

RoadworX:

Collected impressions

Rob Simpson

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By the same author: *The Rainbow Man*

For
Nick and Amy-Rose

“A story, once told, is loose in the world.”
Thomas King

About the author

Rob has moved around a lot. After migrating to Australia from New Zealand in 1970, he tried his hand at everything from process work to bus conducting, landscaping and high school teaching; from theatre direction to corporate management to running a caravan park. He's worked as an Outreach Coordinator, community arts officer and trainer in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country, and as a humanitarian worker overseas. Rob now lives on the mid-North Coast of NSW.

RoadworX is a collection of previously published literary cameos. Many of them have received recognition of some kind, or in the case of script, being performed to public audiences. The work spans a wide range of genres, with settings and subjects reflective of the author's diverse experience and extensive travels.

A brief note of explanation has been included with the pieces where this may add to the reader's enjoyment or understanding of the work.

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A teacher's lot

[My first paid literary effort, published while I was serving out the last day's of a teaching appointment at a small rural high school in New Zealand. The piece, which was intended as a satirical comment on the culture of the place, appeared in the *New Zealand Post-Primary Teachers' Journal*, a publication distributed directly widely into schools, three days before my scheduled return to Australia. It was an interesting three days.]

It had all the makings of a bad day. He overslept – not just the usual five minutes but a full half hour, which disrupted his entire early morning routine. He cut his neck shaving, just at the spot where his shirt-collar would pass, and spent several frustrating minutes dabbing the wound with a face cloth before the blood congealed. His tie, for some reason, refused to hang vertically, and when he finally got it to do so the thinner end protruded conspicuously beneath the wider. His mood wasn't improved by his wife went, who ignored his mounting ill temper and went back to sleep, waking only when he slammed the wardrobe doors, and then in a temper as foul as his own.

His outlook towards the morning wasn't helped when he got to school. The clamour of voices surrounded him as soon as he got entered the schoolyard, each voice seemingly independent of the others, as if the speakers had no concept of conversation. He pursed his lips and set out firmly across the quadrangle, his exterior calm betrayed only by the white-knuckled grip on his briefcase.

The noise level rose sharply when he opened the door to the room; like the climax of some kind of demonic symphony, the voices merging into a single heinous note. He felt dizzy, disoriented, overwhelmed. The air was bitter with tobacco fumes; he saw Ferguson, in the far corner of the room, carelessly mangle a cigarette butt underfoot.

Better to ignore it, he told himself; no sense in antagonising them so early in the day. He went to his chair and sat down. The arms were sticky – a dark glutinous substance that might, at some time, have been ice cream or lemonade - but he suffered the discomfort and patiently wiped the mess from his sleeve. Not to get riled, that was the thing. He no longer believed that such acts were unintentional - he knew the provocateurs too well – but he had been powerless to catch them in the act. They were out to get him, to prod him into some kind of outburst that they could use against him; at the first sign of irrationality, they'd converge on him like sharks.

He studied them over the rim of *The Education Gazette*. Sally Donalds, only a few metres away, was discussing her latest sexual adventure (real or imagined, he wondered) in a voice calculated to be heard by everyone in the room. Clara Hughes, her mesmerised confidante, giggled uncontrollably, glancing around to see if anyone was listening and catching his eye, which he hastily averted.

His gaze settled on Grey, dumpy and scholastic, picking his nose with his index finger. Grey withdrew the slimy digit and, after discretely nibbling at its contents, inserted it into his remaining unpillaged nostril. Even though it was a ritual the

teacher had witnessed a hundred times, he was immediately captivated, and it took a loud expletive from elsewhere in the room to distract him.

The cry had come from David Cromwell, challenging young Whitehead over the outcome of some obscure sports fixture. There were tears in Cromwell's eyes as he jumped up and shouted his claim again, shaking a fist at Whitehead, who returned the gesture with a contemptuous smirk. Cromwell appealed to the group for confirmation of his position, but received only silence, jeers or abuse, and eventually stormed from the room, kicking the door in frustration as he passed.

There was a quick squabble of voices as others mocked Cromwell's inadequacies and praised the beaming Whitehead. George Bailey took advantage of the subsequent lull to recite his latest obscene joke to the group, crowning his triumph with an indecent suggestion to Martha Brett, who tittered in mock astonishment.

My God, the teacher thought, scanning the bizarre array of faces, this is getting out of hand. There's no order here, no discipline, no control. Where will it end? His gloom deepened as he surveyed the ravaged walls, the filthy floor, the assaulted furniture. Someone began flicking paper pellets at the rubbish bin, the tiny projectiles zipping across his unblinking vision. *Where will it end?*

A bell rang somewhere, and the teacher rose and picked up his briefcase, glancing from habit at the clock on the wall: nine-fifteen. It was going to be a bad day, all right. He braced himself, offered a silent prayer, and left the staff-room.

*

Kennedy's Bull.

[This story was originally titled *The Great Kalang Muster* when it was first penned. It was inspired by real events related to the clash of cultures occurring in the Bellinger Valley at the time. It belatedly won the New Writers' section of the Henry Lawson Short Story Awards.]

The tiny hamlet of Kalang lies about twenty kilometres west of Bellinger in northern New South Wales, on the coastal flanks of the Great Divide. It was Red Cedar that first lured white settlers to the area, but the commercial timber has long since gone, and all that remained of the original settlement at the time the following events took place was a sagging, creosote-encrusted community hall. Nowadays most of the district's inhabitants eke a living out of farming cattle on the valley's narrow river flats.

It's what the farmers call "marginal land", a constant battleground between humankind and the elements where every claim to occupancy is continually being challenged by the encroaching bush. For farmers, the cost of this ceaseless war of attrition is high, and during the recessions of the late 'Seventies and early 'Eighties, many of them admitted defeat and sold up.

Attracted by the resulting cheap land prices, a number of 'alternative life-stylers' – 'hippies', in the common parlance - moved into the valley, bought up the surrendered properties, and set about establishing communal settlements. Most of these failed within a few years – the bush makes no concessions to ideology – but enough remained to form the core of a viable and resilient 'alternative' sub-culture. After several years of conflict, punctuated by occasional violent clashes over issues like the burning off of privately owned land, an accommodation of sorts was reached between the new settlers and the farmers, but the truce remained fragile; tensions were never far below the surface, needing only a spark to set them off.

Barry Kennedy had farmed around Kalang all his life, but unlike Charley Thomas, his downstream neighbour, the hippies hadn't bothered him much. His main problem was wild cattle, a mob of about twenty cows led by a rogue Brahman bull that had avoided the musters of several seasons and become an increasing nuisance, trampling the fences of local farmers and ravaging their fodder.

After losing yet another corn crop - the third in three years - and having had to replace several hundred metres of fencing on account of the mob, Barry had had enough. He organised with Charley and Pat Ryan, his other immediate neighbour, to meet at his place the following Saturday morning with horses and a couple of extra hands each. The idea was to track the mob upstream from where they'd crossed Barry's boundary, then drive the lot down the river into Charley's corral, an imposing structure built from old rail irons which Charley asserted would hold a herd of wild elephants without much trouble. Pat initially suggested taking rifles along and shooting the cattle where they found them, but Barry wasn't all that keen on the idea. The bull belonged to him, and ever since it had escaped when he was unloading it from the Coffs Harbour Show, where it had just won its second consecutive Best of Breed, its recapture had been something of an obsession.

They set out about five in the morning, with dawn turning the peaks the colour of apricots. The trail, still clearly visible, led them up a steep spur, then down an old forestry track to the river again, at which point the cattle appeared to have struck directly upstream. The men followed, cursing the swarms of insects that hung above the water and the treachery of the surface beneath it, until bad light forced them to pitch camp. All the signs indicated that they were gaining on the herd. They knew the cattle wouldn't move far at night, so they bagged down with a certain sense of confidence.

Sure enough, within two hours of breaking camp the next morning they caught sight of the mob, browsing along a grass flat on the opposite bank of the river. The party decided to split into three, with Pat and Barry taking positions upstream from their quarry while Charley and his hands waited in the bush where they were, ready to steer the muster into the river as it passed. They didn't expect to have to work too hard; cattle aren't known for their stamina, and these were carrying a lot of weight.

It took longer than expected to set up. At a critical moment, one of the horses in Barry's group shied at a black snake, and there was a brittle pause as the huge bull turned its head ponderously towards the disturbance. Finally everyone was in position, and after a last quick adjustment of his livery Barry gave a shrill whistle and broke from the scrub. Immediately there was a whoop from his left, and Pat's party bore down on the herd from above.

The bull hesitated for only a split second, then gave a bellow of rage and spun nimbly around, plunging through the midst of the startled mob. The cows promptly set off after him, nudging their offspring in front. Charley and his men heard the mob coming and dropped in neatly behind the herd as it passed.

The drive made rapid progress down the river, the riders taking full advantage of the swathe cut by the fleeing cattle. It soon became obvious, however, that the men had badly underestimated the stamina of their quarry. As the pace of the pursuit continued unabated they hung on grimly, cursing the whole idea, while ahead the foaming, wild-eyed Brahman and his entourage blundered downstream in full stampede.

The only saving grace for the riders was the knowledge that it would soon be over; it took them less than half an hour to reach the ford at the upper boundary of Pat's place, and only a few minutes more to cross the easier stretch of shallow, sandy water behind Barry's, where they'd initially picked up the trail. They'd soon be at Charley's; the deeper water there would have to slow the cattle down, and the corral was only a short distance from there.

About two hundred metres downstream from Charley's boundary, the Kalang River broadens into a long, narrow pool, with steep, muddy embankments on either side. The pool had always been popular as a swimming hole; local kids had been using it for generations, but when the hippies moved into the valley and reports of 'naked bathing' began filtering through the community grapevine, prudent parents had forbidden their offspring to go near the place. There'd been several letters to the paper demanding that the offenders be barred from swimming there, which had put quite a bit of pressure on Charley to enforce some kind of ban, but he hadn't pushed it

too hard. All through the summer he'd found himself running back and forward to the pool, running people off, and even with the cooler weather coming in he still had occasional trespassers. Anyway, he'd found the publicity generated by the 'naked bathing' had been good for business; the small produce stall he maintained on the road overlooking the site (albeit from some distance) was thriving with the custom of bemused tourists, and the odd upright citizen who stopped by to check whether the offending behaviour might still be taking place - which it apparently was on the day of the muster, when several tonnes of outraged Brahman bull, travelling at around thirty kilometres an hour, suddenly appeared from nowhere at the top end of the pool.

Time has lent colour to what followed, quickly swelling the number of 'naked bathers' from ten to a hundred, but there can be no doubt that the scene that followed was one of total pandemonium. Everyone who witnessed it agreed that it was a miracle nobody was killed. The only confirmed casualty was one of Charley's station-hands, who sprained a wrist when he fell off his horse laughing.

"Never seen anyone move so fast!" Pat Ryan told anyone who'd listen in the pub afterwards. "Just about walked on water, some of them! I seen one poor bugger, 'e was tryin' t' climb the bank - looked like a possum on a greasy roof, kept falling back into the river! Fair Dinkum! Then just when I thought 'e was gone for sure, 'e cleared it in one jump. One jump, mind you - fifteen bloody feet, if I'm an inch!"

If you're interested in finding out more about what happened that day, you can ask around about it next time you're passing through Bello; but my advice would be to be careful who you talk to, because it's still a bit of a sore point in some quarters. Certainly, relations between the hippies and the farmers in the valley deteriorated markedly after the incident, and stayed that way for a long time afterwards.

Some hippie hard-liners still insist the whole thing was Charley's idea, a desperate and malicious attempt to drive the swimmers off his property, but according to Charley it wasn't like that at all. The prospect of the pool being occupied simply hadn't been a factor in the drive. They'd expected the cattle to run out of steam upriver, and once the drive had started he'd been so intent on staying in the saddle that no thought of anything else entered his head. He was just as shocked to find the swimmers there as they were to confront the stampede. As a gesture of goodwill, he put a lot of effort into making reparations to the hippies, including selling a wide range of their organic produce through his stall.

Anyway, the cattle got the last laugh in a way. The muster ended at the corral as planned, but Charley had no sooner shut the gate when the Brahman went sailing over the top, leaving his cows to kick the enclosure to pieces and follow him a few minutes later, trailing several hundred metres of new fencing wire behind them.

oOo

Chrysalis

[This poem made it quite unexpectedly into second place in the inaugural Banjo Patterson National Poetry Competition. It's one of my shortest poems, and probably still the most enigmatic, even to me.]

The unborn soldier waits to kill,
The butterfly to spread its wings:
The one to do another's will;
The other rise to higher things.

Who dares foretell the mystery
Within the silken womb concealed?
The soldier's judge is history;
The butterfly's the field.

*

The Black of Bourke:

Bourke, NSW

[I worked for a while as a freelance play-builder, travelling from place to place around rural New South Wales. As a sideline I wrote short social commentaries on some of the towns I visited. This was one of the ones published in *Nation Review*.]

The road to Bourke is littered with omens: the arthritic ghosts of eucalypts and sagging fence-wire, posts and poles toppling into the red dust. Even from the air-conditioned comfort of the coach, you can feel the lethargy of it, seeping in as you gaze limply at the horizon.

‘Soldier, Jesus is Your Saviour’ blares for the third time from the speakers overhead, and there’s a moment’s temptation to lean forward and ask the driver to change the tape; but there are enough nodding heads and tapping feet around to make me think better of it. This is the home of fundamentalist thought; people out here actually *believe* that sort of doublethink, and making a point of my objection is hardly the kind of thing that’s likely to make the project easier to carry through.

The local support scheme for unemployed youth had set it up, a weeklong video-drama exercise to try to build a bit of motivation and confidence among the kids. I jumped at the chance, partly because I needed the money, but also because I’d never been that far west before, and I was curious to know what it was like.

Nothing I experienced in my time there has convinced me that my initial ominous impression of the town was mistaken. Bourke is one of those places that should serve to remind Australia that however manicured the front garden, there are still a few dog-turds in the backyard. The further west one travels, it seems, the more frequently one encounters bigotry. No doubt there is a close relationship between geographic isolation and intolerance, partly owing to the greater effectiveness of powerful interest groups in dominating local affairs and partly because of the lack of moderating influences from outside.

The source of political strength in any community is economic power, and in Bourke that is the province of the local meat-works. When I rang the manager on Monday afternoon to request an interview he agreed, rather reluctantly, to an interview in front of camera, but looked decidedly seedy when a group of young Aborigines flooded into his office the following morning. Suddenly it was ‘inconvenient’.

The kids didn’t seem surprised, because ‘Aboriginal’ is a dirty word for many of them, too. Young, black and unemployed is bad news in the best of circumstances, which certainly don’t apply in Bourke. None of the kids are interested in travelling to the city to work, though, leaving home, friends and the familiar on the off-chance of a factory job that, if the accounts of some are to be believed, may not exist when they get there.

The trappings of government concern are there in Bourke; there's a black face behind the counter in the CES office, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has an office just off the main street. But reference to these evokes a cynical response from the black community, many of whom feel that such 'white' institutions are merely another aspect of the welfare mentality that has dominated social policy towards Aborigines for the past hundred seventy years. There's no provision here for black aspirations, black culture, or the preservation of heritage.

The clone of Colonel Sanders haunts the bars and beer garden of the commercial hotel, replete with white suit and hat, cadging a beer off anyone naive enough to shout him one. "I got nothin' against Abo's," he tells me, in a one-sided conversation that began about something else. "It's these bastards from the city that stir them up, communists and so on." He stares me straight in the eye. "They're not a bad lot, really, if they're left alone. They never used to complain before people started puttin' ideas in their heads."

There's plenty to complain about. There are very few black faces among the permanents in the boning room; the Aborigines have to make the journey to the works, chasing the rumour that 'it's on' five miles across the desert to queue up awaiting the fickle nod of the foreman for a casual day's work. Most have to walk back to town with empty pockets. It's hard to avoid making the grim connection between this process and the drafting of stock; the destination, after all, is the same.

Working the chain may be degrading, but it's just about all there is. That or the dole. Paradoxically, progress towards equal pay has worked against Aboriginal employment in traditional sectors such as farm labour, introducing greater competition for the few non-skilled jobs available. The one thing in the Aborigines' favour – that their labour was cheaper – has been removed, and the station boss's choice of who to employ is quite literally there in black and white. The young blacks, with no local prospects and no desire to leave behind family and friends, the only support they have, spend their days kicking a football around or swimming at the weir, when they're not out of their heads on ganga, petrol or grog. They rule the streets at night, hanging around the pubs whose doors seem to grin with welcome. The age restriction is laxly enforced out here; boongs are good for business.

Bourke is the domain of the Country Party, and the breeding ground of a political philosophy that's about as close as you get in this country to neo-fascism. If you don't believe it, take a video camera into the main street and ask around. The town is obsessively proud of its enlistment record – one of the highest in relation to population in New South Wales during the previous two world wars, and you get the distinct feeling there'll be plenty of room left at the cenotaph if the balloon goes up again. It's not just a matter of duty, or even glory; it's a matter of faith.

Local issues in Bourke are kept local, handled by a town Council routinely elected by the ratepayers and supported by the land-owning and merchant lobbies. If things get tricky, there's also an impressive law enforcement presence; nobody wants trouble, especially racial trouble, but they've recently doubled the police contingent, just in case.

One day the lid will blow off this can of worms, but meanwhile the local power brokers sit it out in the golf club, an oasis from which, after a few gin and tonics, it's easy to imagine that everything's okay. Anyone interested in gaining an alternative view can take a walk through the 'western quarter', with its sullen teenage alcoholics and emotionless black eyes watching from the doorways, to the edge of town, where it's possible to look out at the vast expanse of the desert and try to put it into some kind of perspective.

The workshop I ran produced about half a dozen reels of raw tape, but the editing facility at the local high community radio station broke down half way through the edit, and the videotape was never finished. The image that sticks with me is the title of the project, scratched in the dust where we'd taped it: 'A Hard One to Answer.'

I doubt that completing the project would have made much difference anyway. The coaches will continue to come and go to Bourke; the galahs will still spread pink wings over a country too big to fence.

*

The Tooth Fairy.

[A personal favourite, based on my wife's recollection of a real situation in which she was involved as a young child. The story won a commendation in the Wollondilly Literary Competition.]

Dad was always going on about the old days, about how tough things used to be when he was a kid. If it wasn't how far he and his brothers had had to walk to school every day, it was having to eat bread and dripping for tea, or only having enough water for a bath once a week, or some other memory of hardship.

The trigger for these recollections was usually a complaint by one of us kids about something trivial like having to go to the local store for milk and bread, or taking a shower, or turning our noses up at something on the dinner table. Dad's intention was to make us appreciate what he considered a life of relative opulence; but the effectiveness of his strategy decreased with repetition, so that after a while his stories tended to be taken with a grain of salt. His credibility, too, was in doubt. The distances he'd had to walk grew inexplicably, the evening fare became increasingly meagre, and the availability of water more critical with each recollection. We suspected that history was being distorted in its telling, but Dad's eyes would always challenge us to dispute with him at our peril, so we generally sat in frustrated silence as each more incredible version of the past unfolded. As if to challenge us, he would punctuate his accounts by turning now and again to our mother and saying: "Isn't that right, Thel?" in response to which mum would smile enigmatically and reply: "Yes, that's right, Ted," in a quiet, slightly mischievous tone that served only to deepen the mystery.

One evening at the dinner table I was carrying on about a loose tooth that was giving me a bit of trouble, a big molar at the back of the upper jaw that had reached the stage where it tingled whenever I nudged it with my tongue. I must have been about seven at the time, because I remember I was later than most of my classmates losing my milk teeth. The tooth wasn't *really* a major problem, but I'd found it served well as a handy excuse to get out of eating things I didn't like, and on this occasion it was cabbage, a vegetable for which I had a particular distaste. Finally Mum suggested perhaps I ought to go and see the local dentist.

The ends of Dad's knife and fork thumped on the table hard enough to make the salt and pepper shakers rattle. "What's she need to see a dentist for?" he blurted. "Never heard such a load of bullshit!" He waved the tip of his knife in my direction. "You kids've got no idea! When I was your age we didn't have a dentist; nearest one was a couple of hours away in Maitland." He plunged back into his meal. "'Course we didn't have a car in those days; no phone, either, so you'd have to go in on the sulky, a full day's trip. You couldn't afford to go running to the dentist over a loose tooth!"

My brother Barry, my elder by ten months, had been listening to Dad's account with keen and unusual interest. It was easy to tell when Barry was interested in something, because his eyes would sort of glaze over and his nostrils would flare a little, so that the shape of his nose would change. Usually he only got into this state of excitement when

someone was talking about the War, or when Dad brought home news of some accident at the pit. Barry grew up okay, but as a kid he was always a bit of a wheeler-dealer. Even at eight, he was adept at sniffing out opportunities, and getting someone else – often me – to do the dirty work. His interest in anything to do with my tooth made me slightly apprehensive.

“So what *did* you used to do, Dad?” he asked.

My father’s eyebrows lifted and his gaze drifted in Barry’s direction. I think he was surprised anyone had actually been listening to him. “Do?” He thought for a moment. “Well, I dunno; it depends how bad it was, I suppose. Most of the time you just put up with it. Wasn’t much point going to the dentist anyhow; there weren’t any anaesthetics in those days. If the pain got too bad, you’d just have to pull the thing out yourself.”

Barry was enthralled. “Wow! How’d you do that?”

I could see Dad’s mind at work. “A loose tooth? Well, ... you’d get a bit of string - good stuff, mind, nothing flimsy - and you’d tie it around the tooth, see; one end round the tooth, the other round a door handle. Then you’d just stand back a bit and kick the door, pull the thing straight out. Worked every time!”

My brother’s eyes met mine. Barry wasn’t normally the pensive type, but he was pensive now, studying the terrain of my jaw in a way that increased my discomfiture considerably. We finished the meal in silence.

When I got home from school next day, Barry sauntered across to my bedroom and propped himself jauntily in the doorway. “So how’s the tooth?”

I’d forgotten about it; the tingling had subsided, and when I ran my tongue over the molar there was no sensation of movement. “It seems better.”

Barry’s dissatisfaction with this response was immediate and apparent. “I thought you said it was loose? It can’t suddenly get un-loose, can it? Give us a look.”

I hesitated and drew back, but Barry gripped my jaws and prised them apart. He peered into my mouth and stuck a salty finger inside. “Which one?”

I indicated the offending molar. “Ah un.”

Barry squinted and roughly manipulated the tooth, until the familiar tingling sensation returned. “This one?”

I nodded. Barry wiggled the tooth again. “Feels loose to me. Does it hurt now?”

I shook my head. “‘Ot mussh. Ti’gles a vit, vat’s aw.”

Barry withdrew his finger and wiped it on his shorts. “It’ll get worse,” he declared. “Sometimes they get infected, you know.”

I didn’t know. “What’s ‘infected?’”

“Germs get into them. It’s like a toothache, only much worse. Joey Johnson’s brother had one like that, and he ended up in hospital for weeks. His whole face got infected. He looked like a cane toad.”

I tried not to let my panic show, but Barry must have seen the uncertainty in my eyes. “It’d have to be worth at least fifty cents from the Tooth Fairy, a tooth like that.”

We both knew what he meant. The Tooth Fairy was one of those myths that neither of us really believed in but that we periodically resurrected, like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, for purely pecuniary purposes. Belief still had currency, especially when gifts and money were involved. Barry knew I was still thinking about the money when he said: “You still owe me twenty-five cents, anyway.”

I was instantly on my guard. “What for?”

“For last week, when you sneaked across to Trixie’s instead of going to piano class. You said you’d pay me twenty-five cents if I kept my mouth shut.”

I must have paled visibly, because I saw a glint of triumph in my brother’s eyes. I well remembered the incident he was talking about, and the numbness of guilt that had made my feet stumble as I hurried across the paddock to Trixie’s. We’d spent a miserable afternoon of truancy together, brooding on the prospect that, sooner or later, Sister Agnes would remark on our absence to one of our parents, bringing sure and swift retribution - a good belting, public humiliation and the agonising penance that the nuns seemed so good at devising. Barry had caught me halfway across the paddock on the way back, and had been grinning like a monkey as he’d watched me approach. I’ll never know how he found out where I’d been – Barry had an intelligence network that would put the CIA to shame – but he definitely *knew*, and twenty-five cents had been the price for his silence. It was obvious from the look on his face as he stood in the doorway that the time of reckoning was at hand.

He moved in quickly to close the deal. “Tell you what,” he offered, “I’ll let you off the twenty-five cents if you let me do it now, the way Dad said.”

He produced a long, waxy piece of string from his pocket. I pulled back, my mouth firmly closed. Barry’s face took on a wounded, piteous expression. “What’s the problem?” he said, wrapping one end of the string around his upheld forefinger. “It’s not going to hurt. We just tie this end around the tooth, see, then we tie the other end to the door handle. No worries; it’ll be over in a second.” He looked at me a little slyly. “Anyway, better than getting it infected, I reckon, or something worse...”

I opened my mouth reluctantly. Barry seized his opportunity and stepped forward, hurriedly slipping the prepared noose of string about my tooth. He worked like a mechanic, wedging the twine deeply into the gaps between the molar and its neighbours then tying a tight reef knot in the string, so that the tooth, when I stole a glance at it in the mirror, had the appearance of being gift-wrapped. The shorter end the string hung from my mouth like a piece of spaghetti.

Barry took the end of the cord and led me across the room to the door. I looked at the handle and shook my head. "I's doo high," I protested, slobbering a little, "Ou'll rit my 'ead oth."

Obsessed though he was with seeing the procedure through, Barry finally conceded that connecting me to the bedroom door would be little short of an act of homicide. He surveyed the room and soon brightened. "How about this?" He stepped over to the heavy, federation-style wardrobe, and without waiting for my consent looped the string around one of the large polished handles, double-tying the knot. "Okay," he said, leading me back a couple of paces and placing me carefully in position. "Ready?" I nodded and braced myself, catching a glimpse of my imbecilic face in the wardrobe's mirrored door. I looked like a tethered mule.

The crash of the slamming door and the shrill wail that followed brought my mother rushing in from the garden. I'll never forget the look of horror on her face as she stood slack-jawed in the doorway. My tooth swung loosely from the doorknob, the gory fragments of jelly-like flesh that had accompanied it on its departure splattered all over the mirror. I stood nearby, my hands clasped over my mouth as I screeched in pain and terror. Every time I blubbered, bright red bubbles of blood and spittle erupted through my fingers. I remember being fascinated, in a detached sort of way, by the heavy scarlet drops falling onto the carpet, wondering where on earth so much blood could be coming from.

Barry was nowhere to be found. He didn't even turn up when Dad came home, but nobody seemed all that worried about it; everyone knew that, unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life in exile, his eventual submission and return was inevitable. Dad just sat there in his lounge chair, reading the paper. Occasionally he'd glance up at me, propped miserably on the sofa opposite, and shake his head.

When Barry finally came through the door, the knowledge of what was coming was already imprinted on his sickly face. He copped belting for – as Dad so succinctly put it – 'being so bloody stupid'. I'd already copped one, for the same reason. The Tooth Fairy vanished from my life, ever more a symbol of misery and pain. My jaw eventually healed, but it took several visits to the dentist before the damage was repaired. At one point the wound even got infected, and I had to spend a night in hospital.

I don't think Mum ever really got over it; she always had a thing about teeth after that. As for Dad ... well, he was pretty sensitive about it, too, for a while, at least when we kids were around. The stories about the bad old days didn't stop, exactly, but they were told with more restraint, as if the implications had to be carefully thought through. Often there was a bit of a cautionary note at the end, along the lines of "Of course, things've changed since then", or "Of course, you don't have to do that nowadays".

But the walls of our house was small and the walls were thin, and I can still recall, as I lay awake late nursing my aching jaw on the several nights followed the incident, the muted chuckles emanating from my parents' room, my mother's whispered appeals to my father to be quiet, and the low, reassuring rumble of his laughter wandering through the silent rooms.

*

A Teacher, Last Day

[This and the piece beneath are retrospectives on my experience in the education industry. They appeared together in the *NSW Education Journal*.]

'Well...' he began, then stopped,
Aware that the words dropped
Into an ocean of meanings and drowned
There, symbol dissolving into symbol sound.

The hunched grey fact
Of the rumouring class,
The bleached and blu-tacked
Walls, the sightless glass
Bled from him a final insight:

Girls whose innocence would wilt
In the first embrace of a loveless night;
Boys with reputations built
On lies. The young are quick to learn
Brutality can conquer doubt,
And finding candlelight can burn
Reach out, just once, and snuff the candle out.

Conference Lunch

She said: "My son is going blind."
The light from the plate-glass window behind
Shattered on the cutlery,
Froze each form in its own idolatry.

"He's only nine";
Leaving only the broken line
Of thought in the candelabraed room:
Wands of dust-light, water-coloured gloom.

"I only found out today."
Eyes that are fugitive slink away.

*

Why Ronald McDonald Must Die.

[Sometimes we do things just for the hell of it. The challenge on this occasion was to create an effective script less than ten minutes long. The play was written in a single afternoon, in a frenzy of literary insanity, and much to my surprise was selected for performance at the inaugural Sydney Short & Sweet play competition. The performance was fair, although I had some reservations about the direction.]

Characters:

PERPETRATOR

POLICEMAN

SALES ASSISTANT

CUSTOMER

CUSTOMER'S CHILD

MANAGER

RONALD McDONALD

Setting: Centre stage are two *small tables, each with two chairs of the kind commonly seen in McDonalds restaurants. The table stage right sits beneath a pool of bright light. Both sets of tables and chairs are tilted towards the audience. In shadow behind them is a counter of standard McDonalds design, overhung by an unilluminated McDonalds menu board. Downstage left is an unlit self-standing McDonalds sign atop a high pole. There are lit footlights along the floor front of stage.*

The POLICEMAN is seated in the chair on the nearer side of the lighted table, the PERPETRATOR opposite facing him. The PERPETRATOR abruptly jumps up.

PERPETRATOR: That's the thing, isn't it? That's what you *really* want to know!

POLICEMAN: What?

PERPETRATOR (*agitated, coming quickly to front of the stage*): 'Why'. That's what you really want to know.

POLICEMAN: I suppose it is.

PERPETRATOR (*considering for a moment*): It's a big question, isn't it? An ultimate question, really. Why anything? Why you, why me? I mean, it just goes on and on. Let's think it through. You've got the 'when', the 'how' and the 'who'. That only leaves the 'what' and the 'why'. Like I said, I preferred to start with 'what'. I felt we could manage it.

POLICEMAN: Manage what?

PERPETRATOR: Exactly! Who knows, if we work through that, it might even lead us to the why.

POLICEMAN: Maybe.

Lights come up abruptly on the menu board and counter. The SALES ASSISTANT is standing behind the counter.

SALES ASSISTANT: Would you like any fries with that?

PERPETRATOR: Pardon?

SALES ASSISTANT: Any fries or drinks with that?

PERPETRATOR (*abashed*): Um... yes. Okay, maybe a small coke. And a small chips.

SALES ASSISTANT: So you want the Regular Deluxe Meal Deal?

PERPETRATOR: Ahhh... I guess I do.

SALES ASSISTANT: Would you like to upgrade?

PERPETRATOR: Sorry?

SALES ASSISTANT: Upgrade to a large Coke and fries for fifty cents?

The SALES ASSISTANT freezes.

The PERPETRATOR turns back to the Policeman): You see what I mean? There were too many questions, too many demands! I'm not used to it. It's an American thing, value adding. I've always resented it: the fundamental motive is greed. I like to make my own choices in my own time, and then state them. I don't like them pre-packaged.

POLICEMAN: Is that why you did it?

PERPETRATOR: Aha, there, you see! Didn't I tell you: you went straight back to the why! We almost had a what, but you couldn't wait! That kind of approach isn't going to get us anywhere. It's too global. You've got to pave the way for it, prepare the ground.

Lights up abruptly on the second table. CUSTOMER and CUSTOMER'S CHILD enter with trays of McDonald's food and sit. They begin to eat in silence, the mounting abandon of their gluttony gradually becoming the focus of the action; they devour the food in large and increasingly frequent mouthfuls, spilling much of it onto the table.

PERPETRATOR: I mean, look at them! We might as well be feeding pigs. Is that what we're destined to become, I wonder, just a herd at the trough? They have no redeeming qualities at all, nothing anyone could possibly find attractive: no humanity, barely enough intelligence to make them useful. They're worse than animals, in many ways.

The CUSTOMER, her mouth full of half-chewed food, re-animates violently. She slaps CUSTOMER'S CHILD.

CUSTOMER: Shut your fuckin' mouth when you're talkin' to me!

The CUSTOMER'S CHILD snivels briefly then goes back to his food. They freeze.

PERPETRATOR (*returning to his seat*): I did them a favour, really. At least I might have slowed it down a bit.

POLICEMAN: What?

PERPETRATOR: Their journey to the slaughterhouse.

POLICEMAN: The animals?

PERPETRATOR: The people.

POLICEMAN: They don't seem to want to thank you for it.

PERPETRATOR: I don't expect them to. They wouldn't recognise their salvation if they fell over it, let alone fight for it. Someone had to strike a blow on their behalf.

POLICEMAN: Part of the 'why', then?

PERPETRATOR: Yes, I suppose it is. I felt I a need to do something, to hit back at somebody.

The MANAGER steps forward from the shadows. He takes the PERPETRATOR by the elbow and raises him gently but firmly from his chair.

MANAGER: Can I help you, sir?

PERPETRATOR: I'm... a bit upset, that's all.

MANAGER (*as if not having heard the response*): You seem a bit upset. What seems to be the problem?

PERPETRATOR: I feel like I want to kill somebody.

MANAGER (*Brightly*): Why don't we sit down and talk about it. I'm sure we'll be able to sort something out.

He freezes.

PERPETRATOR: I couldn't do it to him. He was too nice. It would've been like killing a friendly calf.

POLICEMAN: So what *did* you do?

PERPETRATOR: He offered me a Happy Meal, and I took it.

POLICEMAN: And then what?

PERPETRATOR: Aha, you're getting the hang of it! I really don't know how it happened - I just turned around and there he was, Ronald McDonald in the flesh! It seemed pre-ordained. I knew I had to act quickly - he was at the counter when I saw him, and you know how quick the service is there. So I grabbed the nearest thing I could and used that.

POLICEMAN: A quarter pounder. You choked him to death with a quarter pounder.

PERPETRATOR: Yes. Like I said, it was the first thing I could lay my hands on.

POLICEMAN: His last supper.

PERPETRATOR: I hadn't thought of it like that; but yes, I suppose it was.

POLICEMAN (*after a pause*): People hate you for it, you know. They want to kill you; the central switchboard's been jammed with death threats. I can't say I blame them, in a way. The poor bastard was collecting for Ronald McDonald House, for Christ's sake. He'd just stopped in for lunch. Whatever you might think of the company, Ronald McDonald was one of the good guys.

PERPETRATOR: He was created to give the company an aura of social responsibility, that's all. They got their money's worth out of him. He was just another victim, in a way.

POLICEMAN: So you decided to put him out of his misery?

PERPETRATOR: Not at all – at least, not at first. All I could see then was the symbol; he represented everything I despised. I was striking against the principle of the thing. I mean, I suppose I could have targeted Kentucky Fried or Burger King, but they don't have a living embodiment, do they?

POLICEMAN: He was a *clown*, for Christ's sake!

PERPETRATOR: The fact that he was a clown only made it worse! Clowns have always had a negative effect on me; there's always something spooky about them – something phoney, a false projection of happiness. You can see it in their eyes. It might be sadness or resentment or even malice, but there's always something there.

POLICEMAN: What about Ronald McDonald's eyes? What did you see in them?

PERPETRATOR: That's what struck me about him! There was nothing except sincerity, genuine goodwill and trust! It was like looking into the eyes of a child. Even when he knew that his life was about to end, all I could see in his eyes was forgiveness, and a vision of the place he was going to - a McDonalds World of endless joy and happy meals. That was when I realised that he was innocent: that it was possible to truly believe!

POLICEMAN: But you killed him anyway.

PERPETRATOR: It was too late by then. The bun had lodged in his glottis. But even if I could've saved him, I don't think I would have. I believe that deep down he wanted me to do it. He was at the gates of paradise, and he wanted to go through.

The McDonalds sign lights up. Beneath it is the costumed body of RONALD McDONALD. The PERPETRATOR and POLICEMAN walk over to the body and study it.

PERPETRATOR: I thought about tying him to the sign, like Jesus on the cross, as a bit of a gesture, but I ran out of time. I guess it doesn't matter. I know he's happy. And who knows - if there really is a McDonald's World, maybe he'll rise again.

POLICEMAN: It could be a while.

PERPETRATOR: Oh, that's okay. I'm happy to wait.

POLICEMAN (*Taking the PERPETRATOR into light custody*): We have to go.

They begin to leave the stage.

PERPETRATOR: So you got the why, then?

POLICEMAN: Maybe. I'm not sure.

At the edge of the stage, the POLICEMAN hesitates in front of the menu board. He feels in his pocket for some change. All characters except Ronald McDonald abruptly re-animate. The MANAGER, CUSTOMER and CUSTOMER'S CHILD leave the stage. The PERPETRATOR waits, watches the scene. The SALES ASSISTANT smiles brightly as the POLICEMAN approaches the counter.

SALES ASSISTANT: Hi. How can I help you, sir?

POLICEMAN: Um... a Double Cheese and Bacon, thanks.

SALES ASSISTANT: Sure. Would like some fries with that?

POLICEMAN: Um... sure.

(He extracts some change from his pocket and examines it) Um.. How much is that?
(He)

SALES ASSISTANT: That'll be seven fifty.

The POLICEMAN counts out the correct change, stands beside the PERPETRATOR, waiting. Blackout.

CURTAIN

The Trophy

[I spent a lot of time in northwest NSW. During that time a lot of my literary energy went into producing a novel, but I managed a few poems as well. The following, part of a series written when I was living in Werris Creek, appeared in *Hunter Valley and Northwest Magazine*.]

It caught her eye, almost the wink
Of fading love in a foreign dream
In the lace-webbed glade of attic dusk.

Dust had draped the golden prize
And dulled the deed of champion praise.
She took it down, lifted away

With her breath the garment of sad age,
Touched the metal of the winner's face;
Remembered her place, the wedding and put

The trophy quite suddenly back on the shelf,
Having seen in the peeling inscription plate
The jigsaw reflection of herself.

Echo of Love

(In memory of 'Pop' Dennis.)

[Written in Werris Creek as a tribute to my partner's grandfather. It was published in the *Quirindi Advocate*.]

For those of us who stay behind,
The dry wind, the velvet hills;
The after-image in the mind's eye.

Let those of us who knew him say:
'I knew him well':
The heart's long pain, the hope,
The slow swell of dusk on the verandah,
Hands cup-warm and thought
Flown to horizons.

You only go before us.
Every shadow must flee into that dim evening,
Leaving only an echo of love
And the wind and the dry hills.

A Bad Case of Barnacles:

Bellingen, NSW.

[Another piece from *Nation Review*, this one about the northern NSW town of Bellingen, not far from where, after an absence of several years, I have subsequently returned to live. The article stands as a historical impression. Relations between the sections of the community referred to in the article are a bit more conciliatory these days.]

Coming into Bellingen off the Pacific Highway is like stepping into a tourist postcard. Perched astride the dark river from which it derives its name, the town cradles in the palm of the Dorrigo ranges amid lush pastures of browsing dairy cattle, a scramble of picturesque buildings and tree-lined streets less than an hour's drive inland from Coffs Harbour.

No doubt it was this kind of scenic appeal, combined with a benevolent pastoral climate and a thriving local timber industry, which helped attract settlement to the area in the first place. For the best part of a century the town enjoyed a slow and steady growth, largely unaffected by the external influences such as tourism that impacted upon its coastal neighbours. Symbolic of the community's social torpor, the local Azalea Festival was one of the highlights of the local events calendar.

All that changed in the mid-'Seventies, with the arrival of a wave of refugees from the affluent urban mainline, serious alternative lifestyle seekers with enough cash to collectively buy up cheap land and set up communal settlements. Such real estate wasn't difficult to find; in the narrow valleys behind the town, high interest rates and the relentless war against the bush had exhausted the resources of many farmers, and they were ready to cut their losses.

Despite a high initial failure rate, enough of the new migrants survived to provide the basis for a small but viable communal network. This in time became a centre of gravity for other like-minded individuals, further enhancing the local counter-culture, which within a short time had developed into a viable and vocal force in community affairs.

'New settlers', the migrants called themselves. They don't like the word 'alternative' much, because no one seems sure what the alternative is. It's far easier to identify the members of the 'alternative community' by the values they reject – large-scale technologies, conspicuous consumption, environmental destruction, and so on – than by those they embrace, which range from extreme militancy to transcendentalism.

There are other names for them, names commonly heard in the conversations of farmers, townsfolk and the local chamber of commerce. The term 'hippie' encompasses a vast array of negative attributes – indolence, dishonesty, lack of hygiene and even, according to one line of public-bar philosophy, 'sleeping with your dog'. At a public meeting called to discuss the 'illegal housing' problem arising from hamlet development in the district, a prominent member of the Shire Council likened the presence of hippies in the community to that of 'barnacles on a ship'.

You didn't have to be in town long, however, to realise that the barnacles were in fact helping to hold the ship together. Like many rural towns, Bellingin was in economic trouble before the new settlers arrived, and it was hard to find a shopkeeper who'd deny that business had picked up since the settlers' arrival. The hippies have established a number of cooperative craft and cottage industries that coexist with and complement other enterprises in the town, helping to maintain a healthy turnover of cash.

Be that as it may, it's the tensions between the two groups that dominate local politics. One issue that polarises the community is the operations of the local timber mills. Bellingin is cedar country, and although most of the surviving operators are small by north coast standards, they're still big enough to enrage the new settlers, most of who live on the fringe of the rainforest and see themselves, rightly or wrongly, as frontier defenders of the bush.

They may have a point. Even from the Kalang Road, ten minutes out of town, it's hard to miss the landslides and broken skyline along the North Ridge; but it isn't till you get up to where the action is – an hour's gut-busting climb onto the tops – that a true picture emerges. One D-9 and a good team can clear a lot in a matter of days, and it's evident that they're not fussy about putting things back the way they found them when they've finished. The results read like something out of a geography textbook: subsoil instability, down-slope erosion, re-growth suffocation and, with the onset of the wet season, river siltation and consequent lowland flooding. Which is ironic, when you think about it, because the prospect of thousands of hectares of prime flatland pasture going under water doesn't exactly thrill the farmers either.

But emotive arguments hold sway, and the possibility of an alliance between new settlers and the rest of the community seemed as unlikely as any other kind of compromise during the time I was there. The strategy of passive disobedience that the new settlers had adopted to frustrate the logging industry had found expression in a refusal to participate in the annual burn off, incensing both their neighbours and the local council. Parts had been stolen from heavy earth-moving equipment belonging to one of the local timber contractors.

When I was there the flash point wasn't forestry, however, but the local Community Centre in the main street, which the Shire Council wanted to demolish in favour of a new, modern Council chambers. The Centre had been a social hub for the settlers, providing a casual atmosphere for gatherings, cheap and wholesome food, and space for a variety of craft and lifestyle workshops. The building also housed a library that boasted an extensive range of information on alternative lifestyle, environmental matters and non-destructive technologies.

The fact that much of the funding for these activities came from the local support scheme for unemployed youth located in the Centre had been seized upon by the advocates of demolition, in support of the view that the current occupants of the premises were 'dole bludgers'. My own observation, based on the workshops I conducted with people using the scheme, was certainly not consistent with such a judgment, which I believe ignores the strength of commitment that underpins the new culture. Most of the people I talked to had clearly thought their decision to abandon a conventional existence through, and had consciously decided to pursue an alternative

lifestyle only after a long history of negative experiences within the mainstream system. “People have got this idea that we’ve rejected society,” one of the workshop participants told me, “but they’ve got it wrong. Society rejected us.”

The truth is hard to work out. There are bigots and extremists on both sides of the cultural fence, and whenever the issues were talked about in my presence there was always a bit of a ‘day of reckoning’ quality about the conversation. Compromise still seemed a long way off. A couple of weeks after I left, things took a turn for the worse when the council bulldozed the old centre in an unannounced dawn operation. I’ve heard the war against the burn-off resisters has escalated to new levels, and there have been a number of large-scale aerial drug raids against the alternative communities, assumed to be hotbeds of subversion.

There are some hopeful signs, though. A few months after the community centre affair, a ‘freak’ candidate ran for Council on an environmental platform and gained a seat. Local resistance to hamlet development is crumbling in the face of legislative precedents elsewhere. The trade in tourist products, largely stimulated by ‘hippie’ input, is booming.

The seas may be choppy, but the barnacles cling on.

*

Small Towns

[A portrait of small town life, published in *Hunter Valley and Northwest Magazine*.]

Brief, chameleon, the dusk
Lies down upon the dreaming hills:
Slow, slowly, eucalypt soft,
As gentle as a lover down
Upon the earth and the small towns.

Yellow the eyes of houses blink,
Gather the bath-reluctant child,
Women full of back-fence rumour;
Crooked, hero-burdened men,
Into the houses in the small towns.

Outside the soon-be-there cafes
Shadow-silent youth appear,
Slump like the old forgotten folk,
Joke, uncertain, city-tempted;
Not much work in the small towns.

Sullen the passing stock-trucks fold
The air in diesel, dung-sweet scented;
Stock Jew-quiet, drivers fisted
Loud around the roadhouse lounge;
Rear-view images of small towns.

On the flickering highway threads
Of travellers creep, night-uneasy,
Yearning forth a jewelled glimpse
Of stars in the hills' palm.
There's light in the small towns.

Cats cry now the ancient pain
Of love; cry back the cave, Fire! Hunt!
Blunt the purpose of club on hide;
Song of the dark ones, settlers sighing,
Stirring sleep in the small towns.

Only the night owl, spectre-heavy
Shadow from the whispering trees,
Hangs in the bright-wheeled dome of space,
Marks the pace of the East hope rising
Over the country and the small towns.

All That Glitters: Cultural Mis-chord in Kountry Musik Kapital

[This article appeared in *ArtsWest*, the Central West Regional Arts Magazine. It was a reaction to the building of the 'Big Golden Guitar' along the New England Highway at Tamworth, where I'd lived for several years.]

First impressions are a funny thing; they not only stay with you, they colour your every perception about a place. Take Tamworth, for instance. Arrive during the off-season – February through September – and you might be forgiven for thinking there's nothing special about the town. The usual clusters of motels and service stations cling like molluscs to the fringes of the highway, fibrolite suburbs seep into the apparently limitless countryside, bleaching heat bakes the main street. Even the river, lying inert between parks and sports grounds, recalls almost any town west of the Great Divide.

But arrive as I did in latter part of January and all that changes. January is Country Music month, an annual festival culminating in the presentation of the industry's most prestigious awards at the Longfield Entertainment complex. For two weeks the population of the city doubles to around sixty thousand, and all hell breaks loose.

The devotees start arriving in early December, their origins almost as many as their number. Most of them come from rural areas, many from the genuine outback, the buckled fenders of their utilities still smouldering with dust. Often it's a family pilgrimage, the kids hanging limply from the back windows of sagging Fords, the women's faces in the front seats pinched from hard living.

The festival has traditionally been pretty much a folk event; not a community celebration in the usual sense, but a focus for the kind of coarse, splintery ethos that is the mainbrace of outback sub-culture. It's certainly not everybody's cup of tea; there are many, even in Tamworth, who choose to leave town at that time – a strategy that, for the more astute, affords an opportunity for a lucrative home-stay venture.

Country Music has never had much status in community arts circles, partly because its commercial aspects have been selectively promoted and partly, I suspect, because a lot of the decision-makers in that field find it difficult to bridge the gap between this particular genre and their own socio-graphics.

The legitimacy of the medium ought not to be judged by such personal percepts; the origins of the form and the strength of its following certainly give it credence as a vehicle of cultural expression. The real festival takes place on the streets, championed by the buskers and the numerous unknowns who make the slate at the pub-sponsored jams and talent nights. From time to time it's possible to pick up something uniquely Australian, an original blend of settler's fiddle and didgeridoo, songs about Australian rural issues without the Dixie accent, and it's exciting.

Most folk don't make it to the Awards Night, a glitzy affair designed to cater for the significant commercial interests – the local tourist industry, the recording studios and the retail lobby - that dominate this fastest-growing sector of the music industry. If

anything, the grassroots festival has developed in spite of the glamour events; a lot of the music that makes it to centre stage is nothing more than a vulgar mish-mash of sentimentality and imported Nashville that manages to combine many of the worst elements of the country music genre.

I was back in Tamworth again, a couple of years later, around the same time, and it seemed to me that the omens weren't all that good. There were more brand new stetsons among the crumpled Akubras floating above the crowds in the shopping arcades, more dudes there for the spectacle rather than the music, people more at home at the Powerhouse Motel than in a caravan park.

The glitz might be winning. Which is a pity, because the fledging Australian tradition is going to find it increasingly difficult to survive in the type of cultural climate the promoters are trying to create. There are moves afoot to erect a twelve metre high 'Golden Guitar' along the town's approaches, and given the kind of track record of the local council and the immense political clout of the scheme's promoters, there's every chance this unique example of architectural bad taste will get the go-ahead. Not everyone's crazy about the idea; local residents are worried about their property values, and some community members have raised concerns about the artistic sanity of the project.

The Golden Guitar is more than just another piece of junk. When it takes its place among the numerous other 'big things' that litter the Australian landscape, it will be a symbol of confused priorities, a monument to cultural parasitism. A first impression, certainly; something visible from miles around, an embodiment of something crass in the character of the place, testimony to the possibility that in Australia's country music capital, all that glitters may indeed be gold.

*

The Sister

[Another offering from *Hunter Valley and Northwest Magazine*. Sometimes a poem can change a life.]

She lay like the sister and the family cat
On the lounge-room sofa, growing fat
With self-indulgence and lack of care,
Preferring to leave untasted her share

Of love. Her image sadness,
Loss, almost a toss at tragedy; a princess
Without innocence, left only the slow indignity
Of a wilting flower. The hour hung in the dull heat

And I wondered what great iniquity
Had brought her, lamb-like, to this long defeat
And what regal wilderness would be her fate.
To bed, sweet sister; the world is turning, and the hour late.

Small Towns: The Forgotten Rural Crisis

[This article appeared in the *North and Northwest Magazine* as a feature over two issues. *The Land*, to whom I had also sent the piece, expressed an interest in publishing it, but demurred when they learned it had already been published.]

I.

Every so often a catch-phrase crops up which seems to say everything that needs to be said about a situation. Take the term “Rural Crisis”, for instance; generated during the rallies which marked the regrouping of the Farming Lobby during the 1980’s and nurtured by the media and politicians, the “Crisis” is now a familiar catch-cry in the rhetoric of a host of rural interest groups, many of whom have quite different views regarding the origins of the Crisis and what (if anything) might be done about it.

Yet on two points there is a remarkable degree of consensus: first, that a genuinely desperate situation exists in the Bush and, second, that the people bearing the brunt of hardship are the farmers themselves.

Such assumptions are worth examining in more detail. The complex of economic factors which are responsible for the downturn in the farming economy – spiralling costs, falling incomes, weak domestic demand, increased protectionism in the international market, high interest rates – are not unique to the present decade; nor are their effects entirely unpredictable; risk and failure and foreclosure are not new to the farming family, never more than the next long drought away, and there is nothing to suggest that private farmers are faring any worse, in survival terms, than other sectors of the community such as small business.

If there is a genuine “Rural Crisis”, it is happening not on the farms but in the small country towns, and its causes are only indirectly related to the problems being experienced in agriculture.

For the past four decades, Australia has been experiencing a population shift of unprecedented proportions, a migration from rural areas to the cities and larger provincial centres that has made Australia the most urbanised national on earth.¹ The rare instances where DEP figures show increases² can be explained by factors such as location (often backed by enormous marketing resources, as in the case of the mid-North Coast of New South Wales) or by a “commuter effect” from the presence of nearby provincial cities (as in the case of such shires as Parry in Northern New South Wales, which surrounds the Municipality of Tamworth and gains a “spill-over” of residential growth in selected areas of the Shire). But in general the trend in rural areas is one of depopulation; not only are small communities failing to maintain themselves at replacement levels, they are losing a significant section of their income-producing population without attracting new residents to replace them.

A population drift on this scale cannot be explained simply in terms of hard times on the farm, for the trend has continued regardless of variations in farm profitability or income. If anything, “good seasons” have been marked by increasing mechanisation¹ and investment in “New Technology”, both of which have had a negative impact on the largely unskilled and semi-skilled farm labour market. This is not to say that in some sectors of the small town economy – plant servicing, equipment merchandising, grain and livestock handling, for example – there is no direct relationship between net farm incomes and employment opportunities, but the decline in rural employment is not a simple reflection of the fortunes of the farming sector, and the crisis in the small town economy will not be miraculously cured by the provision of assistance, in whatever form and on whatever scale, to the farming sector alone.

Undoubtedly one major social change which has impacted on rural areas – and on the retail and service outlets in small towns in particular – has been the revolution in transport and communication that has been gathering momentum throughout the post-war period. The householder residing in a rural community is no longer constrained by time or distance to purchase goods at local stores. The greater degree of choice and availability of items in the larger provincial centres, and the necessity of travel to these centres for other purposes, makes the weekly or fortnightly shopping expedition a regular feature of family activity. As well, the cost of buying locally is generally increased by higher freight charges and associated costs of distance, so that the competitiveness of the small town commercial enterprise is being continually eroded. Small town shopkeepers do not have available the sophisticated distribution and marketing networks of specialised merchandising options available to the urban retailer.

Another significant social change that has contributed to the decline of employment and career opportunities in rural communities has been the increasingly centralised structure of the labour market. The need to compete and justify costs in both the public and private sectors has resulted in a reduction in the size and number of commercial and public service outlets in small towns. The “new technology” has provided the means for this process to be accelerated during the present decade. Data collation, accounting processes and even in some cases client servicing have become increasingly computerised and linked to regional offices or state networks; labour needs at “local” level have been superseded by a demand for skilled administrative personnel to maintain these specialised services. Nor is this trend confined to government departments or agencies; rationalisation and corporate re-structuring are as characteristic of the private sector as they are of the public. Over all, the result is much the same: jobs lost in the small towns, with specialised “professionals” administering and servicing large areas or regions from a provincial city base. The young and vocationally mobile section of the population has tended to respond to this changing labour market by migrating to high-opportunity areas, leaving behind a typically “skewed” population top-heavy with elderly people.

Other social opportunities within the small town - culture and entertainment, community services (as opposed to welfare and medical services) – tend to shrink as the crisis deepens and depopulation continues. In some cases the community is simply unable to sustain the economic base for the survival of a particular service or facility; in other cases services might be killed off by improved access to city services or competition from other sources. The community cannot offer sufficient incentive

to attract new businesses, entrepreneurs or professionals. Only medical and welfare services are likely to prosper in this environment, a response to the prevalence of the aged and disadvantaged groups within the population; but the professionals employed in these agencies are seldom residents of the small communities they service.

The signs of decline are familiar to most rural people: the Cinema or Drive-in closes down; the Railway retrenches or relocates positions as part of a Rationalisation Program; a local transport operation closes; the town's resident doctor retires and is not replaced. The town lags further and further behind larger centres in its provision of the services by which the quality of life is measured both by the outside world and the residents themselves.

The decline of community morale parallels the decline in these services, and the physical appearance of the town begins to reflect faltering confidence and failing pride. A walk down the main street, with its vacant lots and derelict buildings, becomes a dismal affair. Strangers encounter a mood of surly depression, almost to the point of rudeness. The mention of the name of the town assumes a connotation of neglect throughout the district, and there comes a point at which the foreboding of the town's residents about the future of their community becomes almost self-fulfilling...

II.

In seeking to resolve the crisis into which small rural communities are being plunged by depopulation and the economic gravity of provincial and metropolitan centres, there are a few facts that have to be faced.

One is that over 85 percent of Australians live in such centres¹. It is therefore likely that political decision-making (and therefore funds and services) will tend to continue to concentrate resources in urban electorates, particularly those marginal seats experiencing rapid residential growth.

The only way in which small towns can divert this process is by making their situation a political issue. The Crisis has to become a matter of public concern. Planners and political decision-makers have to be made aware that small communities are disadvantaged. Politicians, at all three levels of government must be convinced that support for such communities is in the interest of a broad section of the Australian society and culture.

In the area of employment, and particularly youth employment, there is no doubt that certain social costs are attached to both country and city in the process of labour migration. Property markets languish in the "Outback", while in the suburbs the Urban Sprawl places increasing pressure on services and resources.

One answer might be to lobby for the establishment of an Incentive Scheme weighted in favour of business initiatives in isolated communities of, say, 100,000 residents or less where evidence of depopulation exists. Such a scheme could conceivably provide subsidies for the employment of local labour on a reducing basis, with funds available to both existing enterprises and new ventures.

A change of policy which might be helpful would involve a Directive to all government departments or agencies, encouraging “consideration of existing residency” to be taken into account as a positive factor in their training, recruitment and promotion procedures. Emphasis might be given, for example to attracting and training teachers to fill positions in the districts within which they already reside; no amount of rationalising by Education Department will change the fact that present policies in this regard are extremely cumbersome and expensive both in personnel turnover and direct management costs.

Another area where policy could be reconsidered is in the structuring of regional functions. At present the dominant model or “blueprint” for delivery of services to rural areas is a “Circuit Model”; a single individual or team, usually based in a provincial city, providing service to a cluster of smaller centres within the Region or District. Yet some services – the Home Care Service would be an example - have managed to operate quite efficiently by employing administrative personnel on a part-time basis in each small community. Obviously the merits of this alternative will vary depending on the kind of service being delivered; but all too often “Circuit Models” are imposed in country areas more from uncreative planning than from a demonstration of real effectiveness. They involve high overheads (travel and communication costs especially) and without local input and knowledge, may have only limited penetration.

Any such changes of policy are meaningless without the achievement of an accord between federal, state and local government acknowledging the existence of a crises situation in small town economies and recognising the need for positive action to redress that situation. It is towards this specific objective that the efforts of interest groups representing small communities can be directed, and against which success can be measured.

There are a number of existing lobby groups which might serve to advocate for such changes at state and federal level – service organisations, chambers of commerce, retail associations, industry-specific or small business groups; and strategy relying on the muscle of existing groups needs to be a sophisticated one, because it is likely to have to deal at some level with partisan opposition from within the organisation itself.

The other options available to the commercial or development lobby in small towns is to form a specific-purpose organisation that can tackle the problem at local level and work towards the development of a grass-roots network that includes district and regional areas. Such a body ought to include a cross-section of retailers, agency representatives and local opinion leaders, an incorporate both management and political representatives of Local Government. Whatever the strictures under which shire councils operate, and whatever the barriers that might exist within the council structure, there can be no doubt that local government has available to it the management skills, planning expertise, resource flexibility and political network needed to bring about effective re-development in rural communities.

Such an organisation might begin by consolidating its objectives into a charter for consideration by potential support groups and political parties; rallying influential support and developing a lobbying strategy; and seeking the support of Local

Government in a realistic appraisal of the social and economic needs of the community. Approached with foresight and costed realistically, a Town Plan has the latent purpose of concentrating the energy of the organisation on something practical and attainable, while affording an excellent opportunity for involving the entire community in the process of its redevelopment. [It is worth emphasising the need for a realistic appraisal of cost estimates and funding availability, and the need to plan within a realistic time frame. Five to ten years, with annual stages or “targets”, could be considered a reasonable framework for such planning. Responsibly approached, and with some support from Local Government, this process provides the touch-stone for the community’s renewed sense of purpose and confidence in its future.

The physical improvement of the town and political advocacy are only part of any re-development scenario. A third and no less important task is entrepreneurial: to attract residents to the town and effectively promote its economic welfare. It is in this area that some fundamental re-thinking may be required. Most importantly, the real (as opposed to the presumed) economic and demographic status of the community must be assessed. What types of industry or enterprise would be best suited to the resources (cheap land or rates, labour supply, transport, market locations, etc) that are locally available? What is the tourist potential of the district and the town, and how might it be developed? Is there commuter potential and, if so, what services or facilities might be needed to realise it? What are the best ways to target appropriate residential and industrial markets? Are there ways to attract residents back to shopping locally?

Framing accurate answers to these questions in the contemporary social climate requires considerable expertise and access to specialised resources, meaningful source data and appropriate technology. The Development Organisation may, particularly if it has links to Local Government, access to such expertise and resources; otherwise it may be able to arrange this research through an appropriate department of a regional University, or seek assistance from state or federal Environmental Planning agencies. At present, little priority is given to the needs of small rural communities by any of these bodies when rural planning is considered¹; a reflection more of the failure of the towns to generate a political and public awareness of their situation than from any deliberate policy of exclusion by governments. There is certainly room within the existing policies and guidelines of these departments to accommodate research of this kind, either through the use of their own personnel or the distribution of grants to provide for consultancies. The organisation must maintain an integrated approach to planning; to be constantly aware of the relationship existing between town improvement, political advocacy and entrepreneurial activity.

The kinds of actions so far proposed deal mainly with medium and long-term goals. There are also a number of more immediate actions that might be taken. The distribution of resources within the local Council might be prompted to use its powers under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act to require residents with unsightly frontages or properties to improve their premises. Local clubs and committees might be encouraged to plan their annual festivities of fund-raising events in creative and innovative ways, and promote these events (with the assistance of the Development Organisation) not only in the local media but at district and regional level. Residents could be encouraged to participate in formulating the Town Plan. Small-scale community beautification and maintenance projects might be integrated

into the planning of local clubs, schools and businesses. Local artists and craftspeople might be encouraged to become more actively involved in promoting the town's culture and identity.

Small steps, perhaps, but the beginnings at least of a “social investment”; the notion that something can be achieved co-operatively within the community beyond destructive criticism and self-interest. For one thing is certain: the crisis confronting the small communities of rural Australia is not some temporary social accident to be resolved with the next good season. Without positive and considered action by these communities, the future can hold nothing more than further decline and eventual dereliction. The next two decades will be critical in reversing this process. Given the steps through which the process of re-development must proceed – the delays, the setbacks, the ponderous working bureaucracies, and the slow evolution of community attitudes – any further delay in confronting the real rural crisis would be ill-advised.

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Waiting for the Sun:

East Timor

[This piece was written during a stint as a voluntary aid worker in East Timor. It was published in *The New Matilda*, an on-line social commentary journal.]

Most of us know the country as East Timor, but the people who live here often refer to it, perhaps rather optimistically, as Timor Loros'ae – “The place where the sun rises”. It's a term that's gained a lot of currency since the 1999 referendum and the bloody events that followed the pro-Independence vote: in the songs that are an integral part of the new nation's culture, in contemporary poetry and art, in the speeches of politicians.

Optimism is a much-needed commodity here, in a nation that has been authoritatively described as one of the poorest in the world. That description fits well with a number of critical indices of national well-being: a per capita share of GDP of around a dollar a day; an infant mortality rate of over 5 per cent (Australia's equivalent is less than .05 per cent); and an average life expectancy of 57 years, around that of our own Indigenous population.

Then there's the destruction. Even for someone like me, who'd done enough research to build up some kind of picture of what had happened following the referendum, the extent of the devastation here came as a huge shock. In an act of blatant spite the pro-integration militia, with the tacit approval of the Indonesian military, went on a rampage that left thousands of civilians and independence supporters dead, the national infrastructure largely destroyed and more than three quarters of the country's buildings burned-out shells.

Even now, after years of reconstruction, at least half the premises here remain roofless, rusting hulks. There are no streetlights, little reticulated water or sewerage and - on an almost daily basis - no electricity. And it isn't just Dili that suffered. Everywhere you travel in the country, the physical evidence of the milisis' vengeance confronts you: in the weed-infested ruins of houses, churches and schools, in the rusted wrecks of vehicles, in the lack of even the simplest amenities.

The human cost of all this hasn't been definitively calculated, and it's unlikely that it ever will be. Common estimates put the death toll somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000; not just from the militias' malevolence, but also from the widespread displacement of people, particularly in rural areas, that robbed entire regions of their livelihood throughout the relentless years of Indonesian occupation and Falintil resistance.

What is almost as chilling in this grim scenario, however, is the apparent ineffectiveness of the international relief effort in bringing substantial rejuvenation to this tiny nation. While every second vehicle on the road seems to be an aid agency Land Cruiser or equivalent, the roads themselves remain in a pitiful state; while there are innumerable malae (foreigners) in evidence, their concentration is in 'high-level'

meetings or in the up-market hotels and restaurants rather than on the streets or among the broader populace; and while there is an unquestionable current of foreign aid flowing into the country, one cannot help but wonder how much of it is being absorbed into the comparatively exorbitant salaries, lavish furnishings and state-of-the-art security systems of the numerous foreign consulates and embassies that infest the capital. So apparent is the disparity that some commentators, including a growing number of East Timorese, are beginning to refer to the aid-related presence here as 'the fourth occupation.'

Yet for all there is to be cynical about, there's an undeniable optimism among most of the people here that may, at the end of the day, be their saving grace. Despite the disillusionment and personal trauma - and it's hard to find anyone here who hasn't lost a relative or friend in the troubles - there's still a general attitude of goodwill towards foreigners, and to Australians in particular. Indeed, to receive such generosity and hospitality from those who - by our standards, at least - have so little, is a humbling experience. There is a deep spiritual strength here, in the truest sense of the word, and that determination may ultimately go a long way towards building the kind of enlightened, democratic and prosperous future the people seek.

But like most such moral capital, this goodwill may have limited currency; for ironically, the very things to which the East Timorese aspire - modernisation, a higher standard of living, material prosperity - are already producing the kind of undesirable side-effects that we see in our own culture, unbridled by any kind of education or control. There is already rampant pollution, particularly by plastics and the other flotsam of a consumer society. If the talk of tourism as a possible revenue stream is ever going to become a reality here, something radical is going to have to be done to curb the rapidly escalating garbage.

Then there's the demographic problem, creating a further source of social pressure. With a population growth rate of over 5 per cent, and almost half the population under the age of 14 years, the mere logistics of feeding and caring for people in a country that clings to a fairly conservative Catholic view of birth control and family planning are increasingly untenable. Related to this, and perhaps most pressing of all as a social issue, is the simmering discontent among the huge population of unemployed urban poor, and specifically among the young. East Timor is a nation born out of violence, and sometimes - among the crowds of youth on the streets at night, in the bullish attitude of some members of the military and police - I have detected a hint of darkness in the national psyche that could, if untended, spill into the kind of riots that shook Dili in 2002, or something worse.

The real test of national resilience will come when the UN finally brings the curtain down on its involvement here, taking a lot of the funds and aid-based NGOs with it. The fact is that, despite the rhetoric of our politicians, the overall investment and aid effort here has been woefully inadequate, much of it spent on maintaining the opulence of ex-pats' lifestyles or tied by procurement to overpriced Australian goods and services. In a strange exercise in doublethink, we seem to have overlooked our moral accountability, both in regard to our silent sanction of the Indonesian invasion of 1975 and in our inexplicable delay in intervening in 1999 until after Dili and most of the rest of the country had gone up in smoke.

It isn't popular to raise such concerns here, however. Foreign aid may not be a perfect arrangement, but the fact is there's precious little to replace it, and those who hold the purse strings have considerable clout. The withdrawal of AusAID funds from organisations such as *Forum Tau Matan* and several other East Timorese NGOs that spoke out against the Australian Government's approach to the Timor Gap issue, makes a mockery of any claims to an 'arm's-length' funding policy.

In the short term, relief for East Timor may come in the form of petro-dollars, either from the Greater Sunrise field of the Timor Gap or from the other sources that the East Timorese Government, with the help of others such as the Chinese, has been now exploring. But even with the kind of 50-50 deal that East Timor has managed to claw back from foreign governments like ours, it may well be a case of too little, too late, with oil and gas revenues expected to be in sharp decline within the next decade. Also, there's no guarantee that the East Timorese Government, for all its high aspirations, will escape the virus of corruption that some say has already infected the halls of state, public office and the civil service.

Whichever way it goes, there can be no doubt that the road ahead is going to be a rough one for this tiny nation, and if the sun is indeed to rise on a brighter future, it will be from behind the towering storm clouds that rise each evening over Dili, and not from the flat ocean horizon beyond.

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Madonna, Drifting Into Age

[A bit of a ring-in. It was scheduled for publication in *Hunter Valley and Northwest Magazine* but was 'pulled' at the last minute. The editor rang apologetically: he told me the literary standard was fine, but the content was "too controversial" for the magazine to print.]

Across the night's hadean stage
The harlequins of heaven danced.
Madonna, drifting into age,
Stood by their euphony entranced

When, from the flickering balustrade
Prometheus flung a fiery dart.
Before the trembling virgin's gaze
The doors of heaven flew apart.

Within, the sad Madonna saw
The truth that treasonous time forgot:
The penalty for playing whore
In history's vast insensate plot.

Her shroud of holy virtue slipped,
Her need for human comfort burned:
No Saviour risen from the crypt;
The young Messiah had not returned.

The iron height of heaven closed.
Thereafter, she was discontent:
Her faith to apathy disposed,
Her passion to abandonment.

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