

MEANDERING

Childhood Poems

COMING HOME FROM QUILPIE

Beneath the hot dry desert sun
Bare bones lie parched and white.
Red dust swirls. Magpies dance
Beneath its glaring light.

The wind whips up the tumbleweed
To roll across cracked ground,
And cockatoos scream in the sky.
An eagle-hawk soars round.

Emus feed beside the track
On the flat red dusty plain.
As the engine hurtles past
They chase the Quilpie train.

Blackboys with their grass skirts stand
On flat and treeless earth.
Tall anthills dotted here and there
Are of enormous girth.

Railwaymen shout as we pass.
“Paper! The fettlers cry,
We throw papers from the windows
As the steam train rattles by.

On through the night we tunnel;
Stop at Roma in the morning
For breakfast, rush on board
At the guardsman’s warning.

It’s getting greener now.
There’s no more swirling sand.
Tufts of blue-green stunted scrub
Replace the dry red land.

Kangaroos are grazing
Where the green is growing most.
Sometimes there’s a creek or pond.
We’re getting closer to the coast.

Now the track winds round the hillsides,
And through the forests growing.
The train's whistle rends the air
As through villages we're going.

Now it's farmland we're traversing,
And I'm getting excited.
It's when we reach this area
I know soon we'll be united
With Grandma and our cousins
By the sea. My brother's sighted
The houses of the city
That spread so far and wide,
And crowd against each other
On every steep hillside.

The train's whistle pierces shrilly.
For a moment I forget,
And my heart starts beating wildly.
Then its quickened beats
Slow down as I remember
Why we've come back here.
We've come home for the last time.
This time Grandma isn't there.

BUSHFIRE

The sun glares red through smoky haze.
Flames lick up through blackened trees.
Leaves curl and float upon the breeze.
With their embers fire carries.
Over forest gums there hovers
A cloud of smoke that chokes and covers
Everything that it drifts over.
Deadened logs and blackened bark
Give off crackle, give off spark
Through the smoke haze dense and dark.
Exploding logs are all around.
The grass is bare and blackened ground.
Of forest birds there is no sound.
Animals have fled the plight
Of being burned by scorching might
Of orange flame. Their flight
Has left the forest silent, still,
Where nothing lives, and nothing will
Grow restored and green, until
The rain comes once again to bless
The forest with its soft caress.

SONG OF WARABA

Written at the age of 12, (in 1957) in parody of Henry Longfellow's "Hiawatha".

This story hails from hilly Wamran,
 By the big blue Beerburrum,
 By the towering Tibrogargan,
 By the crooked one, Coonowrin,
 By the twins, the Tunbubudla,
 In the valley of Waraba,
 Where lived the tribe of old Umballa.
 It tells the tale of Nanangara
 And her lover, young Kabali.

Umballa was a tribal elder.
 Nanangara was his lubra.
 But Umballa was not gentle.
 He raped and beat young Nanangara,
 So while he slept she left his humpy.
 Nanangara stole by moonlight
 From the humpy of Umballa,
 Escaped in darkness wondering whether
 She could flee and shelter safely.

Morning found her by Waraba,
 The creek that ran through Wamran Valley.
 Hot and tired she dived into it,
 Refreshed herself in its cool water,
 Happy to have found her freedom,
 Not yet fearing for the future.

Kabali was a vested warrior
 Belonging to the tribe Caboolture.
 He had come down to the poolside
 To check some nets along the creek-bank.
 Kabali watched young Nanangara
 As she chased a darting mullet.
 As he watched the lovely lubra,
 Laughing in the sparkling water,
 He fell in love with Nanangara,
 In love on sight with Nanangara.

"Shall I spear it?" called Kabali.
 "Are you hungry? I can cook it."

In surprise young Nanangara
 Glanced quickly at the handsome hunter.
 “Oh, yes, I’m hungry,” said the lubra,
 “Could you catch the mullet for me?”

Kabali speared the fish and cooked it,
 And they ate its flesh together,
 Getting to know one another.
 Nanangara told Kabali
 About the cruel man Umballa,
 About her plight and flight to freedom.
 “I will help you,” vowed Kabali.
 “Come to my tribe. Be my lubra.
 My father is a tribal elder.
 He will let you be my lubra
 When he learns of what you’ve been through.”

Just then they heard the sound of shouting.
 Umballa’s friends were out and searching.
 “Come,” urged Kabali, “Hurry quickly.”
 They left the camp-fire and its ashes,
 Fled alarmed into the forest,
 Hid running fast among the greenery.
 The hunters of the tribe Waraba
 Following, saw trace of ashes,
 Knew the couple were adjacent,
 Combed the forest through to find them.

Kabali and the frightened lubra
 Fled towards safety of Caboolture.
 At last they lost them in the forest,
 Rested thankful in the shadows,
 But when young Nanangara strengthened,
 Kabali urged her once more onward
 To the sanctuary of his own tribe.
 They waded through the Creek Waraba
 To conceal their fleeing footprints,
 Then they went back to the forest.
 They came at evening to Hill Mulu.
 Too weary-limbed to climb its steepness
 They rested in dark Mulu’s shadow.
 In each other’s arms they slumbered.

Meanwhile the hunters who had followed
 Came at last into a clearing.
 Baffled as to where they could be,
 And tired of chasing the young lubra,

And envious of old Umballa,
They contrived to tell a story
Of how the lovers by black magic
Turned to crows which rising skyward
Winged away and thus escaped them.

Nanangara and her lover
Hurried onward to Caboolture,
To the safety of his father,
To the arms of his dear mother.
Kabali's understanding parents
Took pity on young Nanangara.
They believed the Rainbow Serpent
Had sent her to them for protection.
His father told a story to the elders
Of how the lubra had flown to them
In the guise of a kingfisher
Across the waters of Waraba,
And won the heart of young Kabali.

He declared the Rainbow Serpent
Desired peace between the tribe Waraba
And its rival tribe Caboolture,
And the marriage of Kabali
To the mystic wandering lubra
Would unite the tribes forever;
They would be joined like creek and river.

So it was with much rejoicing
They held a marriage feast corroboree,
And Waraba and Caboolture
Were united, creek and river.

TIBROGARGAN: DAWN

In the morning mist, by sunshine kissed,
Tibrogargan rises high.
Small shrubs embrace its rocky face,
And gum trees reach the sky.

Tibrogargan leans
Athwart the foggy blue.
Rays of sunlight in the mist
Come beaming softly through.

Tibrogargan is an island
In a lake of mist.
The trees are keys of green
By sunlight gently kissed.

FIRST KISS

(This was written after holidays at the Gold Coast at the finish of High School, the rite of passage now known as "Schoolies Week.", December 1962.)

O to be at Kirra Beach,
Swimming in the surf,
Baking on the golden sand,
Or scruffing on the turf.

O to run up Kirra Hill
Beneath his flashing smile,
Or to walk along the sand
With him beside me all the while.

O to skate around the rink
Holding tight his hand,
Or just to sit and watch him skate.
His skating was so grand.

O to climb up Razorback
To watch the setting sun,
And feel his first kiss on my lips.
Who'd ever be a nun?

CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

Written 1961, at the age of 16, describing the “beatniks” of the time.

They sit in the gloom in corners poky,
In clubs and in pubs and in dens all smoky.
They dress in black, and they drink and they swear,
And they never laugh, and they say that they care
For the state of the world; that it’s so unfair.
But they sit and look bored and tired and depressed,
And drift like the smoke from one den to the next.
And they don’t want to work. They want to be free.
Is it a grievance, or apathy?

Family And Friends

AT GRANDMA ANNIE'S

Long snow-white hair pinned in a bun,
Dear face lined and wrinkled,
Slight and slim, and yet she seemed
So tall; blue eyes whose corners crinkled
When she smiled. Visage that beamed
Warm greeting when she saw us,
And there was nothing for us
More looked forward to
Than for us to be
On the road to Grandma's in the summer.

Our days were filled with love and laughter.
The Christmas puddings on the rafter
Were a sign of things to come
When all her kin would gather
Packed into Grandma's home.

We children played all day
In the yard and by the bay.
Twelve we were together,
The kinder of Grandmother.

She was busy all day long,
And her voice in song
Would carry as she baked,
Or in the garden raked
Up leaves in early morning.

I rejoiced when I would waken
To hear the sound of raking
Up of mulberry leaves, and Grandma's voice
Singing softly some sweet verse.
Joy would fill my heart,
For I'd know it was the start
Of another golden day
With my cousins by the bay,

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