra. It squeaked in rage and swooped down from where it had been observing the scene. The birds were so surprised at the sudden intrusion that they didn't have time to make fun of their attacker's frenzied squeaking as they fled. The kookaburra fluffed out its feathers and stood guard next to the victim in case its tormentors returned.

"Unfortunately, the kookaburra's anger subsided and once again it became self-conscious, too ashamed to make another sound, yet yearning to reassure the confused bird that it wouldn't let it come to any more harm.

"Slowly, the shearwater began to gather its wits and wondered who its protector was. Next to it stood a large, striking-looking bird with a powerful beak. To overcome its nervousness the shearwater began asking questions, but received no answer. The large bird just stood there, like a silent sentinel.

"The kookaburra was pretending to appear nonchalant while trying to understand what the foreign bird was saying, longing to know where it came from. Its guardian was pleased the stranger appeared friendly but had no intention of tempting fate by making a sound – just in case.

"The shearwater felt uncomfortable trying to converse with its silent companion but persevered because it didn't know what else to do. It told of Phillip Island and the Bass Strait islands, where countless numbers of its kind were preparing for the mating season. It tried to describe the spectacular sight they made as huge flocks of them darkened the evening sky when approaching the rookeries after returning from a day spent fishing in the sea.

"Its companion still didn't make any response, although its eyes did appear to have brightened. Thinking that was a positive sign, the shearwater became quite talkative and mentioned other aspects of its life and experiences. It told of the migration nature caused it to take each year to the Allusyian Islands near Alaska, and the freedom of soaring above the waves.

"The other birds lost interest in the newcomer and went about their business, leaving the kookaburra able to devote its attention to whatever was being said. The traveller reminisced about many unusual and exotic sights it had seen when migrating, and the more the kookaburra concentrated, the greater became its ability to comprehend what it was being told.

"The shearwater overcame its inhibition with the stranger and enthusiastically indulged itself in relating some of the more bizarre things it had seen in its travels. It told of huge fish that looked like barren islands leaping, frolicking and rolling in the oceans, while spraying fountains of water from holes in the tops of their heads.

"The stranger's tales were so incredible that the kookaburra felt sure they had to be true because they seemed beyond the capacity of imagination.

"While the amazed bird was absorbing the fact that giant fish with holes in their heads didn't sink and drown, its learned companion began telling of something even more extraordinary, something that was to become the cause of kookaburras' laughter. The

shearwater told the awed listener of strange two-legged creatures, resembling what we now call apes, whose antics made them seem the most stupid animals in the world.

"The kookaburra became fascinated with what it was hearing and forgot its inability to create a sound worthy of its size. The bird was so absorbed in learning about the ridiculous ape-like creatures that it was unaware of a strange sensation beginning to stir deep within its body, as if tiny, exquisite, bubbles of pleasure were being released for the first time into its bloodstream.

"When this effervescence reached the bird's throat it burst out in a sound that was a cross between a squeaky grunt and a cough. This startled the kookaburra momentarily, but it was so engrossed in what the traveller was saying that it disregarded the sound and didn't realise that, for the first time in its life, it had made a sound other than a squeak.

"Pleased to get a response from the other bird, the shearwater concentrated on telling it more about the behaviour of the strange creatures, who were, of course, human beings.

"When the kookaburra heard how humans burnt their food in fires before eating, the squeaky cough-like grunt became a chuckle. This disconcerted the shearwater because the sound seemed ominously familiar. However, it continued its story and told of the even more peculiar habit humans had of sticking sharpened saplings into each other's bodies and thumping each other on the head with lumps of wood.

"That was too much for the new emotion building up inside the kookaburra and it erupted in a sound of joyous hilarity; a sound that had never been heard in the bush before.

"As the kookaburra visualised the antics of the strange creatures, the incredible sound of its mirth grew louder and reverberated throughout the forest. Never again would the squeaky birds be ashamed of their voices. From that day on they became known by the sound they made, 'kookahahas', although, eventually, they were called by the name we know them by today.

"The shearwater recognised the sound's origin and, having recovered sufficiently to be able to travel the remaining distance to its destination, flew away gratefully. It couldn't wait to tell its comrades about the bird that made sounds similar to those made by the stupid apes. As it flew the bird wondered if they also stuck sharpened sticks into each other or belted each other over the head with lumps of wood, or burned their food.

"When other squeaky birds heard the magnificent new sound echoing through the bush they were envious and hated their squeaks even more. The first kookaburra to laugh was so proud of its new voice that it flew up to a dead branch, where it would be easily seen, and thought about what the foreign bird had told it. It tried to visualize the first things it had begun to understand, up to the stories about the strange creatures.

"As before, it began to chuckle, then the chuckle again grew into a belly laugh. All the other birds were astounded and looked to see where the sound was coming from. When the squeaky birds realised it was one of their own kind making the incredible noise they quickly flew up to join their mate, eager to know how it made the wondrous sound.

"By this time the laughing kookaburra was enjoying itself so much that it was almost in hysterics and began wobbling on its perch. The more it laughed the more unsteady it became until it toppled out of the tree and fell to the ground, where it lay on its back and chuckled uncontrollably."

A thought suddenly distracted the narrator. "It was fortunate the bird didn't break its neck and die when it hit the ground," he commented. "If that had happened other kookaburras may never have learned to laugh.

"Anyway," he continued, "the rest of the squeaky birds were astounded by this phenomenon. Imagine having a voice so powerful it could throw you out of a tree! Almost overwhelmed by envy they also tried to make the same sound, but none were successful and they all ended up disappointed.

"When the kookaburra recovered some control over its mirth, it tried to explain to its comrades how it came to make the sound. This took a while because, at first, other squeaky birds couldn't understand its voice now that the squeak had gone. However, they were also good listeners and eventually began to comprehend the amazing stories the shearwater had told. This was how they too learned to laugh.

"Over time, the laughter spread far and wide. But kookaburras had to learn to control their laughter because they began to find so many things in life funny that their hilarity was causing many of them to fall from great heights and injure themselves.

"Other than lyrebirds, who could make weak imitations, no other bird learned how to copy the once-squeaky birds' new sound and became jealous of them.

"Unfortunately, kookaburras were now so pleased with their own voices that they stopped listening to other species. Thus, over time, they lost the ability to interpret what their neighbours were saying. Now you know how kookaburras learned to laugh."

The swagman picked up the mug of tea from where Archie had left it near the fire. He took a sip and seemed to survey the pleasant scene with satisfaction. Archie also looked around, and for the first time that day felt a sense of peace envelope him.

Both men sat by the fire in companionable silence before the swagman said: "If you notice a kookaburra suddenly burst out laughing while watching you, you'll know in future that it is either remembering the antics of your ancestors or gaining some pleasure from your own actions. However, their ability to laugh had a far more important outcome.

"As time passed kookaburras began to find many different things to laugh about. The wonder of this was that their humour was not just sourced from the antics of other living creatures. They also learned to laugh at themselves.

"I can't remember if I told you," said the stranger, glancing at Archie, "but when they were insecure and lonely, even though it made them feel uncomfortable, the only physical contact squeekies had with others of their own kind was to mate with each other because something in their nature forced them to. It was only after they began to see humour in various aspects of life, and learned to laugh at themselves, that they started living in family groups and enjoyed the fulfilment and intimacy of each other's company.

"Unfortunately, their laughter is not as powerful as it used to be and they do not find so many things in life as humorous as they used to. In fact their voices occasionally crack back into a squeak when they realise that some of the things that once seemed funny can also be destructive as well and ruin their environment.

"Enjoy their call while you can, before it's too late and their habitat is destroyed."

Archie Hair gazed into the fire and thought about what he had been told – although he still had a lingering feeling that kookaburras' laughter *was* territorial. He doubted that all birds were as malicious as those in the story.

He was about to thank his companion for sharing the yarn with him but, when he looked up, the swagman was nowhere to be seen. Archie had not heard him leave and found it disconcerting that the stranger could have left so quietly. He could not know it then but that was to be his first of many meetings with The Storyteller.

Sparks and a puff of smoke rose unexpectedly from the fire, as if a breeze had disturbed it. Archie decided it was time he went home. He looked around for the billycan so that he could get some water to put out the fire, but neither the billy nor the mug was to be seen. Instead, he filled his hat with water from the creek, but when he turned to douse the fire Archie was stunned to find that it was not there either. In fact there was nothing to indicate that a fire had ever been lit.

Disconcerted by the strange turn of events, Archie pushed back the brim of his hat, scratched his forehead and frowned while trying to understand what he had just experienced.

After some thought the frown was slowly erased by a smile when he realized that his mind must have been given the privilege of sharing a wonder.

Archie untied the worms. They were so surprised at having been given their freedom that they thought it must be just another ploy by the fisherman to entice some other form of prey to eat them. Pretending to be dead, they waited in terror. They waited and waited but nothing happened.

The worms cowered in soggy apprehension while anticipating some other form of horror before tentatively crawling away. They had travelled quite a long way in worm distance before feeling reassured enough to relax. After catching their breath they turned their attention to digging into soil that was not nearly as welcoming as the compost heap had been.

While he was climbing back up towards the track, Archie slipped on a rock, causing him to throw up his hands and let go of the creel containing his tackle. This fell into the waterhole and hit an eel on the head, stunning it. Fortunately, he was able to retrieve his fishing gear and managed to capture the eel before it recovered. This pleased him greatly, but disappointed his wife.

Suddenly, a kookaburra began to chuckle, and then it laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed. Archie smiled to himself: *Maybe there was some truth in the swagman's yarn*, he thought.

When he arrived home, Archie told Edna about the strange appearance and disappearance of the swagman and how kookaburras were supposed to have learned to laugh.

His wife said that the story sounded quite plausible. Then she thought for a moment and remarked: "You know, Dad, maybe the weather that caused the mutton bird to meet the kookaburra was the origin of that old saying, 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good'."

Archie agreed with her and said: "You could be right, Mum. Yes, life can indeed be curious at times."



MISTER FOURTYCOATS

A chill, morning mist had silenced the Freestone valley birds on the day Edna died. Even the gurgling of the creek seemed muted.

Archie was sitting on the porch of their home while one of his beloved wife's relatives took a turn at nursing her. He thought of all the small jobs that needed doing but none of them seemed important anymore. Edna had been ill for a long time and, although he knew that she would soon be released from her suffering, naturally her husband was feeling miserable.

Archie gazed through the mist into the soft, ghostly-grey bush on the opposite side of the track and began fondly remembering some of the things he and his wife had shared over the years. Time slipped away, taking him to a place where even wistfulness held no regret.

The old man was unaware how long he had been reminiscing when the sound of a beautiful, but haunting, melody drifting along the valley brought him back to the present. Archie did not recognise the tune nor could he understand where the music had come from.

While the melody played the mist slowly began to dissipate, as if the music was gently blowing it away, brightening the day and causing the birds to sing.

Suddenly, and so briefly that he was unsure of what he had actually seen, Archie thought he noticed the bulky figure of a swagman in the distance. Although he was not facing Archie, the stranger seemed to raise a hand in greeting, or farewell, before disappearing around a bend in the track.

Not having seen anyone pass by Archie was intrigued, and wondered whether what he had witnessed may have been an optical illusion. Had it not been for Edna's condition he would have gone after the stranger, if only to confirm that he actually existed.

When he went back inside the house, Archie mentioned the music to his wife's relative and was surprised to learn that she had not heard it. He suggested to the woman that she make herself a cup of tea while he sat with his wife. She was grateful for the opportunity and left the elderly couple alone.

Archie sat by the bed that he and Edna had shared for so many nights and took hold of his wife's hand. Not expecting her to say anything he was pleasantly but curiously surprised when she murmured: "Thank you for singing to me, Archie."

The old man looked at her closed eyes, and the tears he had been holding back began to fall. Edna spoke again, as if from a distance: "Tell the creek not to cry. Everything will be alright."

Archie kissed her workworn hand and was grateful when he felt the movement of her thumb slowly rubbing against his fingers. The old man realised that, of all they had shared over the years, this was the closest they had ever been.

He yearned to be able to bring his wife back from the brink of death and share with her what he had been unable to during their lives together. But he knew they had shared all they could and that had to be enough.

Archie felt the gentle grip of Edna's hand weaken. "And thank the birds for singing to us, Dad," were the last words she spoke.

"Of course I will, Mum," he replied and kissed the treasured, dying hand again, wishing that he could go with her.

*

Archie returned home the day following Edna's funeral but found it lonely living there so soon after her death. In an attempt to distract himself from her absence the old man went on many walks through the bush.

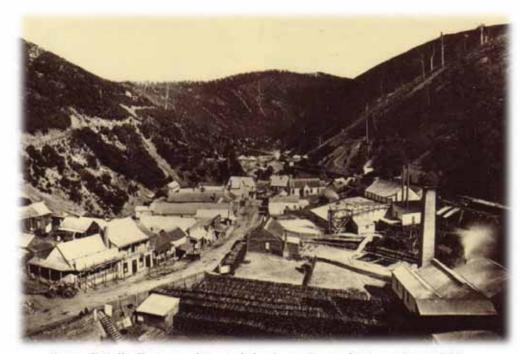
During one of these walks he met The Storyteller, who he had occasionally encountered since their first meeting when the man he thought of as a swaggie told him about kookaburras' laughter.

The Storyteller commiserated with him on his loss. Archie did not question his companion about how he had come to hear the sad news, he was just grateful for the company.

The two men sat on the ground and began swapping yarns about the old days. It was while The Storyteller was recounting one about a swagman that Archie remembered the haunting music, and the person he thought he had seen while his wife lay dying. As soon as he had the opportunity he shared this with his companion.

After being told of the strange occurrence The Storyteller was reflective for a while. As if to aid his thought process, he picked a grass stalk and chewed the end of it. Eventually he removed the stalk from his mouth and said: "This may not be related to your experience but it puts me in mind of something I heard many years ago in Walhalla."

He proceeded to tell the following story about Old Mister Fourtycoats.



Part of Walhalla township and the Long Tunnel mine, circa 1880

By the sound of his accent, the Waterford region of Ireland would have been proud to claim him as a native son, yet he never mentioned his place of origin. On the rare occasions that someone met the old man and enquired where he came from his reply would invariably be: "Oi came frum dere."

While making that statement he would raise an arm and wave his hand in various directions. Then he would finish by pointing to the ground where he stood and say: "But now Oim ere".

He didn't actually wear fourty coats. It was unlikely he would have been able to move if he had. No. This title came about one misty winter morning during the year 1899 in the Gippsland gold mining town of Walhalla.

The old man's appearance was first noticed by young Jimmy Grierson who, as usual, happened to be staring dreamily out of his classroom window at the time. The boy's elbows rested on previous students' names scratched into the lid of the desk that was now his for the time being, while his ginger-haired, freckle-faced head rested in his grubby hands.

Jimmy was not thinking of anything in particular, his mind was just drifting away with his dreams.

Somewhere beyond his dreaming was the distant hum of his teacher's and classmates' voices – like bees in a flowering summer meadow. They did not disturb him, in fact it was a comforting sound that he felt part of – albeit from a distance – as if reality was having a brief but pleasant holiday.

The boy began to feel drowsy, while a morning mist thickened in the playground. His eyelids started to droop and his head nodded slowly in his hands. Then, just as he was about to fall asleep, he noticed something move. It was as if an apparition had materialized from out of the mist.



Walhalla School, circa 1890

Suddenly awake, Jimmy stared in amazement as an old man with long, wavy light-grey hair and a bushy beard, stepped out of the mist. He appeared to be a tramp wearing every piece of upper-body clothing he had ever owned.

The old man looked around as if searching for something before stepping backwards and disappearing into the mist once again. Jimmy wondered whether he had seen a ghost.

Unaware that the bees' buzzing in the meadow had stopped, leaving the classroom in a drama of silence, Jimmy was about to share the experience with his classmates.

His teacher, Miss Valentine, much to the other children's anticipation, had crept up behind the boy to reprimand him for his inattention. She suddenly stung him back to reality by sharply slapping the top of his head, causing it to slip from its comfortable position and thud onto the desk.

Josh Dunn, who was the bane of Jimmy's schooldays, sat behind him. Thinking that Josh had hit him, Jimmy involuntarily exclaimed: "Bastard!" and swung around wildly to punch him.

Unfortunately for Jimmy and his teacher, but fortunately for the town's history, his closed fist thudded into Miss Valentine's stomach before it could reach his protagonist. The teacher expelled an "ooouufff" of air as she collapsed. Her head's sudden contact with the floor rendered her unconscious.

There were a few seconds of silence, open mouths and wide-eyes before young Julia Gibbs screamed. Julia's scream was the catalyst for pandemonium.

"Miss is dead. Miss is dead" yelled out a child, horrified by the sight of the teacher lying motionless at her feet.

The other girls began screaming and crying.

"Miss is dead. Miss is dead," reverberated around the classroom.

"And Jimmy Grierson killed her!" vindictively yelled out a delighted Josh Dunn.

"Jimmy killed Miss Valentine," chorused the boys excitedly.

"No I didn't!" bawled out an aggrieved Jimmy.

"Yes you did, you murderer," said Josh, unwilling to give his victim any sympathy.

"I was trying to hit you!" shouted Jimmy in righteousness and fear as his classmates took up the accusing cry of: "Murderer."

Jimmy's bottom lip began to tremble and he could feel tears welling in his eyes. Unwilling to let anyone see him cry the boy instinctively tried to bolt from the classroom.

He had not meant to tread on his teacher's head in his escape attempt as he elbowed and pushed his way past old friends who were enthusiastic in their "Murderer" refrain. The fact that they had never seen anyone killed before, especially a teacher, made the experience all the more exquisitely frightening.

Because everything had happened so quickly Jimmy had no idea what he would do after he reached the door but that did not matter, all he was conscious of were the calls of: "Murderer". He did not even notice the warm, damp sensation in his trousers begin to trickle down his legs.



Steam-driven battery, Walhalla

The headmaster, Mr Pringle, was sitting in his office, grudgingly preparing to take a class. The unreliable teacher who had been highly recommended by his previous employers (probably so they could get rid of him) was late – again.

Telling the class to read while he finished some important paperwork had of course been a useless request. But he refused to break his morning ritual of relaxing with a cup of tea before starting what he considered to be the thankless task of teaching.

Mr Pringle finished blowing on the steaming hot liquid, hoping it had cooled down sufficiently to take a sip while ignoring the noise rising in volume from his classroom down the corridor. With a fine bone china saucer in one hand he expectantly lowered his lips towards the cup being daintily held in the other hand.

These private moments were treasured by the headmaster, who had become accustomed to using them to help brace himself for the daily trials and tribulations of running a school.

As he was often reminded, this was not just any school but one that was tucked away in a narrow Gippsland valley, far from civilization.

For 24 hours a day, except on the Sabbath, the gold seeking, quartz-rock crushing battery pounded – making sleep difficult. From midnight Saturday until midnight Sunday – when the battery was shut down out of respect for those of a religious inclination, or just in case there was a divine being – the unaccustomed silence made sleep even more difficult to come by.

The ancient hills of the surrounding rugged country had been denuded of trees to keep the wood-eating mines operating.



Some of Walhalla's miners

To Mr Pringle's annoyance, no matter what country or strata of society they came from, the town's miners invariably greeted him with an uncouth "G'day" or "How ya going mate?"

Surely it would not hurt them to treat me with the respect a man of my status in the community deserves? he would think. Would it be so difficult to greet me as 'Headmaster' or 'Sir'? No. They feel as if they have the right to treat everyone as equals.

Mr Pringle sometimes felt as if fate had transported him to the wilds of an American frontier town in a fit of pique.

While contemplating the injustice of life, as he often did, Mr Pringle was startled when Julia Gibbs' piercing scream shattered his thoughts. The shock caused him to slop the contents of the cup onto his lap and utter a word he had never admitted knowing.

Heroically trying to ignore the pain in his scalded groin, or what the children would think about the stain on his trousers, the headmaster was still civilised enough to have the presence of mind to carefully replace the delicate cup and saucer on his table. Then he quickly stood, knocking over the chair in his rush to investigate the source of the scream.

Attempting to stop himself from tripping over the chair Mr Pringle frantically reached out for the support of the table, but only succeeded in swiping his treasured cup and saucer to the floor. As they also shattered he fell and joined them, cutting a hand on the broken crockery. He uttered another word that, unbeknown to him, had been lying dormant in a dark recess of his mind.

Although worried that he may have fractured a leg in his encounter with the chair the headmaster nevertheless struggled upright, wrapped a bogey-soiled handkerchief around his bleeding hand and, unable to overcome a nagging feeling that the day would not turn out well, set off with a hobbling gait.

It was unfortunate timing that, just as Mr Pringle was about to enter the open doorway of Jimmy's classroom, the terrified boy came charging out of it.

The pupil and the headmaster collided. Being the smaller of the two, and almost bent double in his haste to escape the scene of what he thought was his crime, the boy's head

rammed into the stain on the headmaster's trousers with such force that Mr Pringle was slammed into the corridor wall behind him.

The collision caused his false teeth to come loose and his spectacles to fall to the floor, where one of Jimmy's fleeing boots crushed a lens.

Another "Ooouufff" of suddenly expelled air was left in Jimmy's wake as he rushed off down the corridor. Fortunately the headmaster passed out from the impact and the excruciating pain in his groin – otherwise he might have been a bit grumpy with Jimmy.

The boy had a vague idea of who he had run into, but compared with killing his teacher he thought that even knocking over Queen Victoria would have been a trifling matter. At least he thought so until cries of another damning accusation caught up with him and rushed into his ears, filling him with horror: 'Jimmy killed the headmaster,' chased the haunted boy as he dashed out of the school, into the mist, and the arms of the apparition he had seen from his classroom window.

"Whoa, son. In yer haste ye almost knocked me back t' where Oi came frum," said the apparition, while extricating the terrified, squirming boy from his clothing.

"Is it the divil himself who's after ye? That's strange. Oi never knew the divil had courage enough to chase a red-haired choild. T' be sure, come to tink of it, Oi never knew a red-haired choild who was afraid of the divil. Then agen, what would Oi know?

"And look at yer face! Begorrah. Whatever terrible ting that happened to ye has almost frightened the lovely freckles from off of yer skin. And where would the freckles go if they didn't have yer face to bless? Maybe they'd go back to the sunspots they came from and bedazzle the twinkle in the Almighty's eyes. Then agen, they might become flecks of gold glistening in the creek, waiting to tempt the panning-dish dreamers."

When the old man imagined the reaction of any assayer who tried to value freckles in the belief they were alluvial gold he couldn't help but chuckle.

If anyone had been listening they would have heard him say more than he had ever been known to say previously. In fact he might have continued his one-sided conversation had he not been interrupted by Jimmy. The boy fainted from fright in his arms and fell into the ragged layers of well-worn clothing.

The stranger lifted the boy's limp body and carried him back into the school, where he was greeted by a scene of mayhem. The corridor was full of emotional children of all shapes and sizes, many of whom seemed to have succumbed to hysteria. However, he was able to make his way through them with ease because they quietened and shrank back as he approached.

When the old man came to where a dazed Mr Pringle lay in an undignified slump against the wall he gently lowered Jimmy to the floor. The boy was slowly regaining his senses so the stranger turned his attention to the headmaster, whose false teeth were protruding from his mouth in a death rictus-like grin.

"The headmaster wet his pants when Jimmy killed him mister," said one of the braver boys, Stevie Johns, with some relish.

This prompted Chrissy, the school's youngest pupil, to ask: "Did you kill Jimmy, Mister Fourtycoats?" Thus the wonderful imagination of childhood eloquently captured the tramp's memorable appearance in two words.

"Now why would Oi do such a ting?" asked the exotic stranger, smiling at the name he had been given.

"Because Jimmy killed our teacher and the headmaster," replied the child.

"No-one's dead," he reassured her. "They're probably jist having a little rest. Now, if ye'll all give me some room, Oi'll take care of everyting."

And take care of everything he did, although his ministrations were interrupted by questions from the inquisitive children. After their initial shock at the sight of him they began to relax.

"Why are you wearing so many clothes, Mister Fourtycoats?" asked Chrissy, who was intrigued by the tramp.

"Because 'tis cold outside," he replied.

"But you're not outside," she responded, with a child's logic.

"But Oi was, and Oi will be agen soon," said the tramp as he took the headmaster's false teeth out in case he choked on them. Fortunately Mr Pringle was unaware that the collapsing of his face was the cause of the young audiences' sudden hilarity.

When the laughter died down another question was asked: "How many clothes do you have, mister?"

"Oi have enough to keep warm, plus my special suit."

"What's so special about it?"

"It's his birthday suit!" guessed Josh Dunn's older brother Corey, causing more hilarity.

After the patients had recovered and composed themselves, Mr Pringle and Miss Valentine wanted to punish Jimmy for all the trouble he had caused. But the stranger would not hear of it.

"Sure, 'twas jist an accident gone wrong" was his comment when he heard the details of the sequence of events. "And a little bit of forgiveness never hurt anyone."

Despite the old man being dressed in an outlandish fashion and appearing to be an eccentric tramp, he had an air of dignity. This caused the headmaster and teacher to feel uncomfortable about disagreeing with him, but disagree with him they did.

At first the old man smiled while ignoring their complaints, and then he pulled a penny whistle from one of his many pockets and began to play a seductive tune.

The whistle music overcame their disagreement and the teacher and headmaster became distracted from their desire for vengeance. Much to their own and the onlooking children's amazement, Mr Pringle peered at Miss Valentine through his broken spectacles, took her in his arms and began dancing with her.

"Mr Pringle's in love with Miss Valentine," sniggered Finley Cope from behind his hand as the couple glided around the front of a classroom in time to the penny whistle's music. They were as astonished as the children by their actions, but could not stop.

While the music played the headmaster and the teacher continued dancing. In fact they were beginning to enjoy themselves. The longer they danced the more attracted they became to each other; and the more attracted they became to each other the less they noticed their students.

To everyone's shock, Mr Pringle kissed Miss Valentine passionately on the lips and, to her surprise, she responded, lingeringly. To them, the children seemed to have disappeared. All that mattered was each other. Blissfully ignorant of their cheering and wolf-whistling audience, the couple continued dancing and kissing.

Without warning, the old man stopped playing. He put the instrument back in one of his pockets and silently left the school.

To the children's delight, and their own embarrassment, the headmaster and the teacher suddenly became aware of what they were doing and, even worse, that they were doing it in front of their students.

In an instinctive act of cowardly self-preservation all Mr Pringle could think of doing was to rebuke the flustered teacher by saying: "Oh, Miss Valentine. How could you!" as if their predicament was her fault.

Miss Valentine did not know what to say so she blushed and ran from the room.

Needless to say, any idea of punishing Jimmy Grierson was forgotten.

When the parents heard of the indiscretion in front of their children they demanded the headmaster's resignation. Because he was much older than the teacher the school council

concluded that he must have taken advantage of her innocence. Miss Valentine knew that it would not be in her best interests to admit that her innocence had enjoyed being taken advantage of.

Mr Pringle realised that he had no future at the school so he resigned and left town in disgrace.

The little girl's descriptive name for the stranger stuck and he was known as old Mister Fourtycoats, or Fourtycoats, from that day on – although there was one little boy who, either through ignorance, a speech impediment, or insight, called him Misty Fourtycoats.

Old Mister Fourtycoats was only seen occasionally in Walhalla during the winter of 1899, and then it was usually in the school grounds on misty mornings before classes began that he seemed to mysteriously appear.

The children always knew when he was coming because notes from the penny whistle would herald his arrival. When the school bell rang he seemed to fade back into the mist.

There was much speculation about where the old man had come from, how he supported himself and where he lived, but nobody ever found out. As many itinerant strangers had previously, he arrived in the town without fanfare, spent a few months in the area and then disappeared.

He rarely spoke, he was more likely to smile, wink and nod his head (as if at some private knowledge) when asked a question. But the children did not mind, just so long as he played his penny whistle because it always made them feel better than they had felt before hearing the music.

The merry notes of jigs and reels tumbled joyously from the instrument while old Mister Fourtycoats cheerily blew into it. The children were amazed that he could move his fingers so nimbly over its holes, and they enjoyed the sensation that caused their feet to keep tapping until the music stopped.

One occasion became a special part of the town's folklore. Two boys were fighting while the rest of the schoolchildren stood around in a circle, eagerly urging them on.

From a distance, softly at first, came the whistle's melody, slowly growing louder as the old man approached. Nobody took any notice of it at first, they were too absorbed in the fight, but the onlookers' feet began tapping unconsciously while smiles appeared on their faces.

The combatants were so engrossed in wrestling and hitting each other that it took a while for their feet to be affected by the music, but slowly they too began to tap, and then they started dancing.

This made fighting difficult, and the boys began to feel foolish as their feet danced them away from each other – leaving them futilely swinging their fists.

Old Mister Fourtycoats reached the circle where the children were now clapping their hands as well as tapping their feet in time to the lively music and the dancing fighters. Although the combatants had never been taught, the dance steps seemed to come naturally to their feet as they jigged, skipped and whirled through the chill morning air.

With twinkling eyes the old man gradually increased the tune's tempo. The boys' feet began dancing so rapidly that the rest of their bodies could not keep up with the pace and they fell down, exhausted.

However, there was another problem. While the whistle played the feet would not keep still. Although the boys lay on the ground their feet kept dancing, sometimes leaping so far into the air that the boys' bodies were lifted up until their heads bumped on the earth.

When both of the dancing fighters began crying the music suddenly finished. The audience stopped clapping and tapping their feet and the combatants collapsed on the ground, where they lay snivelling while Mister Fourtycoats vanished into the mist.

It was a long while before any of the children began fighting again.

The old man did other remarkable things with his whistle. One morning he entertained the children by making a leaf that had fallen from a bush in the school grounds suddenly rise up and begin to dance through the air.

At first it seemed that the leaf's movements were being caused by a breeze that was blowing at the time, but when Fourtycoats stopped playing the leaf would fall to the ground, where it lay motionless.

When the music began again the leaf resumed dancing in time to whatever melody was being played. For a finale the old man lifted another leaf from the ground with his music and the two leaves, like butterflies, danced a duet. Higher and higher they danced until they disappeared.

On another memorable occasion the school's worst bully was annoying an inoffensive student in the playground and abusing him with terms of derision. The victim was too timid to defend himself so he was easy prey for the bully and just stood where he was, blushing and feeling embarrassed.

Suddenly, shrill, staccato, penny whistle notes pierced the air and, like perfectly aimed darts from a blowpipe, sped into the bully's open mouth just as more venomous words were about to leave it.

One after the other the notes shattered the words into letters that became jumbled up in the bully's mouth, and stung the tender skin with their sharp edges as they whirled around while rearranging themselves into terms of self-derision

The words the bully was now using to criticise himself were far more eloquent and harsh than those he had used on his victim. In fact he did not know the meaning of many of them. To make matters worse the children began laughing at him.

Frustrated and furious, the bully began a tirade that was also shattered by more of the penny whistle's shrill notes. And he abused himself far worse than he had ever abused anyone else. The pain in his mouth was almost unbearable, and tiny droplets of blood sprayed out with the venom of the words now directed at himself.

More children gathered around to enjoy the incredible turn of events.

Never having been a victim the bully did not know how to respond so, humiliated, he finally slunk off home with the sound of laughter mocking him. The poison in his words infected the scratches inside his mouth so that his cheeks puffed up and he was given the nickname of 'Bullfrog'.

This was fitting because his voice had developed a croak that distorted his words and made it necessary for people to listen closely to understand what he was saying – not that he spoke nearly as much as he used to before that fateful day. Nor did he ever criticise anyone again, in fact his attitude became quite pleasant, and certainly more thoughtful.

Over time his features and voice returned to normal but to his regret the nickname stayed with him for the rest of his life.

Although he had not been seen, everyone who witnessed the extraordinary event that began the bully's transformation believed that old Mister Fourtycoats was the cause.

After that winter Fourtycoats seemed to have disappeared. In fact he was never seen in Walhalla again. The townsfolk, especially the children, often wondered what had become of him. They hoped that he had just left the district and not died alone in the bush as others had done.

Considering the few times they had seen the old man the locals had become fond of the bulky sight of him and his clothes, his cheery face, and the merry sound of his penny whistle.

Early in the year following his disappearance, a tragedy occurred that was the cause of much discussion and speculation involving Mister Fourtycoats.

On the night of January 27th 1900 life in the town was going along as normal when the tune of a haunting lament drifted along the valley.

Other than Dicky Didem, who was foreman of the battery operation and so deaf that he even had trouble hearing his own thoughts – not that anyone who knew him considered his thoughts would have been worth listening to anyway – every person who wasn't dead-drunk or working in a mine heard the melody above the battery's pounding and stopped what they were doing. It also awoke sleepers from their dreaming.

Children leapt excitedly from their beds, yelling out: "It's old Mister Fourtycoats!" (except for one little boy who declared: "It's Misty Fourtycoats and his magic whistle!") and, followed by the parents, they ran out of their homes.

Everyone peered into the gloom to see if they could find out where the music originated. But no matter how hard they looked they could not see any sign of the old man. Eventually, the sound faded into the night and for some reason left everyone feeling a sense of sorrow and loss.

The following afternoon four Italian woodcutters were about to row a homemade flatbottomed boat across the Thomson River, a few kilometres from Walhalla. They asked Louisa Bonazzi, aged 13, and her brother Louis, 11, who were playing on the bank, if they wanted to join them. Louisa was dubious about the safety of the small craft with so many people in it but the men's and her brother's enthusiasm convinced her to join them.

Halfway across the river the overloaded boat began taking on water and sank. None of the occupants could swim so the six were drowned.

The following Tuesday the largest funeral procession the town had ever witnessed walked to the cemetery with its tragic load.



The funeral procession

Had old Mister Fourtycoats been trying to warn the town? But, how could he have possibly known what was going to happen? And why hadn't he just told people that the tragedy would occur if no warning was given? This brought on more speculation that he was dead and somehow his spirit had played the lament.

THE LISTENING TREE

Listening trees are the great grandparents of the bush and, having survived long enough to absorb Nature's wisdom, are revered by learned people who believe they contain spirits of enlightenment.

Throughout time many of the world's indigenous people have treated these trees with the same respect reserved for aged, cherished members of their own tribes, or families. And the creatures that made their homes in them were thought to be the spirits' offspring.

Many of the stories shared by listening trees had their genesis when the trees' ancestors were but seeds and, like parables, have been passed down from generation to generation so the lessons of history would not be forgotten.

Fortunately, even in places where the inhabitants cannot remember the magnificence of forests, enough memories of listening trees' knowledge has survived to create a sense of wonder and incredulity at the mystery of nature.



A 'Listening Tree'

Sadly, the majority of Australia's most notable listening trees have long since been slaughtered and vast numbers of amazing stories lost forever.

Skeletal remains of some of these trees' descendants whose throats were cut, or ringbarked, as this form of destruction is termed, can occasionally still be seen standing alone in barren paddocks as stark reminders of what once was but can never be again.

The underlying philosophy of the trees' narratives has no cultural boundaries, so it is not uncommon for a story heard in one country to eventually become part of the folklore of another.

The following was experienced at a listening tree in South Gippsland by Karla Gilhal, who had arrived in Australia as a refugee after World War II. At the time Karla was a young woman who had taken a position as a domestic servant on a property near the town of Foster. She

was a shy, reserved person who could not overcome a feeling of intense homesickness for the country of her birth.

In a corner of the property was a fern gully that had never been cleared and remained as a pristine reminder of what the area had looked like before being cultivated. From this gully grew an old tree that towered above the surrounding paddocks like a monument to the past.

Although she was afraid of poisonous creatures that might be hidden in the undergrowth, Karla was drawn to that place for reasons she did not understand. Its rugged beauty felt alien to her – as if she had been transported back into a prehistoric era. In fact she would not have been surprised if a dinosaur appeared from out of the tree ferns.

One hot summer day, in an attempt to escape the heat, Karla took a picnic lunch to the gully and sat in the cool shade at the base of the tree. When she had finished eating, the young woman leaned back against its trunk as if against the comforting chest of a beloved friend.

For the first time since her arrival in Australia she felt a sense of peaceful acceptance seep into her body, relaxing her so completely that she had a fleeting sensation of actually being part of the tree. The feeling did not concern her. Grateful for the solitude, Karla closed her eyes.

Whenever she told the story of what happened next she could never be sure if she had been awake or asleep.

Karla was not aware of feeling tired, or drifting into sleep, but began to sense that where she sat was not where she actually was.

No longer was she in the tree-fern-filtered shade of a hot Australian afternoon but in an orange grove that was sweet with its blossoms' fragrance. Then, gentle as the caress of a cooling breeze, a flute-like sound flowed through her. It was a melody she remembered as that of a song women from her village had sung about a mother lamenting the loss of a child.

Karla's fancy, unhindered by a body, drifted through time and space, revisiting memories of her youth.

Entranced, the young woman greeted friends and relations who had been killed during the war and reminisced with them about the exploits of her childhood. Arm in arm with her mother and sister, feeling more at home than she had done when she actually lived in the country she yearned for, Karla walked towards her village. All the while the soft, fluting melody played on, weaving through her subconscious like a mystic snake charmer.

Ahead of the chattering group an ugly, blind beggar clothed in rags sat in the dust. When they reached him Karla, overcoming a feeling of revulsion, let go of her mother and sister's arms and stopped to drop some coins into his outstretched hands, only to find that she didn't have any money.

Embarrassed, she apologized and turned to catch up with her party, but they had disappeared, as had the village. Even the familiar countryside was gone, replaced by foreign vegetation.

Feeling panic-stricken Karla turned back to the beggar and was about to ask if he had seen which direction her companions had taken, but realised that the question would have been futile

Lost and alone, not knowing what to do, the young woman began to weep. The beggar asked her what was wrong and she told him. With no preamble or comment he began telling a story.

His reaction to her distress surprised Karla and she looked at him more closely, realising that blurred by tears his face did not appear quite so ugly. The man's pale-blue, sightless eyes seemed focused on some distant scene and his voice sounded friendly and gentle. This, as best she could remember it, is the story Karla Gilhal heard that day.

"Once upon a time there was an artist who yearned for a place to feel at home, but could never rest because something forced him to follow the siren call of a whisper in his soul. Wrapped in a cloak of silence he travelled on, wandering through a maze of time.

"Stumbling over dead dreams, tortured by self-doubt and wounded by false hope his spirit dragged its reluctant body along, on and on towards the whisper.

"Occasionally the whisper would penetrate the confusion in his mind and coax him with a murmur of encouragement. 'Just a little further' it would promise. 'Just a little further and you will be home'.

"The artist often cursed the whisper that denied him the comfort of friends and lovers and the sanctuary of a home, while continually beckoning him on to a nebulous appointment with destiny, yet he could not stop.

"On and on the artist was forced to travel across inhospitable terrain. Through morasses of ignorance, mirages of promise and jungles of mortality he roamed, until one day the whisper seemed to become stronger and more urgent, assuring him that if he could follow it but a little further he would find peace of mind forever; if only he crossed one last desert he could finally rest.

"The artist gathered his spirit's remaining strength and continued on until, exhausted by the seeming futility of his life's journey, he was on the verge of giving up hope when he noticed something shimmer on the horizon.

"At first he thought that what he saw was just another mirage, but slowly the vision began taking shape and he realised that what lay ahead was a beautiful city with graceful towers and turrets rising above its walls.

"The city seemed to shine like a beacon. 'Soon you will be home; just a little further; just a little further,' coaxed the whisper encouragingly.

"Finally, the man reached the gates of the city and was about to enter, eager to find the peace and happiness he expected awaited within, when a king's messenger, recognising him as an artist, came running towards him crying: 'Sir, come quickly. Our queen has died, and my master commands that her bedchamber be painted the colours of sorrow so that all who enter will know the depth of his grief. It seems you have travelled a great distance but our King has promised that whosoever does his bidding will be granted anything their heart desires'.

"Whereupon the artist replied: 'I have indeed travelled a great distance and there are many things my heart and body desires. However, even though my palette has many colours the masterpiece of grief is beyond compare, although its forgers are many and merchant'.

"After speaking thus the artist, with a melancholy sense of foreboding, realised why he had been brought to that place. He followed the servant to the palace and was ushered into the dead woman's bedchamber, whereupon he turned to the guards and ordered that the doors be closed and no one allowed to enter until he had completed the task.

"When this was done the artist looked gloomily at the pots of drab-coloured paint that had been placed on the floor for his use and discarded them. With a wistful smile of resignation he opened a bag containing the tools of his trade and began to grind and mix his paints.

"On the wall behind the bed he painted a small, exquisite mural of delicate, brightly-coloured flowers in the hope that all who saw it would be grateful for the beauty of life and the nobility of the king's soul.

"When the king saw what the artist had done his anger was so great at being disobeyed that he ordered the room to be locked. The artist was taken away, tortured and executed. His head was hacked off and impaled upon a spike at the gates of the city so that all who saw it would cower before the power of the king's anger.

"There came to the city another stranger who was also haunted by the siren whisper of ethereal promises that beckoned him on without relief. When he arrived at the city's gates and saw the severed head, not knowing of the artist's crime, the stranger turned to the crowd gathered around and enquired as to what evil the man had done to deserve such a fate.

"The crowd was only too pleased to tell him and delighted in relating the cruel punishment inflicted on the man who had been foolish enough to disobey their king's orders.

"As the stranger listened, overwhelmed with admiration for the man's courage, he was also filled with sadness when he saw the blinded eyes paint the whole city the colour of sorrow. However, what he witnessed unexpectedly gave him strength, and some insight into the whisper's wisdom.

"With a feeling of resolve, he entered the gates of the city."

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Not knowing what else to do or where to go Karla had sat down, leaned against a tree and looked at the sky as the story progressed, visualising what she heard.

After the beggar finished his narrative she turned to question its meaning, but there was no-one to be seen.

Disconcerted, Karla looked around, realising the sky's colour was the same as the beggar's eyes and that she was still sitting beside the old tree in the gully.

Feeling confused and uneasy, the young woman was about to pack the remnants of her lunch and depart, when she was distracted by the aroma of tantalizing fragrances and the sound of a joyful melody above her head. It was not the flute she thought she had heard previously but a carolling song of celebration. Her worries forgotten, Karla sat spellbound, exhilarated by the experience.

Unaware of the woman's presence, a magpie had alighted upon a limb of the tree and began warbling. Karla realized that nothing had changed except her perception and acceptance. What had in reality been giving her pleasure was the subtle bush perfume and sounds of her new home. For the first time it did not feel alien to her, in fact she was beginning to feel a sense of peace and belonging.

Karla found it difficult to believe that imagination was the cause of what she had experienced, yet could find no other explanation. As she arose to leave the young woman unconsciously patted the old tree, while something within her smiled.

From that day on the yearning she had felt for the land of her birth began to diminish, and for that she was grateful.

Karla remained in Australia, eventually moving to Melbourne where she married and raised a family, but she never forgot the story she had heard at the old tree.

One day, many years later, the woman was in hospital recovering from a serious operation. She had asked her husband to bring some books from the library when next he visited. Not being interested in reading he just selected some at random, one of which did interest his wife.

This book, titled 'Pages of Moments', was a collection of folk tales and mythology from various regions of the world. While browsing through it one story in particular caught her attention. It was from Peru and, although there were differences, what she read caused her to recall the story the blind beggar had told her that day long ago at what she would never know was a listening tree.

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Just as all the others had done, the story that had been portrayed in the Blue Pool dissolved and disappeared.

The faerie stood up and said: "Come on, Mister. It is time to go. We have almost reached the end of this part of our journey."

THE BROKEN HEART

 ${f R}$ ianna and Sidney Block travelled further along the creek until they reached a small beach. The faerie fluttered down to the water's edge.

A water dragon clung to the cliff opposite and watched the human cautiously before plunging into the creek. A dragonfly skimmed the surface. Water boatpersons pulled on their oars and rowed away to the further side of some tranquil water. A wallaby crashed through the bush and a king parrot flashed its superb plumage through a sunbeam. The creek just kept flowing along on its way to wherever.

A few black cockatoos flew out of the trees: *There must be a change in the weather on the way*, thought the man, remembering some bush lore.

The faerie knelt upon the beach and picked up something from among the sand and pebbles. She silently held out her hand for Sid to take whatever was in it.

He knelt down also and Rianna dropped what she had picked up into his palm. Curious, he looked down but only saw what appeared to be a small piece of pebble, worn smooth by the water's flow.

I'm sure this must be more special than it seems otherwise Rianna wouldn't have shown it to me, he thought, closely inspecting what he held. Not seeing anything unusual about it, he began pushing the object around with his index finger.

"Please be gentle Mister Sid," said the faerie, softly. "You are holding a dream faerie's broken heart."

"I'm what?" Sid asked in surprise, almost dropping what he held.

"You are holding a dream faerie's broken heart."

"It doesn't look like a broken heart to me."

"Have you ever seen one before?"

"Well, no. But it doesn't look like anything special. I'm sure there are lots of these along the creek. In fact it could just be some sort of pebbly sand."

"It may not look special to you because there is more wonder in a grain of sand than you could ever hope to understand."

"Anyway, Rianna, it's too big to be a baby faerie's broken heart."

"Oh, it's not a baby's. This was once part of a fully-grown faerie."

Sid pondered what she had said and wondered why, if he had seen plenty of things that looked similar to what he held he had never seen any dead faeries. He mentioned this to Rianna and she replied:

"You are surrounded by an inestimable amount of creatures but rarely see any dead ones."

Sid had wondered about that phenomenon himself and hoped for an explanation to the statement, but was disappointed as Rianna continued:

"When this faerie was a baby it must have seen a reflection and gone in search of its person. To do this it would have had to follow a dream signal of hope that it felt in its heart.

"Over time these signals can often become so faint that any faerie following one grows weak due to lack of nourishment from their person's spirit. If that happens then the faerie wonders whether or not it is searching in vain. To reassure itself it will again look for a reflection. If it sees one, even distantly, the faerie gains confidence and continues searching.

"Unfortunately, many people desert their dreams before their faeries can help them. If that happens then their reflections disappear, and the next time their faerie looks for one they

realize what has happened. Like the sad babies, they evaporate while their broken hearts turn to stone."

Rianna paused and sighed before continuing: "I wish people would realize that they are not the only ones to suffer when they live unfulfilled lives."

"But what if a person dies before being able to fulfill their life?" Sid asked. "That must often happen."

"Yes, of course it does. In fact it's very common. When that happens, so long as the person has not given up hope, then all of the faerie, including its heart, evaporates suddenly as if it never existed and feels no grief."

A thought suddenly struck Sid: "But what about Ashlakune? Can it still go there?"

"I can't answer that Mister. No faerie has ever returned to let us know whether or not it even exists. Maybe when you and I die, so long as you have not lost faith in life, I may find out." Rianna smiled and winked at him, adding: "Just as you may find out if the human Ashlakune exists."

Sidney Block looked at what he held and wondered what had become of the person who had disappointed that particular faerie so badly. Kneeling beside the creek in silence, with the little broken heart in his hand, he thought about all the things he had shared in such a short time with his own dream faerie, and how fortunate he was to have had her find him.

"Rianna," he asked, "why have so many different things happened to me since I met you?"

"Oh, Sidney," she replied softly. "Nothing is different except your awareness. You have been searching for destinations while ignoring the journey. You cannot reach one without sharing the other. It is the journey that gives the destination meaning.

"At birth you were given a child to share the journey with; a child abandoned as you grew older; a child full of the wonder of life; a child that cries lost in your heart while you waste your time searching for it in the world.

"You owe allegiance to nothing, except the truth in your heart yearning to live in peace with you and the rest of life. If you do not try and understand the person you truly are, not the person you have been taught to believe you should be, then it would have been better for the rest of life if you had never been born.

"If you exist without learning from the lessons of pain then your journey will be a waste of time, and the joy waiting to be released within you so that it can be shared with the family of life will wither without ever having had the chance of blooming.

"The gift of your life is but a seed, a seed of wonderment, but it is still a seed that must be shared before it can flourish. Your awareness must be a gardener, tending with love the place wherein that seed was planted, even though you do not know how or why it was planted where it was.

"It is beyond your comprehension to know the reason for your being but it must not be beyond your understanding how to nourish the seed, and the only way to do that is to share, with love, the wonderment of life.

"Treasure your dreams, and allow them to be part of the adventure of self-discovery. Learn to cherish life, even though you live in a place of extremes – the immensity of a leaf's journey and the obscenity of war.

"Learn to see things in a larger perspective. Don't judge through ignorance. Gain knowledge from your pain and learn to live in harmony with that knowledge – there is no easy way to peace of mind; you have to walk every step yourself.

"Allow a smile to warm your heart in spite of everything, because of everything, and let that smile be a beacon to help guide you through your destiny while The Storyteller tells you to yourself.

"Find comfort in the company of Nature, if you do then you will never be alone for you are fellow travellers and kin with The Wonderment, and The Wonderment's kindred could never break a faerie's heart."

Rianna's words flowed like water through a desert in the man's own heart, quenching the thirst of a long-forgotten child, while the creek flowed on down the valley of the Freestone.

The man no longer felt a stranger. He began to feel part of all things. The trees were not just trees. Sap rose in them as blood through his own veins. The sand beneath his feet was historic, filtering and purifying the water that could quench a deeper thirst than his own.

A swallow skimming the water was not just a bird, besides it had things to accomplish that were as important to it as the man's journey was to himself. The warmth of the sun caressing the body he thought he was using was not just the sun – it was the warmth of life.

The man closed his eyes, slipping further into his self. He felt he could hear the humming of a didjeridu flow through his sap. Silently, he felt himself warble, a magpie perched upon a limb of his self. Then he floated down, a leaf, into the nest of the earth, and was given rebirth.

The faerie watched him kneeling by the creek and smiled. *If only he could feel like that forever*, she thought, *we would both be so happy*. But she knew there was further to go so she flew up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Rianna," Sid said, opening his eyes and feeling as if he had been blind all his life and was only now seeing a wonder for the first time, "I feel that there is a reason for everything and we are all just a part of it."

"Come on Mister," she said. "One moment of insight is not all wisdom. You must live what you learn and you cannot do that until you share the secret."

"But what is the secret, Rianna?"

"The answer to your question is so simple that I find it surprising that you have to ask a faerie for it. But then, maybe it is not so surprising otherwise we would not be here together.

"The secret, Mister Sid, is what you deny yourself and others if you do not have the strength to share it. It is what can be heard without being told. It can be felt without being touched. It is the deeper smile, too bright for your face to form – although its reflection can shine from you to be rekindled in others. Its power will help you be true to yourself and a comfort to the less fortunate..."

"I wish you wouldn't speak in riddles," interrupted the man, desiring a straight answer to his question.

"Your life is full of riddles, Mister, and the answers are pieces of the secret."

"How do you know they are?"

"How do you know they are not?"

"But what are the answers, Rianna?" persisted Sid, dissatisfied with the way the conversation was going.

Without responding the faerie flew off down the creek, leaving the man to replace the broken heart and then stand up to wander after her once again.

THE PLACE OF THE EYES

A warm, comforting glow began to suffuse the day, beckoning the man on. It may have been the glow of sunset or firelight, or something he was unaware of but, whatever it was, he had the impression that he was reaching a welcome destination.

Rianna stopped, turned to him and said: "Well, Sidney, here we are."

"Here we are where?" he asked, wondering what she meant.

"We are at as good a place as any for The Place of The Eyes," she answered, looking at the man intently.

Sidney Block looked around but, other than those of his faerie, could not see any eyes. All he could see looked very much like the rest of the Freestone's scenery.

The faerie sat down upon a small rock near the water's edge and idly made patterns in the damp sand with her toes while gazing into the creek.

A skink lizard ran along a piece of driftwood before stopping briefly to look around for some reason of its own. Then it scurried away.

"Why is this the place of the eyes, Rianna?" Sid asked.

"You will see," she answered.

"But, what am I supposed to see?"

"What would you like to see?"

"I'd like to see the secret."

"We are here to help you find it. But first you must undress."

"You mean take my clothes off?" he asked in surprise.

"Of course," she replied, without looking up.

"What, all of them?"

"Of course."

"Er, will you be taking yours off?"

"Yes."

"But we might be cold," Sid said, embarrassed and worried about the turn of events while trying to find an excuse not to follow the faerie's advice. To his knowledge he had never been naked in front of a faerie before.

"There have been far too many times when we have been colder with them on," Rianna replied, enigmatically.

Sid was not sure that he understood her response but felt that he had gone too far to stop now.

"Oh. Alright then," he said, resigned to his situation.

So it came to pass that Mr Sidney Block, a much-travelled man who had learned so little, stood beside the Freestone Creek, north of the small Gippsland town of Briagolong and, after taking a deep breath, began to disrobe – not realizing as he did so that he was discarding far more than his clothing.

When he stood naked Sid felt embarrassed because he thought that Rianna and the bush would be looking at him. He had forgotten that the bush is always naked. Glancing sheepishly across to the faerie he asked: "Er, will you be taking your clothes off now?"

"Of course," she replied softly, without looking at him, and stood up like a little nymph upon the rock.

Reaching down to the hem of her gown she began lifting it, ever so slowly, as if delicately peeling sunbeams from her body.

Sid felt he should look away, but did not. I've never seen a naked faerie before, he thought. I wonder what she will look like? Will she be the same as any female? Other than the fact that she has delicate wings she still looks like a tinv lady.

As the faerie lifted her gown she began to disappear, and the sun set. The higher the faerie lifted her gown the more of her body disappeared, and darker became the day.

Every part of her below the gown was invisible. As she lifted it past her knees, her thighs, her waist, her breasts they all disappeared as if they had never existed. When she lifted it over her head and withdrew her arms from the sleeves her wings drifted away like moonbeams, and what remained of the day turned into night.

The gown appeared magically suspended like a flickering golden flame before floating to the ground, where it continued to glimmer.

Overwhelmed by what he had witnessed it took the man a while to realize that where his faerie's face had been were two of the deepest, darkest, most beautiful eyes he had ever seen;

eyes that seemed to be gazing into his soul as they grew larger while drifting upwards and merging with the night. Eventually, his sight was filled with a sky almost bursting with twinkling stars. Or were they winking?

The naked man, more at peace than he had ever been, felt no fear, nor the need to escape from his self. Boredom and the pain of loneliness were vague memories that seemed to have belonged to someone else. Something told him that no matter where the rest of his life's journey took him, it was not necessary to ever be lonely again.

He trusted those eyes completely, and felt that what he had seen in them was something he had been seeking for as long as he could remember. Without being conscious of speaking he thought he heard himself say:

"Goodbye Rianna. And thank you."

After watching his dream faerie merge with the night, Sid realised that he was no longer naked. Without any knowledge of re-entering his body, he was surprised to find that he was still sitting on the old stump outside his hut and gazing into his campfire while holding a leaf on his knee.

How natural, he thought, that the journey Rianna took me on should bring me back to the place where we met. If everything that happened was a way to the secret and at the end of it I am back here with myself, then that must mean the secret is within me. Oh the wonderment of it!

For the first time in his life the man looked forward to continuing his journey. From within the night he thought he heard something whisper:

"Hullo, Mister. And thank you too."

Then the moment was gone, but not forgotten.

THE BEGINNING

Sidney Block looked at the leaf again and then placed it on the stump, determining to put it in a box of bush wonders he intended collecting – just as Archie Hair had done. He rubbed his nose with the knuckle of a forefinger, as if it was itchy.

He was just about to reach down for his mug of tea when he noticed that next to his foot was what looked like a tiny gown glimmering near the fire's embers.

Delighted to have such a treasured memento as proof of what he had experienced he picked it up, and then suddenly dropped what was actually a smouldering piece of bark that had fallen from the fire. He alternatively stuck his finger and thumb into his mouth to cool them, and was reminded of the first aborigine to taste a fire fish.

When the sting had gone out of his burns Sid took a sip of tea. It was cold. However he was not surprised to find that it tasted sweet – even though he did not have any sugar. He could not help smiling to himself, and wondered whether it was a smile that would have satisfied Rianna.

He threw the mug's contents into the night and stoked the fire sufficiently to reheat the billy, then refilled his mug. As he sipped the tea he contemplated all that seemed to have happened to him during the time it had taken the fire to burn down.

Sid had no doubt that whatever had happened, even if it had only been in his mind, was as real as his burnt fingers. It surprised him that, if he had been sitting asleep by the fire for as long as it had taken to go on the journey with Rianna, he had not fallen off the old stump, nor had his backside become numb.

Now that he was back where he had been when he met the faerie the time they had shared, like a dream, seemed to have taken but a moment. It was as if time had hibernated, causing its

heartbeats to slow down sufficiently to give him the opportunity of appreciating aspects of life he would never have been capable of sharing during the time he had become used to living in.

Yet he knew that whatever had happened would be a source of comfort to him for the rest of his life.

The man's allotted time silently continued ticking his heartbeats away at its own pace.

Experiencing a sense of peace and belonging he could not recall having felt before, Sid sat upon the stump, still alone in the night but no longer lonely. He accepted being just a part of Nature, no more and no less, and was grateful. He picked up a log to put on the fire and momentarily felt that he held the firm grip of The Storyteller's hand.

Reflecting on what he had shared, Sid could relate to aspects of himself in some of the stories. What at times had seemed absurd began to make more sense than the melancholy person he had been, wasting his life before the leaf, or faerie, had landed on his knee.

Even the plaid-billed duckorpuss did not seem abnormal – in fact he would not have been surprised to find that he was distantly related to one. There had certainly been times when he felt it could have been possible.

It's amazing, he thought, contemplating the leaf's journey, how, depending on our ability to accept a change in perception, a seemingly insignificant incident can have such an important influence on a person's life.

A nightbird trilled within the forest – at least it sounded like a nightbird. Reminded of Mister Fourtycoats, Sid suddenly felt as if his flesh could not contain the newfound contentment of his spirit any longer. What he had experienced, and the birdsong, filled him with an overwhelming urge to dance.

Placing his mug of tea beside the leaf on the stump he stood up and danced around the fire. His shadow stood up with him and performed the same movements far more dramatically by leaping high into the trees.

After performing uncoordinated steps of a jig, pirouettes, leaps and heel clicks that the wee bards would have envied, Sidney Block dropped down upon the earth and lay gazing into the night.

"How foolish I must seem," he said, before realizing that it wasn't foolish to dance alone within the night. In fact, he felt it was one of the most sensible things he had ever done. He then did something else that was very sensible for a human being in his situation – he sang.

Even though there was nobody to hear him, Sid sang aloud to the stars. He sang to the creek as it flowed on its way to wherever. He sang to the frogs, the crickets and the trees. He sang to everything but, most importantly, he sang with the unexpected joy he felt at being alive.

Sid briefly wondered whether his voice might be mistaken by the bush for the skyrunners' song of joy – and hoped not.

While lying beside the Freestone, gazing happily into the same night sky that, prior to his meeting with the faerie, had filled him with intense loneliness, he knew it would not have surprised him to see a magnificent silverbow arcing over the black hills.

I wonder why the frozen rainbow didn't topple over? he thought, before smiling again, realizing that it did not matter. Without intending to, he began softly singing Rianna's lullaby:

"May the sweet scent of promise perfume your dreams As you lie down to rest between now and what's been. Close your eyes, go to sleep in the care of the deep. In the deep sleep of peace drift away..."

Not far from where Sid lay, singing, a few stunted Chinese Trees of Wonderment whispered to each other: "He has found a way to the secret."

"He shares the secret," murmured The Spirit of The Kurnai.

"Ah, the wonderment of it," whispered The Trees of Wonderment.

A mist began descending into the valley and appeared to drift amongst every tree, bush and rock – as if searching for something. The man stood up and watched it for a while before emptying the contents of his billy onto the fire. Steam rose into the dark like a hissing ghost – evoking the memory of the prospector.

Sidney Block picked up the leaf from off of the stump and was about to enter his hut when he heard the sound of a distant splash from the creek. He waited to hear the distressed cry of a duckorpuss, but heard nothing unusual.

After feeling a moment's disappointment he went inside, put the leaf on the bedside table, lit a candle and sat on the side of the bed while taking off his boots and socks.

Once again the nightbird called from within the bush. This time Sid wondered whether it might be Archie Hair's ghost teaching an orphaned bird how to sing – and hoped that it was. That thought gave him the urge to write a song about the old man.

Reaching for a pencil and a notepad he was just about to start composing the song when a moth distracted him by fluttering around the candle flame. Not wanting it to incinerate itself, he tried shooing the moth away but it determinedly flew into the flame, sizzled, and died. Sid jokingly thought to himself that if he had some 'poemjuice' he would be able to write a poem about the incident.

No sooner had he thought of the drink than a poem did form in his mind. Amazingly, the poem was complete so he did not have to work on it. Quickly, before he forgot it, he wrote:

Hey, you silly moth, don't do that. Don't fly through the flame! Ah well, I tried to warn you, Still, I must admit you were game.

I wonder why you did it? Were you stupid or were you bold? Was it because nature told you to? Or was it because you were cold?

I've nearly done the same myself, Metaphorically, of course, Although I never went as far as you, I wasn't driven by your force.

But, looking back, I often wish That I had been more game And let life's fire consume me, Rather than singe me with its flame.

Pleased with the poem, Sid's body unconsciously copied his faerie's habit of briefly wriggling with pleasure when a moment of delight passed through her.

As if rubbing a magic lantern he briskly rubbed his nose with the knuckle of a forefinger, and then concentrated on writing a song about Archie Hair.

He picked up his guitar that had been neglected for too long, tuned it up, and strummed a few chords.

While the candle flickered, and shadows drifted around the hut's clay and wooden walls, the night pressed up to the windowpanes and peered in to see what the man was doing.

Sid wrote the song as if he was asking questions and children were answering.



Where, oh where is Archie Hair? He used to live back there, now I can't find him anywhere. Please can you tell me where has Archie gone? I've been searching for him so long.

He lives in a moonbeam. He lives in a dream. He smiles from the campfire's glow. He flies with the birds in the sky, high, high, But where he's gone to we don't know.

I heard that he lived down near the Blue Pool And would be pleased for me to call, Although he loved children most of all. Somebody told me he could teach young birds to sing, But I've never heard of such a thing.

You can hear him in the kooka-kookaburra's laugh. He calls from a whipbird's crack. He whistles every day where the bush birds play But he's never coming back.

Where, oh where, is gentle Archie Hair? He could teach us how to care, He could teach us how to share. Please can you tell me where has Archie gone? I've been searching for him so long.

You can see him in the eyes of a kind old man, You can touch him in a helping hand. He whispers with the breeze through the gum trees' leaves His love for this old land. Diddley-idle-di, diddley-i-di-dii, Diddley-i-de-di-di-di.

Repeat 1st and 2nd verse.

After writing the song Sid strummed the chords and sung it a few times (while light-heartedly wondering if the wee bards could hear the songpoem) until he felt comfortable with it.

He finished undressing and then blew out the candle – puffing the light out and the night in. Instantly, moon shadows cuddled up with him as he tucked himself into the warmth of his blankets.

Before drifting off to sleep the last line of the long poem Archie had recited to the wee bards flowed through his mind: "Oh, the questions were many – could the answer be love?"

Although he did not realise it at the time, the man had found a healing place.

He smiled while he slept, for a seed that had lain dormant for so long was germinating within him. Mountain eggs were slowly hatching into parts of eagles, or flowers, or...? Humans were dreaming. The moon was shining. Spiders were spinning webs and dewdrops would soon be forming.

Suddenly, from within the night, one of the stunted Trees of Wonderment exclaimed in surprise:

"I don't believe it. I just don't believe it!"

"What is it? What is it?" asked the other stunted trees.

"Oh, the wonderment of it. I do believe I'm beginning to grow!"

"But that's not possible," responded the others.

"That's what I thought,' replied the delighted tree. "But I don't care. I'm going to do it anyway."



FOREWORD

Once upon a time I was sitting beside a campfire outside my hut near the banks of the Freestone Creek, waiting for the billy to boil. For reasons common to many people I was feeling too melancholy to appreciate how beautiful the night was, or care about what mysteries it might contain.

I did not hear Nature's sounds or, if I did hear them, I did not take any notice. I did not smell the subtle bush perfume or appreciate the cosy warmth of the fire, all I saw were the shadows it cast – and I did not even see them clearly. I took it all for granted, forgetting how much worse I would have felt if what I was experiencing had not existed.

I was deaf and blind to the wonders of that night.

Being preoccupied with insignificance, I denied myself the beauty of life surrounding me but, thank goodness, I did notice a leaf flutter down from out of the dark and land upon my knee – at least I think it was a leaf.

I picked up what had fallen and, in the fire's light, looked at it closely. Whether or not there are faeries there is still something magical about a leaf.



I wish I had remembered to wash the ashes from my hands

SWEET DREAMS

SUCCESS IS GOING FROM FAILURE TO FAILURE WITHOUT A LOSS OF ENTHUSIASM
Winston Churchill

THE FOLLOWING LETTER WAS SENT TO THE AUTHOR BY FRANK STRAW OF SALE

I first met Archie Hair in 1947. He lived in a four-roomed bark hut that also had an attic. There was one main room with a table and a large open fireplace. Archie always had the billy on for a hot cuppa. Anyone who visited might also be given a glass of home-brewed ginger beer and an ANZAC biscuit or a cookie. He was a good cook and also made a great cup of tea.

This room had a mantelpiece with all sorts of things on it including bottles containing gold, things from the First World War, coins, rocks, some lovely plates and pictures, etc. Around the room there were books and a can full of his own handmade walking sticks.

The place he and his wife, Edna, lived was called 'The Arches'. Some of the windows had old green bottles in them that the light would shine through. Archie was also a poet who wrote some nice verse.

He used to take children on treasure hunts and would give them clues where to find the things he had hidden.

Mrs. Hair was able to walk with the aid of two sticks but, most of the time, Archie had to help her and bathe her. They had both been married previously and Edna's married name was Chester. He was a great man and a help to her right up until she passed away.

Archie was an independent man but never in a hurry, as his breathing was slow due to him being gassed in the Great War. He had a 1938 Chevrolet that he only drove when he had to. The Dargo mail brought most of his things. He also had the old party-line telephone.

Archie had the most interesting visitors' book I have ever seen and it contained people's names from all over the world. It was not unusual for him to have 20 people visit at one time. Sundays were the busiest days as people were starting to travel by car and were looking for places to go.

From the age of eleven I only had the chance to see Archie when I could, although he always sent me birthday and Christmas cards. It was not until I was sixteen that I learned to drive my 1928 Chevrolet ute and then saw him at least once a month. I also used to bring my family and mates to see him.

After I married he just loved my kids, as he did all children. I used to get his firewood and he would take us on walks in the bush, along tracks that are still there to this day. There was a mineshaft going from the creek for some 200 feet but it was closed after a big flood filled it up.

As the years went by I had a hut at McKinnon's Point and for some years I mined for gold, so saw quite a bit of Archie and Edna at that time.

Archie's favourite thing was to feed the birds. He used to buy sausages for the kookaburras every week and at times would have up to six perched on his arms and head. Parrots used to perch on him, waiting to be fed, as well. It was just lovely to see them. There was a bowerbird's bower near the house and it was there for years.

The big bushfires of '65 burnt him out but 'The Arches' rose again from the ashes, although not like the old home. First he got a van to live in and then he built a place with plenty of room and a room on top. For a man of his age he just went on and on. He had guts.

Mrs Hair came back after he had room for her and she never left until she got sick and passed over. Archie looked after her day and night. Maybe God looked down on both of them the day she died.

I could see he was having difficulty coping because Edna could not get out of bed or get dressed by herself, but I never heard him complain once. There are not many men left like him nowadays.

Archie only had the land on a continuing 9-yearly lease so when he passed over so did the history of 'The Arches.' He did get sick once and lived in Stratford for a while. Although he had lost most of his possessions in the '65 fires he did have some nice things in his new place. Someone broke in once and stole a lot of things. That hurt Archie a lot.

In 1980 he was in Maffra hospital and could only walk a little way. He hated it there and always wanted to go home. I think that's where he wanted to pass away.

That same year, the town of Willung had a centenary celebration so I rang the hospital and asked if I could take Archie. They said yes, gave us a wheelchair and away we went. He had a ball being back in his old stomping ground again and seeing some of his old mates.

I only saw him once more before his death in December 1980. In his last words to me he mentioned that although things had changed over the years we'd had some fun. Then he found his peace.

Frank Straw, Sale, August 1998.



Archie in wheelchair

EXCERPT FROM A LETTER ARCHIE WROTE TO HIS SISTER

Dear Sister.

you asked me to delve into the past of the Hair family to search out the unusual skeleton in the closet. Although the ghost did not materialize, I can assure you that most of the accounts I recollect are Hair raising.

It would not take much imagination to assume that the name Hair is extremely old. Have I not heard about the missing link being referred to as the hairy man? However, as our particular line came from the land of the kilt, the name conceivably could have been hairy legs.

During World War One I visited the home of our direct Scottish ancestors at Cummock, and talked with an old family friend and workmate, John Reynolds. He was delighted to hear about his old friends as he listened intently, his hands resting on my shoulders to compensate for sightless eyes.

What did it matter that Maggie, Kirsty or Jock he was chuckling about were perhaps a generation or two older than the similar names I was mentioning?

I can still hear him say: "Weel, er-rarrrrchie (the 'er' pronounced as in urchin and the 'r' with the inimitable Scots' roll) I mind the time there was Wullie at you window and Rabbie o'er there, Maxwell, Jock and mesel aw spinning aw the looms...

EXCERPTS FROM ERIC HAIR'S RECOLLECTIONS OF 'THE ARCHES'

This story began during the summer of 1944-45. My father, Archie, and me were camped at Considine's Corner, not far from the Blue Pool. Close by were some old gold diggings and a bark hut. The hut had belonged to a miner called Bill who had recently passed away.

Archie began to take an interest in the hut because it was empty and he had a miner's right. So we moved in. One good thing about bark huts is that they only leak when it rains!

What a difference he soon made. He pulled out Bill's tobacco plants, and gave up smoking. Then he put in a concrete floor. I suspect this was at Edna's insistence because she wouldn't live on a dirt floor – especially with rats and rabbits burrowing away under her feet.

The hut became known as The Arches because he used all the crooked saplings he could find to build extra rooms.

He began by building a lean-to on the hut. It had a bed but was mostly used to store things. Then he built a much larger room about three yards from the hut which became the kitchen, complete with stove – and was better for cooking than the open fire in the hut. It was a much higher room as well, so he strengthened the ceiling with boards and made an attic with beds for visitors.

This was the start of him hosting his grandchildren, scouts, guides and other children during school holidays and at weekends.

When he and Edna acquired a kerosene fridge they began to live there permanently.

Next, he built a garage onto the kitchen to house his Chevy car. An alcove off of the kitchen for a small bedroom completed The Arches.

The exterior of all the rooms were made from the bark of local trees that had been felled by timber cutters. He probably carried some of the sheets of bark up to a mile or so. Archie was certainly a tough cookie!

When Archie first began to live at The Arches the area was dotted with old mine shafts, some of which were quite deep. Everyone had to be careful where they trod. It was necessary to have a torch or lantern when walking around after dark.

However, he backfilled some, and used others to throw his rubbish in until they were full. He built a toilet seat over one of them, and used lime to neutralize the odour and discourage flies – however, we still had to be wary of spiders, lizards and snakes, or even a goanna.

A short distance from The Arches was a shaft of about 30 yards that had been driven horizontally from the upper bank of the creek. My brother, Stuart, and me put it to good use during the bushfires of 1965 – but that is a story for another time.

Archie had an order with the local butcher for his weekly supply of meat. This always included several pounds of sausages. It wasn't because he particularly liked sausages but, when they were cooked, he fed them to his birds. Kookaburras and magpies really liked them – in fact most of the birds at The Arches went for them.

He didn't much like the jays and crows because they muscled in front of all the other birds and quickly ate everything that was thrown onto the ground. However, he would trick them by throwing some bread crusts out as far as he could.

While the jays were eating them, he quickly fed his sausages to the others. The birds learnt this technique and waited for him to play his tricks on the jays and crows.

Kookaburras were probably his favourites. They came and sat on his arms and head, or his shoulders, waiting to be fed pieces of sausage.

*

When they were finished feeding they'd all fly up into a tree and give him the very best laughter they could raise. It was truly a sight to behold, and certainly raised his spirits.

However, Archie had an affinity with all the birds. Magpies, honeyeaters, wrens and many others would come to him for tidbits. It wasn't uncommon for parrots to sit on his head while he fed them. And that was Archie – he was as free as his birds.

*

One day, when Archie was fossicking in the bush, he came across a small joey kangaroo. He had a deformed foot and had probably been abandoned by his mother because he couldn't get into her pouch. So Archie put the joey in his knapsack and took him home.

This was about the time of a television show called 'Skippy, The Bush Kangaroo' and everyone called the joey 'Skippy'. But his proper name, as given to him by Archie, was 'Skipper'.

A diet of diluted condensed milk and pieces of bread, and other tidbits, soon had him thriving – Archie had a special way with animals and birds.

Soon Skipper became famous. People used to visit the Arches just to see him, give him a pat, and offer him something to eat. He became quite spoilt relying on people to feed him. If Archie happened to sleep in Skipper would scratch on the door until he got his breakfast. After a while he grew up and his manner changed. He began to demand food!

One day, a family arrived at The Arches and their daughter tried to play with Skipper but, because she had nothing for him to eat, he began attacking her. It was only Archie's quick intervention that prevented her from being hurt.

Archie took Skipper away into the bush so that he could live his own life in the wild. But the next morning he was back, scratching on the door again. He certainly knew which side his bread was buttered on. Archie took him further away into the bush, and he was never seen again.



Archie and Edna in the 1950's

By now Archie and Edna had become quite well known and lots of folks called on them. Archie was especially famous for his special homemade ginger beer, which he liked to serve to anyone who came along.

Sometimes he tended to make the brew a little too strong. Visitors could be sitting there having a quiet conversation when suddenly there would be an almighty 'BANG'. Even though he tied them down securely, the gas in one of the bottles had blown its cork out.

I often wondered whether he used it as a party trick, because it certainly startled his guests – but it never deterred him from making another batch!

*

Everyone who came along to Archie's hikes and treasure hunts was presented with a walking stick, complete with a pannikin for containing any small bush treasures that happened to be found on the walks.

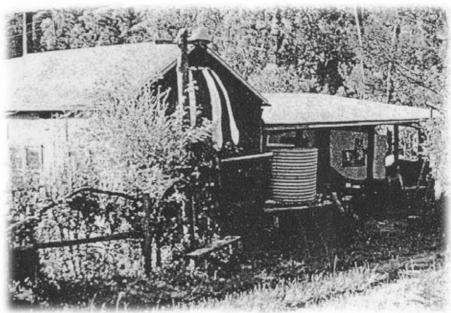
The pannikins were made from condensed milk tins. He used to leave about an inch of the lid uncut when he was opening them – which was often, because he had a passion for using it in his tea and on things like toast and cakes. I think he used to buy them by the slab! He would bend the lids back to make handles and then secure them to the sticks with strips of rubber tubing.

The sticks were of all shapes and sizes. Each one was given a name and had a strip of coloured tape attached. Blue was for boys, red for girls, yellow for little children and green for adults.

The day following the 1965 bushfires in that area I took Archie back to see what damage had been done to his place. We had to walk the last three miles because the road was littered with fallen trees, some of them still burning.

When we arrived at The Arches we found that it had been completely burnt. I will always remember seeing the water tank sitting on the ground, still partly filled with water, with steam rising from it.

Archie scanned the remains of his 'Arches' and, without a word of complaint or bitterness, quietly said: "Where do you think we should start building again?" The battlefields of the First World War had taught him well.



The second Arches

He immediately made plans to rebuild. One of my brothers, Bruce, brought a caravan from Flynn's Creek for him to make a start. Archie dismantled a shed from our brother Stuart's farm which, when re-erected, became the main room at the new 'Arches'.

Bruce brought some second-hand doors and windows from Traralgon and, with the help of rebuilding from cubs, scouts, Rupert Shubert, and others, Archie and Edna had a new place to live.

By August, they had moved in and, with an attic and mattresses, were ready to host visitors once again.

Author's note: When passing their home the tin awning over the front window always put me in mind of inverted tulip petals.

*

Archie died of natural causes, aged 89 years, in the Maffra hospital on the 21st of December 1980 after living a full and interesting life. He was predeceased by his two wives, Betsy and Edna.

Archie is buried in the Stratford Lawn Cemetery, which looks out towards the hills to the north where his 'Arches' once stood.

The rockhounds' gems come from the earth.

They polish, cut and grind them.

Most characters have gems of worth –

If only we could find them.

Archie Hair



HARRY TREASURE: An extract from his memoirs about his family's preparation for their journey to the Dargo High Plains in 1878:

"...Mr King provided his wife's saddle mare, Jenny, for my mother to ride and on which she was to carry me, the baby. Mr King remarked that he would rather carry a 50 pound bag of flour!



Harry Treasure

"My dad fitted up two armchairs, one on either side of a second horse, for my sister Nell and the second oldest boy, George, to ride in. The chairs had the legs taken off so that they would not be broken against the trees along the way. Blankets, rugs, etc. were stuffed in around George and Nell and they were strapped to the chairs so they would not fall out.

"My eldest brother, Jim, about seven years of age, was placed to ride astride a few bags on the top of the horse that Dad led. Four other packhorses were provided to carry all of my parents' possessions which included bedding, blankets, clothing, pots and pans, crockery, sewing machine, a cradle, some fowls and numerous other small tools and chattels..."

The rest of Harry's reminiscences make fascinating reading, and the family overcame many hardships to lead fulfilling and successful lives. Some of Harry and his wife Clare's descendants still run cattle on the Dargo High Plains.

ANGUS McMILLAN: This explorer eventually settled at Bushy Park, not far from Briagolong, where he acquired many thousands of acres of land before becoming bankrupt in 1860.



Angus McMillan

Sometimes lauded as a tireless explorer and hard-working squatter, who was supposedly a benevolent supporter of the local natives' welfare, Angus was also accused of being involved in the murder of Kurnai tribespeople and of lying for his own aggrandizement, while misappropriating supplies that the government had issued to Gippsland aboriginals.

Like his life, McMillan's death, in 1865, is also the cause of some controversy and has been attributed to suicide, alcoholism, the result of an accident after falling off his horse (when a firefish startled it?) and natural causes. That Angus did in fact die seems to be one of the few things about him not in dispute.

DUCK BILLED PLATYPUS: The platypus has a duck-like bill, a flattened tail (similar to a beaver's), a fur-covered body, and webbed forefeet.

Adult males are about 50 centimetres in length and weight up to 1 kilogram, females are little more than half this size. They build two types of burrows.

The resting burrow is generally made beneath the roots of a tree on a riverbank, near the water's edge.

The nesting burrow may be from two to seven metres in length and terminates in a nesting chamber lined with plant materials

The platypus is not a strong swimmer and spends only a few hours of each day in the water, staying submerged for up to ten minutes at a time while feeding on a diet that consists mainly of shrimps, insect larvae and worms.

WATER DRAGONS: Growing up to one metre in length these amphibious lizards have long, powerful legs and claws. Their tail forms 2/3rds of their length and is laterally compressed to help act like an oar when swimming.

They have spiky spines at the back of the head that continue down the spine, decreasing in size to the base of the tail where they divide into two rows.

The water dragon's upper body is grey-green, with cream and black traverse bands on the body and tail. Underneath, the body is creamy brown-grey.

The Gippsland male water dragon has an olive-green chest and is distinguished with a colourful throat that is blotched or striped with various colours; orange, blue and yellow.

They are omnivorous, semi-aquatic, and have been known to stay under water for up to ninety minutes. To reach higher speeds they can run on their hind legs.

They generally feed on insects, frogs, yabbies, other aquatic organisms, fruits, berries and flowers. They can eat under water. There have been recorded incidents of cannibalism occurring to young.

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER (Member of the petrel family): In the early 1800's the explorer Mathew Flinders was amazed by a sight he witnessed in Bass Strait:

"A large flock of gannets was observed at daylight and they were followed by such a number of petrels as we have never seen equalled.

"There was a stream of them from fifty to eighty yards in depth and of three hundred yards, or more, in breadth. The birds were not scattered, but were flying so compactly as a free movement of their wings seemed to allow; and for a full hour and a half this stream of petrels continued to pass without interruption, at a rate little inferior to the swiftness of the pigeon..."

Flinders estimated that he saw approximately 150 million birds. This is probably an overestimation, but it gives an idea of the numbers in which the birds occurred.

Although there has been a considerable reduction since that time, many still breed on Phillip Island and the Bass Strait islands.

The author recalls witnessing huge flocks of them darkening the sky as they flew to their Phillip Island rookeries in the 1950s.

LAUGHING KOOKABURRA (Great Brown Kingfisher): Large bird (46 cm) with a big beak. Cream-white head and body, with brown marks on crown. Brown eye-strip, back and wings. Mottled blue on wings. Tail is barred brown and black with white edge.

Kookaburras feed mostly by flying to the ground and catching insects and small vertebrates. Although they have keen eyesight and strong, sharp beaks, kookaburras can kill but rarely eat rats, mice and large snakes.

Their habitat is open forests and woodlands, especially in south-eastern Australia, where their call (eerily reminiscent of raucous human hilarity) reverberates through the bush at dawn and dusk.

Kookaburras live up to ten years in family groups and mate for life. They are probably the most well-known and best loved of all Australian birds and can be quite tame.

GIPPSLAND: The first recorded sighting of what is now called Gippsland was at Point Hicks, named by Captain James Cook in 1778.

Within this region of south-eastern Australia, despite the invasion of 'civilisation', there still remains a diverse variety of flora and fauna. Unfortunately, due to greed and ignorance, some of this is in threat of extinction.

The geographical features encompass mountain scenery, rolling hills, remaining fern gullies, plains, sweeping beaches, lakes, rivers and streams.

THE GIPPSLAND LAKES: A large system of coastal lagoons originating from a huge bay, which was gradually closed by the action of waves depositing a barrier of sand. Later, another outer sand barrier developed, forming Lake Reeve and the Ninety Mile Beach.

Over thousands of years, silt and clay carried by numerous rivers and streams into the water behind the barrier built the present maze of lakes, deltas and swamps.

By the time the explorer Angus McMillan reached the area in 1838, the lakes were virtually land-locked.

In 1889 a channel was carved through the Ninety Mile Beach at Lakes Entrance to enable steamers to enter the lakes from the sea.

THE FREESTONE CREEK was named after the rocky wall of freestone at what is now the Quarry Reserve, and has its headwaters below Castle Hill to the south of Dargo and the Crooked River area.

From here the Freestone and its tributaries flow south through valleys and gorges, before joining the Avon River just north of Bushy Park homestead – where the explorer Angus McMillan settled in 1843.

During the summer months the creek is often a series of waterholes with a gently flowing stream of water percolating its way through the stony bottom. After heavy rains in the catchment area it can erupt into a raging torrent. Extract from Discovering Briagolong by Laurie Manning.



IN LOVING MEMORY



DAD & MUM Sidney and Julia



ROBYN 'ROBSY' CHABLE