

Issue 71 Autumn 2016

Dialogue

WN BULL



Contents

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Editorial Office:

164 King Street,
Newtown NSW 2042
Phone: (02) 9519 5344
Fax: (02) 9519 4310
Email: wnbull@wnbull.com
Web: www.wnbull.com.au

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Editorial Board:

Richard White
Patsy Healy
Greg Bisset

Production:

Phillip Pavich
Email: phillip@depotspot.com

Copies of *Dialogue*
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calling (02) 9519 5344

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A Season Arrived

Regulars

- 1 Editorial
- 22 Recommended Reading

Features

- 2 My Father's Songs, My Father's Stories Part I
- 4 My Father's Songs, My Father's Stories Part II
- 6 Friendship
- 8 A Birthday Blessing
- 10 Marjorie is Dead
- 14 My Friend Connie
- 16 Reflections of a New Funeral Director
- 20 Moments that Stay and Unfold
- 24 Where The Wild Things Are . . .

Editorial



Richard White

. . . if rain don't come this month, said Dan
And cleared his throat to speak –
'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
If rain don't come this week.'

A heavy silence seemed to steal
On all at that remark;
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed a piece of bark . . .

'Hanrahan', from John O'Brien's *Around the Boree Log*,
always had the last word, 'we'll all be rooned!' There's
probably a bit of the pessimist in all of us, particularly
during a long, dry spell, in the country. The heat and the
cloudless skies seem here to stay. The familiar, inescapable
status quo crowds out any thought of relief. Then, the
drought breaks! It's a miracle!

This edition of *Dialogue* is full of miracles. The surprising
and unpredictable appear in Madeleine Pizzuti's 'A Birthday
Blessing'. Rob Greenop's 'Friendship' is about the way

affection and loyalty underpin and hold strongly the broken
pieces of human lives and temper grief with hope.

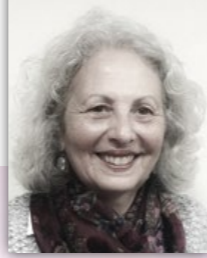
Marjorie Pizer has been a blessing to this editor and
readers of *Dialogue*. Her dying is an occasion for gratitude
and appreciation, as well as sadness. Marjorie's own griefs
informed her writings and endeared them to her readers.

The two pieces by staff from WN Bull Funerals, Mark
Leary and Steve Ross, are personal and comforting. 'This
is more than a job' says so much and is, for all of us,
so reassuring.

Cecile Yazbek and Erica Greenop tell stories. It's a
gift they both wear lightly, unafraid to write of the utterly
ordinary and the mysteriously childlike, creating miracles
that enlighten and enliven.

When you feel that 'we'll all be rooned', may
the surprising and the wonderful catch you off guard
and unsettle you into an 'awesome moment', as they
say these days.

From all of us at WN Bull Funerals.



MY FATHER'S SONGS, MY FATHER'S STORIES

PART I

written by Cecile Yazbek

Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I'm gonna eat some worms, big fat juicy ones, tiny little skinny ones, see how they wriggle and squirm. Bite all their heads off suck all their blood out, throw their skins away; nobody knows how I can thrive on three live worms a day.

My father, the hero, lifted his ukulele to interrupt a frigid pause in an all-race convention in apartheid South Africa. His power was put to good use in public life.

As we grew up, he occasionally forgot that we were his family, not his constituents. We didn't want to be convinced of something or swayed by him, we were forming our own thoughts and opinions. But I was happy to observe my father in action: to see his pronouncements, his photographs in the newspaper. Always the diplomat, he lived his life trying to bring people together – mainly people of different colours, sometimes families with opposing views. His

religion, however, was a different matter. Catholicism sustained him in an emotional suppleness that comforted troubled people who sought his help. They felt accepted, not judged by a man who knew the territory.

But long before then, almost sixty years ago, perhaps I was four or five years old, he knelt beside my bed and patted my pillow at bedtime – 'Shh, here she comes, I can hear her tapping on the window.' I listened – I, in my incarnation as Charlotte, the girl in the story who fell easily to sleep because she said 'yes' to the fairy queen who tapped on the window.

In the soft rush of a breeze lifting the bedroom curtain, the fairy queen wearing a silk and lace frock, flew in and waved her crystal wand over Charlotte's pillow. 'Wish for anything at all,' her sweet voice whispered, as she sprinkled her magic dust on my pillow. Safe in the knowledge that I could summon this fairy at any time in the dark, I allowed my eye lids to droop.

My father had a remarkable mother, known far and wide as a storyteller in the small South African town where my Lebanese ancestors settled and ran a sweet shop. But the death of her husband, my grandfather, plunged them into poverty and deprived her three younger children of their mother's presence. They were sent to the nuns' orphanage.

“ Instead, my father's story of Charlotte and the fairy queen kept me safe for a few years, allowing him peaceful nights until I stopped believing in his fairies. ”

Remembering this and the profound trust I had in my father, I wonder who waved a wand and sprinkled magic dust on his pillow at night in the dormitory? And how did he learn to tell us, his children such a comforting story? Why did my forty-four year old father feel the need to conjure such a character? Did he feel as I do at this time of aging and physical discomfort, the need for an omnipotent figure beyond the realm of guardian angels, suffering saints and Mother Mary? Or was the fairy queen a Mother Mary for his daughters?



Oddly enough, my hyper-Catholic father never told me stories of saints and martyrs. That was left to nuns at school to frighten us with St Lawrence who was barbecued on both



sides of his body or St Joan burnt at the stake. Instead, my father's story of Charlotte and the fairy queen kept me safe for a few years, allowing him peaceful nights until I stopped believing in his fairies.

“ Oddly enough, my hyper-Catholic father never told me stories of saints and martyrs. That was left to nuns at school to frighten us with St Lawrence who was barbecued on both sides of his body or St Joan burnt at the stake. ”

Then, after the click of frogs and the whir of crickets on a damp evening in that humid climate fell into the deep silence of the early hours, I called to him from my nightmares. He padded in bare feet to kneel beside my bed and wordlessly pat my back. He never turned the light on to dispel monsters and ghosts; he just held me until my racing heart stilled in the overwhelm of sleep.



MY MY FATHER'S SONGS, STORIES
PART II

written by Cecile Yazbek

I can't remember when my father began to tell stories of the fairy queen who transmogrified into a wicked queen who bit people's heads off; her garden was a lake of blood from all the headless corpses. He'd play a biting game with us, called *hum, ahh, hummm* in hungry beast cadences. We waited, knowing that at any moment, hum could bite an unwary finger that strayed onto his chest.

When his grandchildren were at an age to listen to Grandpa's stories, he invented a tiger with an Arabic name – a tiger with long sharp claws and huge fangs that he bared as he growled. This tiger, Mahloulf climbed from roof to roof with great roars, and ate people who crossed his path, until the streets ran with deep rivers of their blood. He never ate pets or chickens or other animals, he only devoured human beings.

The grandchildren, with eyes like plates, lay very still together on the big bed, their heads resting on his wide

“ . . . but in his horrifying stories of the wicked queen and the tiger, our courage was born . . . ”

open arms. He enthralled them, and us, their mothers, with his barks and whispers about this terrifying beast. And the children begged for more, 'more Mahloulf please Grandpa', and he'd shape the story into a song. 'Ohhh, there once was a tiger whose name was Mahloulf, a tiger who jumped straight onto the roof.'

“ When night arrives and departs, I scan my memory for the comforting stories he spun on my pillow. ”

If he had to take a phone-call in another room, he pranced away with claws extended and fangs bared. He returned to pounce on the bed with so much growling and snarling, he'd have to drink from the glass on the night table. He emptied it with a loud aah and looked down at the assembled 'prey' whose eyes had followed every swallow.

My father never read Sendak's *Wild Things* but in his horrifying stories of the wicked queen and the tiger, our courage was born – a more robust courage than that of the effete comfort provided by the story of sweet Charlotte and her feminine fairy queen, even although her spells were stronger than those of the wicked queen. In facing that cannibal woman who bit heads off, in the shelter of our father's large hands and arms, steel entered our souls. We shared in the terror being wreaked, both as victims eaten or beheaded, and perpetrators because of the way we egged him on. Once the story session was over, we climbed down from the roof and became ordinary again, with bowls of rice krispies for breakfast.

My father, whose fairy queen, wicked queen and savage tiger captivated us, comes to me when monstrous shapes morph at the edge of the day. When night arrives and departs, I scan my memory for the comforting stories he spun on my pillow. It reminds me of the girl held captive by Rumpelstiltskin until she either guesses his name or learns how to spin mounds of straw into gold. I don't feel her desperation, but sometimes the task makes me tired.

My father's stories sustain all of us in different ways, which is how a loving stream works its magic long after the creator has left the stage.



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FRIENDSHIP

written by Rob Greenop

What is it about a friendship that can be so enduring, often seemingly torn apart by tension, jealousy or disagreement, only for it to come back together during a time of strife or trouble, perhaps when one is vulnerable or unwell, or in need of support? What is the catalyst that repairs a broken relationship?

This is the story of someone whom I knew for more than 50 years, only to see him die in loneliness and depression and, towards the end of his life, there was little I could do to help.

Over that time, in our life as pilots, we shared countless adventures in the skies over much of the world. Back on earth we worked alongside each other and laughed and relaxed at the end of the day. He was nearly four years older than me, most mature and capable and was looked up to with great respect by all our colleagues who worked close to him. In a time of trouble I turned to him. He was a most valued member of our organisation. Looking back over most of those years there was little disagreement or discord between us. He was my friend.

I say 'most of those years' as there came a time when our friendship faltered and a void opened between us.

I was overseas in a hotel room when I had a call that he had suddenly become dangerously ill and was in hospital. I remember that evening, my mind in turmoil, walking the streets in parts of the city I had never ventured into before, wondering where the future lay for him and his work. And what did it mean for me?

I returned to Sydney the following evening and went directly to visit him in intensive care. There I could see disappointment and frustration etched all over his face as the realisation that he would most likely have to retire had begun to sink in. The following morning at work the fact that he would not be returning to continue his important role in the company was causing great concern and it was with considerable reluctance I agreed to step into his shoes.

Over the next few weeks perhaps I was too much wrapped up in my under confidence at being thrust into a

position I knew little about that I failed to take into account how this could affect our friendship or where the future lay for him. He slowly regained some of his health but setback after setback saw him repeatedly in hospital. Frequently I visited him there, but his sense of loss and grief slowly began to show. And then one day he seemed to turn away as though he wanted little to do with me and overnight our friendship entered a dark period that lasted for 14 years.

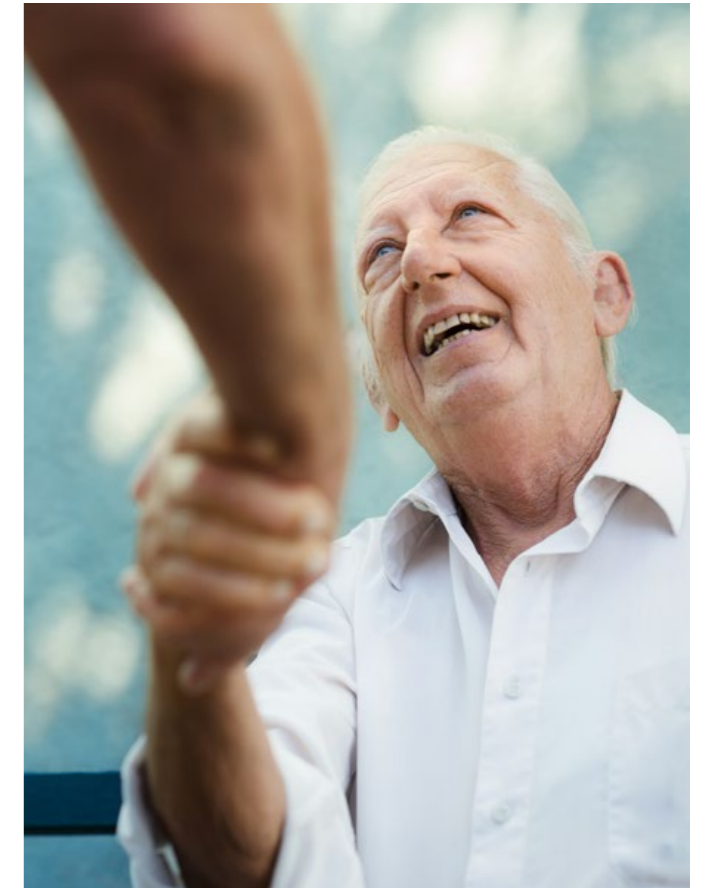
“ Perhaps it was through some sense of guilt of not having made a more concerted effort to repair our friendship that I returned the next day to see how he was and what I could do for him. ”

In retrospect I grieved for the friend who was no longer there for me. On one or two occasions during those years our paths literally crossed but he always turned aside and clearly didn't wish to engage with me. Slowly his life began to fall apart, his marriage failed and as a result his children became alienated, and most of his friends moved on. Perhaps the final straw in his last few years was the failure of a business venture that put his financial situation into dire straits.

It was by chance that we reconnected at a time when he was in need of support as his life spiralled downwards. By then he was having great difficulty in walking and frequently affected by alcohol, so much so that when we met I drove him home to his lonely flat where he lived by himself. Perhaps it was through some sense of guilt of not having made a more concerted effort to repair our friendship that I returned the next day to see how he was and what I could do for him.

And so began a commitment to watch over him that lasted for the remaining years of his life. In effect I became his unofficial minder.

Slowly but surely his quality of life began to slip with increasing periods of illness and financial woes. But it was our friendship that helped him through some of the bleaker moments. We would laugh and joke, talk of the old times we had enjoyed together, reminisce about the places we had visited and of our skiing escapades in Scotland and Austria back in the last century. But in reality all I could do



was to be there for him in his times of need. Eventually he had to sell his flat to pay some business debts and together we found him a place in a quiet retirement village not far away.

“ But in reality all I could do was to be there for him in his times of need. ”

Unfortunately his dependence on alcohol worsened and there was nothing I could do to help him overcome his addiction. During such periods he would withdraw into his own world and not want to see or hear from me for several days. There was little I could do.

It was towards the end of one of these periods that I was unable to contact him – no answer to his phone or reply to my fax messages. I was so concerned I drove over to his village and let myself into his unit. My friend had died in the night.

It was a Sunday morning and I went outside and sat in the sun in a grassy courtyard. All was quiet, no one else was there to disturb the peacefulness, and I had a few quiet moments, while waiting for help to arrive, to reflect on our friendship. Apart from the 'dark years' it had been strong.



A BIRTHDAY
BLESSING

written by Madeleine Pizzuti

My bedroom seemed so much more cluttered from this angle, I thought to myself, as I sat on the floor resting my back against the wooden base of my bed. Why I sat in this uncomfortable position – I don't know. It was a few days before my 60th birthday and I guess I was feeling a bit melancholy. I sat staring at the two cardboard boxes that contained the remainder of my mother's belongings - which still had to be sorted. I guess the reality of her passing away 6 months' earlier was beginning to really sink in. The fact that this was to be the first birthday without her – without her early morning call wishing me 'Happy Birthday'. Without her warm hug later in the day when I'd go to see her, and that reassuring smile that always made me feel she was proud of me. I would miss the way she would look up at me and pull my cardigan together in order to do up the buttons – as she did when I was young; and the way she'd tell everyone in the nursing home "that's my daughter – she's a good daughter."

I slowly got on my knees and crawled over to the boxes to begin sorting the memorabilia. I began to unpack the items. Each one had a memory attached to it, beckoning me to reflect a while. Mum's handbag was there, with her wallet still inside. I sat back against the bed and carefully opened her light brown, leather wallet. Amongst the items tucked inside each compartment were her pensioner card, Medicare card and seniors card. There was an old passport photo of my dear dad who had passed away some 40 years ago and a holy picture of Our Lady. I carefully and respectfully checked every tiny hiding place – it was as though I was searching for something that was part of my mother.

Eventually I noticed that one of the compartments felt as if something was hidden deep inside it. With the utmost care I slowly pulled out what looked like a piece of Gladwrap folded neatly into a square. As I pulled it from its hiding place I felt the need to slow my whole world

down and become totally present to what I held in my hands. There before me was a tiny, flat parcel on which was written in ballpoint ink 'Madeleine's hair', and through the Gladwrap I saw a baby curl of my own hair. As I caressed

“ As I pulled it from its hiding place I felt the need to slow my whole world down and become totally present to what I held in my hands. ”

the small, precious parcel, tears began to flow. I had never known that my mother had carried a part of me with her all these years. It was as if she was now saying to me – “You are precious to me, and always will be.” What better gift could I have received for my birthday!





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AND GIFTS



MARJORIE IS DEAD

written by Richard White

Marjorie is dead. I am not sure if the literary world was shaken by this event. When I met with Marjorie Pizer's son and daughter, they spoke wonderingly of her grandchildren's loving and insightful reflections at her funeral, not of learned eulogies. At ninety-five, perhaps Marjorie had outlived her fellow writers and the reviewers of her books. Perhaps.

However, this editor and readers of *Dialogue* and families who have attended WN Bull's Remembrance Services over the past ten years are deeply grateful for the life, the writings and the generosity of Marjorie Pizer. This magazine and the booklets for the services have been graced, and I use the word deliberately, by Marjorie's poems.

My introduction to these poems was by way of *To You The Living*, a small book flowing from the experience of the cot-death of her daughter's third child. Death, too, prompted Marjorie's return to writing poetry, in that case the death of her husband, Muir Holburn. The appeal of Marjorie's poetry is that death did its worst but that was not the end.

The physical and spiritual shock, the total dis-ruption of one's life, brings us to the edge of darkness. The

ordinariness of life, the familiarity, the simple and deeply felt joys are thrown into disarray. We are never the same person after someone we have known and loved dies. Marjorie allowed these losses to bridge the barrier between the ordinariness of living and the mystery of endlessness that erupts from beneath and around us when death shatters our hard-won securities.

I did not know Marjorie well enough to comment on her 'hard-won securities'. I first met her in about 2009. After coming across *To You The Living*, I searched the phone book and found an 'M Pizer' listed in Cremorne, a suburb I passed through each day to and from work. On the off chance that this might be Marjorie I phoned; it was Marjorie and she agreed to be interviewed for an article in *Dialogue*.

It was not a totally satisfactory meeting. Marjorie was eighty eight at the time. She did not know me from a bar of soap and I knew little of her life and work. My only information was this small book of poems and some appreciative references in a book on grief. I had hoped for a lively discussion on her interests, poetry, grief and life in general. It was not to be and I left wondering whether I would have any material at all for an article.

“ Marjorie allowed these losses to bridge the barrier between the ordinariness of living and the mystery of endlessness that erupts from beneath and around us when death shatters our hard-won securities. ”

I searched through back copies of *Dialogue* and discovered that the article I had written had very little in it about Marjorie. Moreover, the photo I had taken was hardly flattering. There was, however, an appreciative treatment of three of her poems we had used in our Remembrance Services.

I don't know about a 'sentimental person', but Marjorie is certainly someone who notices the ordinary. Her poem, 'Gifts', is a litany of homely items, made precious by their association. Husband, father, mother, great aunt, grandmother and great grandmother all contribute to the necklace of memories. . .

It is the poet's gift, too, the magic woven with words that fixes our attention and enables us to see what is always there, the singularity of things. Marjorie's magic is worked so unobtrusively, as ordinary as the figures in this poem, that we forget we are listening to poetry. We are not lulled by the words but rather held by them, gently, in a familiar, homely way.

When the particular edition was published I was not happy with content or presentation. I'm no photographer and the one for the article did not do her justice and the text was punctuated by pop-up quotations from her poems. I

was reluctant to deliver a copy of the magazine to Marjorie on my way home; I needn't have worried as she was out and I was able to leave the envelope on her door step.

I am not sure what happened next, whether Marjorie called me or I made some tentative inquiries as to how she had found the article. To my surprise, Marjorie was very pleased and asked for some extra copies! When next I saw her, Marjorie spoke warmly of the magazine and of being pleased to distribute them to her friends at Tranby Aboriginal College. So much for my concern about 'presentation' and 'content'! We had a couple of phone conversations after these meetings and Marjorie gave me permission to use her poems in *Dialogue*. That was about seven years ago.

When Jo, Marjorie's daughter, rang WN Bull Funerals to let me know that Marjorie had died, I was not surprised. Over the past few years, I had checked Marjorie's name on the internet, wondering whether she was still alive.

I knew Marjorie had moved from Sydney to live with her daughter in Canberra. I would send a copy of each *Dialogue* in which I had included one of Marjorie's poems to the Canberra address. Once or twice I added a note to ensure it was still OK to publish a poem. But, there was no reply; the magazine was not returned so I presumed all was well. Jo subsequently told me how she would show her mother the poem and the delight I witnessed those years ago would be repeated.



Even though Marjorie had sold 35,000 of her books, something as simple as one of her poems in *Dialogue* could

bring a smile to her face. When Jo told me this, I was touched and grateful that there had been a sharing, a giving of delight as well as a receiving of wisdom and inspiration. That was where we had connected, when I took those extra copies and Marjorie had been so grateful.

“ Her gift of touching so many people came from ‘a will, a feeling, a passion and love’. Sometimes these feelings were result of tragedy and despair; sometimes they arose from the simplest of gestures and experiences. ”

I have been struggling in this article to do justice to this woman, this poet, who has blessed the pages of *Dialogue* as well as taught me so much about grief and life. Jo and her brother Kim, gave me copies of reviews and articles about Marjorie and her books. These reviewers keep coming back to the simplicity and ordinariness of her subjects and clarity



of her writing. I have been making the mistake of trying too hard to write something memorable and appropriate. What I am left with is something simple and profound, gratitude.

I am grateful for the legacy of Marjorie's poetry, for her generous response to that article, for Jo and Kim's welcome

when I visited Marjorie's home of the past six years and for their giving me some of her books and, in particular, for a battered copy of Marjorie's *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. There is a marked passage that struck me as saying as much about Marjorie as it does about the painter, Raffaelli –



*... I ask you what kind of a man, what kind of a prophet, or philosopher, observer, what kind of a human character is there behind certain paintings, the technique of which is praised; in fact, often **nothing**. But a Raffaelli is a personality ... and before many pictures by almost unknown artists, one feels they are made with a **will**, a **feeling**, a passion and love ...*

Sadness and grief did not kill Marjorie, they enlivened her. Her gift of touching so many people came from ‘a will, a feeling, a passion and love’. Sometimes these feelings were result of tragedy and despair; sometimes they arose from the simplest of gestures and experiences. Her skill lay in filling the ordinary with ‘feeling, passion and love’ and awakening in others similar feelings.

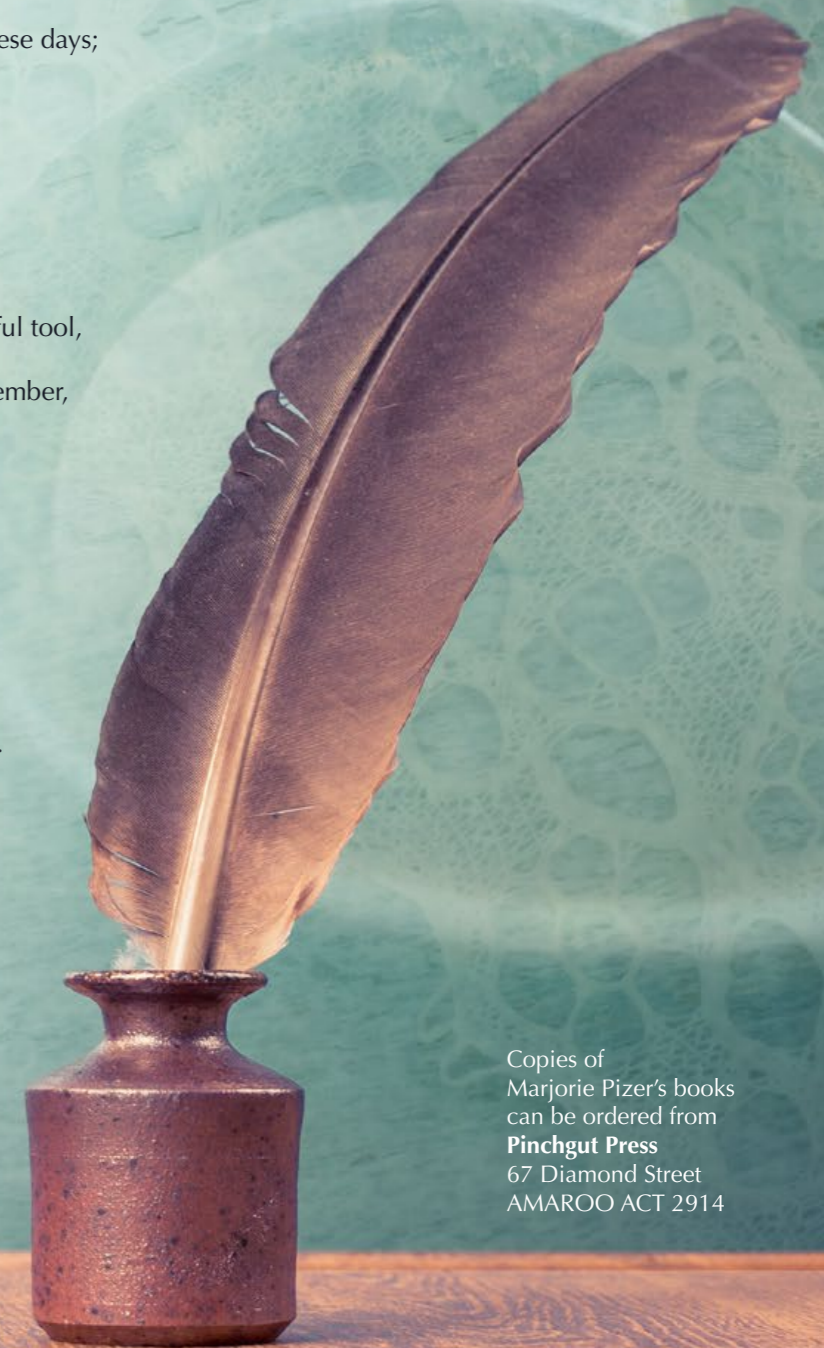
Marjorie will be missed but due to Jo and Kim's kindness, *Dialogue* and our readers will continue to be graced by her poems.

GIFTS

I must be what people call a sentimental person.
I have worn my dead husband's watch these last sixteen years;
I use my mother's old sewing scissors,
Dull, grey, sharp scissors such as cannot be bought these days;
I wear my grandfather's old sovereign case
On a fine chain around my neck;
I remember playing with it as a tiny child
As I sat on his knee.
And from my father I have mulga bookends,
The only present from him I ever remember;
From my great aunt, a long, thin spoon
Which I measure out tea with;
From my grandmother, I have a strange, old, very useful tool,
Hammer, screw-driver and pliers combined;
And from one great grandmother whom I do not remember,
An engraved silver spoon,
Early symbol of my fortune in this life.

I love the continuity of these things,
Knitting my past into my present,
Linking the living and the dead.
They have each left me a gift and a remembrance,
The completion of a circle which makes me whole
And strong to continue on.
I, too, will leave gifts and remembrances
For the continuation of those who will come after me.

Marjorie Pizer



Copies of
Marjorie Pizer's books
can be ordered from
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MY FRIEND CONNIE

written by Erica Greenop

My friend Connie and her Georgie were our neighbours downstairs when we came to Australia. That was 1964. They had the apartment on the second floor with the telephone on the wall outside their front door.

Georgie managed a property in Collarenebri, where the red dust storms rolled in tidal waves across the plains and came in the cracks round the windows and under the doors and stuck on every surface inside the house and hung on the cobwebs under the eaves like strings of orange ropes and settled inches thick on the veranda floorboards. We had come from winter in England where the ground was frozen and the icy cold went straight through the fabric of your overcoat. And my undiluted English accent.

We asked them up for cocktails at 6 o'clock and nibbles. Connie said we were like two different worlds meeting.

Connie loved her Georgie.

Connie brought home a kitten she found in a paper bag at the station. She put All Bran in a baking tray for it overnight because she didn't have any kitty litter. I said I

wondered if it knew whether to eat it or poo in it and we watched it and it did a bit of both.

Connie was appointed our children's no.1 honorary relative. We had a ceremony with crowns and cloaks and iced Vovos. That was 1975.

Georgie died in 2000. The millennium year. The world was full of things she couldn't quite grasp.

Grief, said Connie, is when you forget what it feels like to be happy.

Connie had a hip replacement. That was 2006.

I visited Connie in hospital. Her evening meal was brought in at 5 o'clock. The salad was in a plastic bowl covered with plastic wrap on the tray next to the hot meal. Connie lifted a lettuce leaf out from under the plastic and it hung from her fingers like a wet green hanky. It was the

funniest most revolting thing we had ever seen. It dripped. I made my best most revolting noise my grandson had taught me. I thought my friend was going to die. "Georgie" - she could hardly speak and I didn't know if she was crying or laughing, holding her ribs and holding her nose and bending over and sitting upright again and holding the edge of the table and she was evidently in terrible pain - "Georgie would have loved this." She dabbed her eyes. When we recovered we noticed the nurse with the mouth that turned down at the corners was standing at the end of my friend's bed, waiting.

Connie plays the piano at the nursing home once a month. It is 2014. She wears her neat dress and her cardigan and has her hair done in the morning.

Connie is 84. Her voice sounds as if she is 84.

“ There is a look about Connie that is ageless, when she sits at her piano. She does her remembering, at the piano. ”

There is a look about Connie that is ageless, when she sits at her piano. She does her remembering, at the piano. "Connie Crosby" her Georgie used to say with such pride, and she would feel the glow inside, the feeling she was recognised for something that only she and Georgie knew and she would have that momentary feeling of triumph and it would light up her face. He would put his arms round her. He used to wear short sleeved cotton shirts even in the winter and his arms were brown and strong. "Connie Crosby" he would say. "You are a woman for all ages."

Her face still lights up, when she thinks about her Georgie.

After a performance Connie sits at the piano for ten seconds. Count one to ten she says to herself. Let it sink in. The good feeling, don't disturb it. It's like a prayer to the memory of her Georgie and the music and her knobby old fingers that can still play and the silence and the audience and the walking frames and the old lady who had a funny turn during *In An English Country Garden* and the nurses. One to ten. The silence, between the last note when she takes her foot off the pedal and the first sounds of applause, does good things for her soul.

Today Connie's thoughts flit from one thing to another. She is trying to make sense of the strangeness of being 84. It is universal on the one hand and it belongs only to her on the other. Being 84 belongs to everyone who is 84. It's

the strangeness that is just hers, as if she is an island that has popped up in the distance and nobody knows how to get there.

She was in her car stopped at the traffic lights. A man opened her door and leaned across her and snatched her handbag and ran off. What did you do I asked. I am shocked for her. Connie couldn't remember, except the man had nostril hairs like the holes in the horsehair mattress in the loft at Collarenebri and orange runners. The policeman talked to her in his be-kind-to-old-ladies voice.



Connie's daughter went with her to buy new shoes. The shop assistant talked to her daughter as if Connie was invisible or deaf or stupid or didn't speak English.

She doesn't drive any more. Her children worry about her living on her own. They advise her. They tell her what to do. They mean well, she knows that, but she can feel herself getting smaller.

Connie reaches forward to the music stand, carefully removes her sheet music, turns to her audience. Everyone is asleep. She stands up. She looks towards the back of the day-care room, catches the eye of the activities director. She is mouthing the word "sorry", a slight apologetic shrug of her shoulders, spreads her hands. It's what happens.

Connie quietly closes the lid of the piano. I drive her home. That was this afternoon.



REFLECTIONS OF A NEW FUNERAL DIRECTOR

written by Mark F Leary

The experience of the death can be 'out there' until someone we know and love dies. Then, we are shocked, saddened, numbed and all those things we have seen happen to other people.

The deaths of my father, partner, mother and sister within a relatively short period of time made death real for me. It also became clear that each death left its own unique impression, an impression or imprint that stays with me.

These deaths changed everything for me. I would describe the loss of each of these people as 'a shifting of the heart' - that life will never be the same again. I believe we all experience that shift. It is as if we are invited to reflect and mull over the life of the person who has left us and

the impact they have had on our lives; to continue to live without their familiar presence.

“ I wanted to be able to walk with families, even for a short time . . . ”

I've seen it with other people and I know from my own experience: we cry, we laugh, we reminisce and we begin to heal. Being able to share with others the emptiness and the overwhelming feelings makes a difference. The loss is always there, but so is the awareness of the person who was a gift to us

and who changed our life forever. This was my experience and then I joined WN Bull Funerals in November 2014.

For 16 years I had wanted to be a funeral director. For me this role would bring me to a vocation and not just something that paid the bills. It would allow me to work with families and use the skills I had learnt and refined during my working life. I wanted to be able to walk with families, even for a short time, to assist them in arranging the farewell of their loved ones. These are some of my reflections on the past fourteen months working for WN Bull and the difference this time has made to my life.

“ It was as if the grief that stunned and silenced the family was affecting me as well. ”

One of the greatest joys of my work is realising that no two families are the same. Each time I am invited into people's homes, I am reminded of that. How each family, each person, grieves is unique. This distinctiveness needs to be respected. People need to mourn, to express their grief or to celebrate the life of someone in their own special way.

I was challenged at first because I had held the belief that everyone experienced the same sort of grief that I had. Surely it can't be that different? But it is. It is unique to them and reflects everything that has brought them to this moment in time. And so for me, there is another shifting of my heart. There is an invitation to be open to the moment that I am invited into and to be present to that moment and all that it offers.

How does love express itself when I am with families? Like everything else in this world, love comes in different shapes and sizes, colours and sound. I remember visiting some families where the love is so intangible, so difficult to express. Nevertheless, the stories they tell, the words they use and their tone of voice is filled with affection and sorrow.

I remember spending time with a family where I felt their overwhelming love for their mother. They had brought me to a special place. A rare place where there is so much love that words simply do not suffice. I will always be grateful for that moment.

At other times, it is hard to find the love in a grief-filled room. Instead of being overwhelmed, I was stunned and unsure, in those early days. It was as if the grief that stunned and silenced the family was affecting me as well. Why can't they be like the others I had met, warm and clear and vocal in their expression?

Again, I was brought up face to face with the uniqueness of grief. This was another challenge and shift. I was learning to listen and be present and to set aside my own experience and beliefs. Gradually, and again and again, I encountered the rich and distinctive ways that love



and grief find expression. Not only was I learning, I was being changed.

It may sound a well-used phrase but it is a privilege to be invited into the lives of grieving families. For the short time I am with them I am so often witness to the raw emotions

“ Each day I meet or speak with people whose humanity is there, out-in-the-open, when their lives are turned upside down, as mine was during my experiences of grief. ”

– love, compassion, hospitality, resignation, frustration, sadness, joy, relief, fear and gratitude . . . It is an honesty and openness that never ceases to amaze me.

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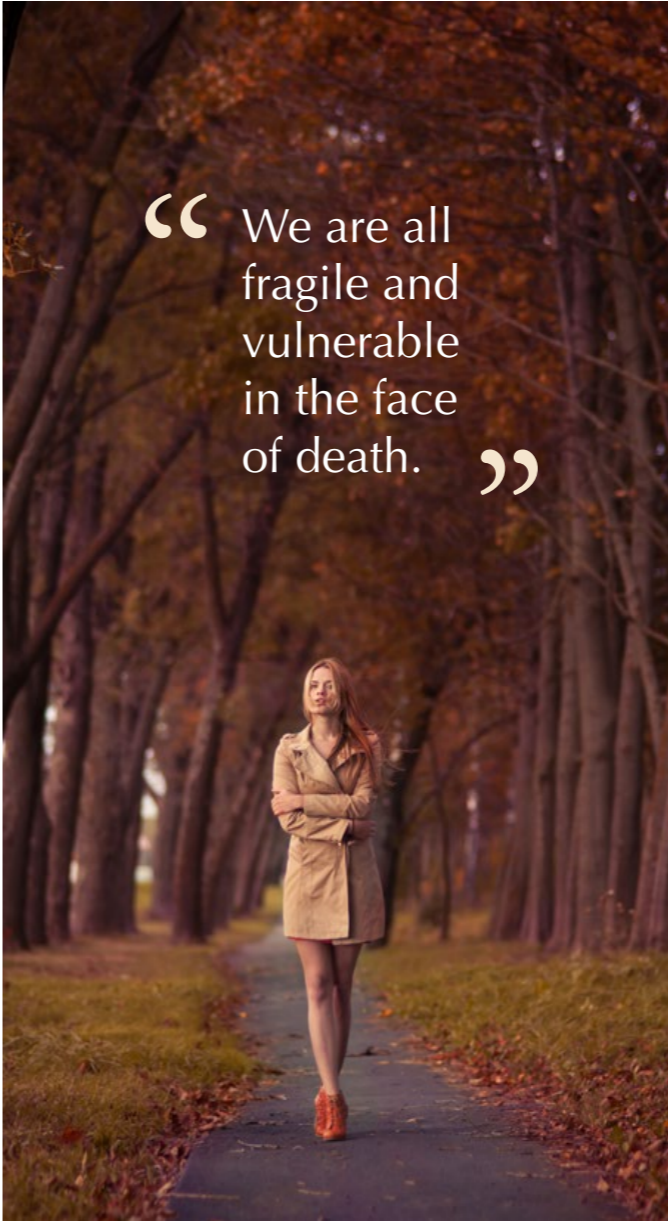
Skylight Function Centre (External)



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Just as death has become real through the experience of the deaths of people near to me, so my understanding of grief has grown by being close to grieving people.

I have been with families where there has been a sudden and unexpected death. In this situation, people are often in shock and disbelief. In other situations, illness and dying has been drawn out and I am aware of the extraordinary courage and compassion of family members. Then, people may speak of their guilt or regrets over words said or unsaid. Feelings of helplessness and confusion can arise at the death of a much loved partner. Anger and fear can surface and find voice when I come to arrange a funeral.



We are all fragile and vulnerable in the face of death. People are also remarkably brave and resilient. Each day I meet or speak with people whose humanity is there, out-in-the-open, when their lives are turned upside down, as mine was during my experiences of grief.

I am not the same person who began work as a funeral director fourteen months ago. I have had my eyes and my heart opened to understand better the particular suffering of the people I meet. Also, I have come to value more what I have now and all that has happened in my life.

“ I have had my eyes and my heart opened to understand better the particular suffering of the people I meet. ”

The ‘shifting of the heart’ continues. I am grateful and committed to making a difference, wherever and with whomsoever I encounter, on the phone or in their home.

Most importantly to be present to that moment and to use that moment to make a difference somewhere else. I think that is the challenge for me.



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MOMENTS THAT STAY AND UNFOLD

written by Steve Ross

It was just another day; the usual things happening; I was about to conduct a funeral. Then, I grabbed a moment to call Richard White, the editor of *Dialogue*.

In a few moments I would be on way to the funeral. The coffin was in the hearse; the driver was checking details before calling me, 'It's time to go!' I wanted to tell Richard about another funeral; the memory of which had stayed with me. I wanted to explain why that particular funeral had left such an impression.

As soon as Richard came on the phone, I realised it would be difficult to explain the way I felt about the events of that day. It was a Saturday, not a normal work day for

us. The deceased had lived in Newtown with his only son. The young man had come in, unannounced, to make arrangements for his father, a man in his early sixties who had died suddenly.

There was not a lot of money and the plans were for the least expensive funeral, sometime with an open coffin in our chapel, then, direct to the crematorium, no clergy, no service. There was nothing out of the ordinary in all this, apart from the poverty and simplicity.

“ It was the man's son.
'I don't know your
name, mate, but thanks
for all you did for Dad!' ”

The son's three aunts, his father's sisters, came up by train from Melbourne. When I met them that Saturday morning, I realised it had not been easy for them to come to Sydney, stay the night, before returning home. It was a 'no frills' funeral, but there was something warm and real in my meeting with this family. They had something.

The man's three sisters wanted to go to the crematorium after the time in our chapel. When the son discovered we could drive him back to Newtown, he decided to come too. When we arrived at the crematorium chapel, the family asked if they could have another viewing. Then, we closed the coffin and took it to the alcove for transfer to the cremator. It was all over.

In discussion with the three women, I suggested we drive them to the nearby station instead of calling for a taxi as

“ It's like all the non
essentials were
stripped away.
There was a rawness
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touched me deeply. ”



planned. We had already made arrangements to drive the son back to Newtown.

A week or so after the funeral, we received a very appreciative letter from the deceased's sisters. And, not long

It's a very ordinary story, no fuss, no excitement, no . . . distractions. Maybe that is why I remember this event so vividly. It's like all the non essentials were stripped away. There was a rawness and simplicity that touched me deeply.

This young man who came in off the street cared for his father. He was three when his mother left. His father was his sole family, apart from the aunts in Melbourne. Father and son struggled together; that was my impression.

The three women who came up from Melbourne cared enough to make the journey. From a few comments they made, I got the impression the interstate trip was a novelty.

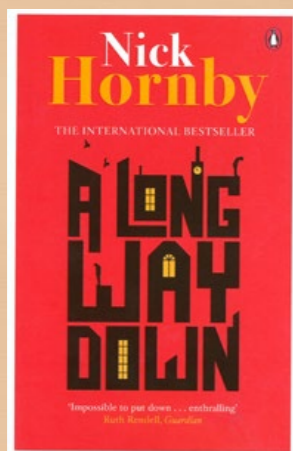
I was having trouble explaining to Richard what all this meant to me. Then, I was reminded of an old black and white photo I had seen in an exhibition, a kitchen table, a pot of tea, two cups and some biscuits on a plate, nothing unusual, but an old fashioned moment caught – hospitality, welcome and kindness.

It was a Saturday morning funeral, no big deal. As I said to Richard, this is why I love this work. That man who had died, his son and his sisters took me to a place it is so easy to forget. The black and white photo, if you like, a funeral stripped to the basics, revealed what it's all about – kindness and courtesy and care and sadness and loyalty and love.

'It's time to go!' I had said all I could, as well as I could and I hung up.



after that, I was down the street getting some lunch when I had a tap on the shoulder. It was the man's son. 'I don't know your name, mate, but thanks for all you did for Dad!'



A LONG WAY DOWN

BY NICK HORNBY

written by Richard White

“Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block? Of course I can explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block. I’m not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasn’t inexplicable: it was a logical decision, the product of proper thought . . . ”

These are the opening sentences of Nick Hornby’s novel *A Long Way Down*. They’re Martin’s words, a soliloquy, as he sits on the ledge, far above the street. He’s smoking and taking swigs from his hip flask. He’s about to be interrupted by Maureen who has climbed to the top of the same building, also intending to jump. It is New Year’s Eve and this pair are soon to be joined by another two people, with the same idea in mind. It’s a very funny book.

But, hang on, suicide is not a laughing matter. It is an ultimate, terrible tragedy. The thought that someone we know or love could be so desperate, so hopeless and often in so much pain is an assault on our own commitment to life and on our love or friendship. A person may choose to kill him or herself but the ripples and tremors of this action spread destruction like an emotional tsunami.

Where is the humour in this? What is Hornby on about?

Martin’s words above set the scene. They describe or express what is going on in his head. As the other three characters are introduced, they share with the reader their innermost thoughts and feelings. We are privy to the inner worlds of four very different characters who come very close to killing themselves, but don’t.

For all the humour, colloquial (?) language and whatever, this is a serious book. When Martin protests that his decision to jump is ‘a logical decision, the product of proper thought’, he paradoxically reveals how skewed his thinking is. It takes until the end of the book for him, and for the reader, to discover another way of thinking and another way of living. Certainly, our first encounter with the quartet reveals some of the all-too-familiar and pain-filled circumstances that can lead to suicide.

Martin, for a start, is in his mid-fifties, formerly a successful television personality, co-host of a breakfast program. He has recently been released from gaol for having sex with a fifteen year old girl. He’s separated from his wife and children, making ends meet with an obscure job with an even more obscure cable television company. He suffers badly from cynicism and self-loathing.

Maureen, who tapped Martin on the shoulder, almost tipping him over the ledge – she wondered on seeing him sitting there whether he would be long – is fifty-one, a single mother with a profoundly handicapped son.

Jess, who comes closest to going over the top, is eighteen, precocious and foul mouthed. She is saved at the last moment by Martin and Maureen who tackle her as she dashes across to the recently vacated ledge. To her chagrin and discomfort, the two adults, who have temporarily changed their minds, pin her to the ground by sitting on her.

Finally, a pizza delivery ‘boy’ arrives. It’s JJ, an American musician of sorts, down on his luck and right out of hope. In the conversation that ensues when all have settled somewhat, telling how they have come to the ‘situation’, JJ is embarrassed by a lack of seriousness about his decision and tells them he has an incurable illness, CCR, the only pseudo medical initials he can think of and inspired by Credence Clearwater Revival, his favourite band.

Nick Hornby writes amusing books. *About a Boy* is another of his and it features Marcus the twelve year old nerd whose emotionally unstable mother attempts suicide. Then, there’s Will, a ne’er-do-well, never-worked, self-indulgent who lives off the royalties of a Christmas song his father wrote years ago. Marcus, isolated and bullied at school, for naivety and singing aloud the songs in his head, finds sanctuary in Will’s apartment and life.

“ It takes until the end of the book for him, and for the reader, to discover another way of thinking and another way of living. ”

I read this book one Christmas when the house was full of family. Thirty minutes or so, lying on the bed, delighting at the unravelling of Will’s self-absorbed and illusory world and the surprising and endearing expansion of Marcus’ restored my strength and spirits. Each couple of years, around the same time, I repeat the dose. Nick’s books are good for me; there have ring (they have a ring) of truth about them, even with their humour. I became interested in where this truth might come from.



Nick has an autistic son, Danny. His first marriage ended and he experienced periods of depression. He is slightly obsessive about football, an Arsenal supporter, and is a music (contemporary) freak. He writes about what, and whom, he knows. He writes, too, about what gets him out of bed in the morning and how surprising and nurturing the rest of the day can be.

So, *A Long Way Down* is earthed in personal experience; it deals with a serious topic in a light way, without being trivial. As the reviewer from the *New York Times* put it, ‘Hornby is a writer who dares to be witty, intelligent and emotionally generous all at once.’

But what about the humour and this ‘emotional generosity’? In one of the classic texts on suicide, *The Suicidal Mind*, by Edwin S Shneidman, the author uses the term ‘lethality’ to describe the idea that a person can stop the intense pain and confusion associated with suicide; the pain is one thing, the idea of suicide is another. In dealing with people who are suicidal, Shneidman recommends addressing the pain first, then the ideas, (then) the lethality.

Hornby’s book is a novel not a text book. It is a story, amusing, entertaining and . . . emotionally generous. Whereas suicidal thoughts are dark, closed, isolated and isolating, humour is imaginative, creative and, in this case, generous and encompassing.

Martin and Maureen, Jess and JJ, are believable human beings. I laughed in the bus reading this book, out loud, like Marcuse singing. I wanted to tell the woman squashed next to me on the L 90 to Dee Why that this was a great book. There was light thrown into the darkness of characters’ worlds, hope splashed around seemingly empty lives and thinking, that I could recognise was broken open, and possibility began jumping around and jumping in.

Yes, it’s a funny book, probably funnier even than *About a Boy*, and it has something serious to say about suicide and suicidal thinking.



It's dry and hot where we live. We have access to a neighbour's bore so we manage to keep some things alive. The grass and the front garden even get watered. Not only are there comforting patches of green during the day, at night we have visitors.

As the light fades, they come. We were sitting on the verandah the other night and the dark was settling. My wife said, 'there's something there, on the edge of the garden'. There did seem to be something, grey, upright, still. It was a shape among other shapes but there was a presence, too. Whatever it was, it was aware of us as we were of it.

In the beam of a torch we could see. It was a kangaroo. We see them quite often when there's a dry spell. I know the farmers have little time for them, grazing and trampling, in crops and paddocks. But, for us, the novelty has not worn off; they're wild things, there, alive in our garden. Our visitor seemed unperturbed by the light and settled to forage and graze. He was at ease in our garden as we were some step above; that safe distance is not always observed.

My wife was painting some chairs inside, in a hallway near the bathroom. We were tidying and I began to fold up the drop cloth. I saw it as a black flash, at first, that shock or surprise at another wild thing, here, inside in the neat (sometimes) world we create and enjoy. It was a small brown snake, particularly poisonous we were later informed.

There was some initial panic; I eventually trapped it in the bathroom tidy, with the help of a thick towel. Under

instructions, I carried our visitor well away from the house and let it go. There was that moment of stand-off, the rearing of body, defensive and threatening, that people speak of, and I turned and let our wild thing return to his world and we returned to ours.

“ . . . I turned and let our wild thing return to his world and we returned to ours. ”

Maybe it's because I'm from the city, a bit naive and unappreciative of dangers and disruption at these meetings of our worlds and theirs, order and nature, but I cannot help feeling we've been fortunate.

The wild, the untamed and the dangerous interrupted our neatness and order; there's a chink in our control and sureness, may it be ever so.

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