

Dust to Dust

Sally Eberhardt

I was born in the dry and landed in the dust,
Pushed from my mother in one mighty thrust.
She licked me clean and urged me up,
On shaking legs, I took my first sup -
Her milk was rich, warm, creamy and sweet,
As I guzzled the colostrum flowing from her teat.
Her first gift to me was life, from conception on.
Her last gift to me was life, as she lay down with a groan.
And that would have been my story, over before it started
Except I was found by a girl, capable and kind-hearted.

Her father didn't want me, said I wasn't worth saving.
'He's just a bloody brumby'. But the girl wasn't caving.
'I'll raise him' she said. 'I'll pay for his share'.
From that day on, I've been in her care.
Jessica her name is, and she dubbed me Clancy,
A good Australian name, not posh or fancy.
I know it wasn't easy justifying my existence
But when her Dad complained, Jess put up resistance.
'He's just a poddy foal. He's a waste of water and hay.'
But Jess would dig her heels in, 'He's my mate' she'd say.

She didn't need to break me, I obeyed her every will,
Even first time with the saddle I stood perfectly still.
The bit was strange in my mouth, the saddle odd on my back
But complete trust in Jessica meant I could relax.
She and I rode fences and kept an eye on the stock,
Ever watchful guardians over the precious small flock,
For most of the Merinos had been sold for slaughter -.
Life wasn't easy being a woolgrower's daughter;
Jess worked hard in the yards and as a roustabout
But there were few sheep to shear, due to the drought.

One day I followed Jess's father into the shed -
I saw dark thoughts tormenting his heart and his head.
Over a high beam he threw a strong rope,
And quietly whispered 'I've lost all hope'.
'They're better off without me. I'm better off dead.'
'Nearly everything is gone. There's so little left.'
I moved in front of him. I got right in his way.
I bunted and pushed him until he clung to my mane.
With his arms around my neck, he took a shuddering gasp
And with great wrenching sobs, let the pain out at last.

The outside forces test the mettle within
And even the best of men don't always win.
Answered prayers bring rain that turns dust into mud,
Next thing you know, we're all battling a flood.
But the water subsides, and the land sprouts green,
Wildflowers and grass create the most beautiful scene.
Neither good times nor bad times can forever last,
Look to the future, live now, remember the past.
The tough folk stick it out, they do what they must,
But in the end their bones, and mine, will add to the dust.

The Returning Disciple

Emma Southwood

The drive out of the city is a ritual,
Rows of houses replaced with rambling trees.
Ushering my soul to the outback -
Australia's cathedral.
Holy ground where Her spirit is strong
And Her glory magnificent.

Her venerable icons captivate me -
Unending expanse, rust red earth,
Lofty gorges, vast vivid sunsets,
Sky awash with stars!
I delight in feeling small against Her
grandeur.
Content and privileged to witness Her
beauty.

I hear birds offer songs of worship,
Their voices sweet and joy filled.
Performing recitals for all who will hear -
Welcoming this day as a precious gift;
To cherish simply being here.
At night an offering of thanks.

The air is aromatic with incense -
Soil and scrub, cattle and campfire;
The heavy scent after elusive rain.
I breathe Her in giving life to my bones,
The mix of earth and salt transport me -
Home.

Baptized in dust and sun biting skin
I soak in Her strong embrace.
Immersed in Her ruggedness.
I run my hand over the horse
And down the back of a dog;
Holy connection restoring the soul.

And Oh! To partake in Her feasts!
Generous ministry from farmers
who toil a relentless land.
Producing bountiful offerings
To our sacred moments -
Time shared with family and friends.

The outback reveals Her divinity.
She grips me and holds me
And reminds me of who I am -
Her disciple; a lover of this land.
Her spirit and mine -
We are Australia.

Spirits of the Outback

Grace Vipen

The old man sits quietly
as beads of sweat form catchments down his cheek,
he wets his lips with hour-old Bushells –
the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak

He lifts his right hand feebly
and grasps his ballpoint pen,
readying himself to put ink to paper:
What is the Spirit of the Outback, then?

Ignorance sees it bodiless,
an idiom, transcendental,
explorers sans custodians,
a connotation meaningful, but immeasurable

He pauses, sips, shifts his weight
as his tired thoughts coalesce,
the next line flashes to his mind:
The Spirit of the Outback is embodied in flesh –

– it is the locals of this vast, dry land;
those reared amongst the rolling hills,
the pioneers, stockmen, flying doctors
from the shire of Burke and Wills

Those who trudged miles through Brightlands station
fossicking, shooting kangaroos,
those who watered flowers on Scarr Street,
were once bronc riders and jackaroos

Those who bake the sliced soft white
bread
and labour out at Castlereagh Quarry,
those who man the Driver Reviver
60 kilometres west of Cloncurry

The stories of legends lay buried:
headstones cracked, flower drought,
this land absorbs Spirits, he writes,
chews them up and spits them out

– the brown wall clock strikes 3
and the man drops pen abruptly,
grabs a mango and a tin of tongues,
and steps into the stifling air, softly

He reaches the Corella River
and as a lark flitters into view,
a glimpse of something yonder
manages to fleetingly slip through

He arrives at Chinaman Creek Dam
and lays down in the red, scorched dirt,
and as sleep slowly beckons for him,
his aged joints gradually cease to hurt

And when he wakes next morning,
sprightly – with hair jet black,
he steps out towards the rising sun
and joins the Spirits of the Outback

My Travelling Mate

David Elson

I was heading out to Cheepie
with the sun just sinking low
to my camp out on the Beechal
where I always loved to go

When I felt this strange presence
it was there within my truck
A type of feelgood feeling
it seemed to wish me luck

I sort of really felt it
when I stopped at Charleville
I filled my truck with diesel
and I went to pay the bill

The girl behind the counter
she smiled and said hello
with some friendly conversation
it was time for me to go

But then I felt it there at Morven
when I brought that great meat pie
there was something that I liked
but I just couldn't workout why

Perhaps it was at Roma
or when I crossed the range
It must have climbed up in in the cab
to join me for a change

But when I reached the Beechal
and I had my campfire set
it sat right down beside me
though I hadn't see it yet

Next morning when I awoke
it was there with me again
and I sort of liked the feeling
as I gazed across the plain

There was Mulga on the hillside
and wildflowers, growing everywhere
a gentle breeze was blowing
and a fragrance filled the air

I went and boiled the billy
and I sat down on my chair
I thought about this thing
that was with me everywhere

In the faces of the people
and out along the track
the feeling was that of welcome
and so glad to see you back

Then I knew just what it was
and why it filled the air
it was the "Spirit of the Outback"
it was with me everywhere.

Me and 'Barefoot' Tim

Kelly Dixon

I met him first in Marble Bar, that sunbaked dusty place,
his feet were bare, he wore three weeks of stubble on his face;
A pair of denims, patched and pale, a threadbare cotton shirt,
matched his bloodshot twinkling eyes, and nails all etched with dirt;
A smile which seldom left his dial, a handshake like a vice;
I recognised a bloke who'd back a mate at any price!

He claimed his first name Timothy, and Delaney as his last,
he said he'd come to marble Bar, to leave behind a past
Which always seemed to visit him, no matter where he went,
a past which told of strife he'd caused, and harm he'd never meant;
I sensed in Tim a spirit raw, a child born of the winds,
harshly judged for sowing oats, and other trifling sins.

We sank a few in Marble Bar, we both enjoyed a dram,
I took Tim at face value; he took me for what I am;
So we knocked about the far-flung, we did every kind of job,
we dug shafts and we drove Haulpaks, anything to win a bob.
We went droving, we went fencing, Barra fishing, navvied, too,
on the railway line from Tom Price to the mines at Paraburdoo!

Tim Delaney won the nickname, 'Barefoot', due to lack of shoes,
boots he said were next to useless, in the wild bare-knuckle 'blues'
Delaney used to relish, due to mostly too much booze;
claimed his footwork smarter, than when weighted down by shoes,
Quite averse to using razors, Barefoot's shaves were fairly rare,
his defense against skin cancer, Delaney claimed was lots of hair!

Which of course had some detractions, only 'pansies' have long hair
mining men were prone to taunt him, but Delaney didn't care;
And if taunts too barbed, and caustic, cast reflections on his birth,
with his fists he'd soon convince 'em, that he didn't see the mirth
In suggestions that his manhood should be questioned by the mob,
then he'd challenge one and all to come and beat him at his job!

So we worked around the Stations and the fishing boats at Broome
suffered both us for a short while, but our shares just didn't boom!
Not with Barefoot always fighting, with the deckhands and the Boss
of the trawler, so he sacked us, and he said we were no loss.
Then we worked a while in Wyndham, at the meat works, 'on the chain',
when the killing season ended, we were on the track again.

Far away to Northern Queensland, where we quickly got the hang
of how sugar cane was something else, we joined a cutting gang;
Where Barefoot once again was King, no man could match his pace,
within a month he led the field, with a grin upon his face;
More cane he cut, his flashing knife threw diamonds in the sun,
the cheque he won, twice that of mine, when harvesting was done!

The spuds were on at Atherton, we toiled with aching backs,
sewing bags, and loading trucks with shoulder-tearing sacks;
The spuds ran out, we took a bus to somewhere down the line
Delaney'd blown his cheque on booze, and I'd spent most of mine;
But not to worry was our creed, back in those glory days,
we cared not what the future held, we blokes of willful ways.

Came the day when mates must part, for reasons one or other,
when ties are cut and paths divide, our feelings we must smother;
Delaney chose the drifter's track, I still can hear his song,
I wonder is he still out there, does still his hair grow long?
His fists may have been slowed by age, his spirit I would bet
is just as strong as in the days when Tim and I first met.

Furthermore, no mortgaged home, around his neck would be
an anchor in some coastal town, where 'steady' blokes like me
Must keep our noses to the stone, as part of what we pay,
for all the times we 'blew' our cheques, back in that yesterday;
When life was good and open roads, set young men's spirits free
when tomorrow never touched the minds, of Barefoot' Tim, and me!

We never should look back I'm told; it does no good to rue
the plans we didn't lay when young, the things we didn't do;
The times we might have missed a chance to put aside a buck,
whilst thinking youth was ours to spend, we trusted in our Luck.
Sometimes now, I wish that I was back with 'Barefoot' Tim,
and sometimes too, if he'd agree, I'd gladly swap with him!

If God would let my mortal hand wind back the clock of Life,
back to a time when vagabonds, we had no home or wife;
A time when saddles were our thrones, our bridle hands the tools
which told a station manager, the practiced from the fools;
A time when we were drunk on fun, and Life was seldom grim,
when I had standing by my side, a mate like 'Barefoot' Tim!

Now, if somewhere you chance to meet a pair of twinkling eyes,
a barefoot bloke with half a beard, and only half my size;
A bloke with wrinkles on his face, (he'd have to have them now)
a fellow with a taste for grog, and a bloke who makes a row,
Chances are you'll live to boast of how you met with him,
the bloke I met in Marble Bar, my old mate, 'Barefoot' Tim!

Spirit of the Veins

Kaylah Faulkner

Spirit lies in the blood red dirt,
where the tree veins barely quenched lie,
climbing under and through,
sustaining a heartbeat through cracked bark,
a painted palette of copper leading to the high up gums,
with their spotted, broken leaves,
dancing to a harsh, dry wind,
showing a rhythm of no remorse.

Spirit lies in the blood red bridge,
rusted beyond a question of repair,
the job kept long of surveying a town built on the foundation of crumbled riverbanks,
holding deepest secrets,
holding deepest longings,
of the souls old and new,
knowing they are disconnected,
yet connected through the nature
(physical and emotional)
of a place they've christened home.

Spirit lies in the blood red tracks halted,
painting a picture of the foreigner's nightmare,
unsure which way is North or which way is West,
(the land evolved since maps created,
only known to a familiar eye,
the souls with an ingrained compass),
wondering how a full tank of fuel was not enough to make it across this demanding land,
wondering how he can listen,
understand,
to be guided back home.

Spirit lies in the blood red sunset,
setting over a land that has seen it all before,
a land that has continuously found itself
rebuilding,
recreating,
re-establishing,
after forces unforgiving unleash,
from mankind and mother nature alike,
combining to create stories told,
and yet to be told,
if only asked,
if only listened to.

Spirit lies in the blood red sunrise,
a cycle that replenishes,
signalling a new story,
sprouting,
emerging,
out of the sacrifice,
out of the red blood spilled by;
the trees,
the rivers,
the cows,
the dingoes,
the snakes,
the ancestors.

The Outback Warrior

Chandra Clements

From McKinley's Gap to Gunpowder Creek
the Emu Foot marks bounds.
We stand upon this borrowed land
with legend in its sounds.
Walpala came; Walpala stayed,
Kalkatungu here before.
From peace to war to peace again,
this land withholds the score.

The crane is carved within the rock,
the Eucalypt bears claim.
And a Warrior is among their tribe
with Spirit as her name.
She's with us now, just like before,
amassed among the reeds.
Bed deep within the sunburnt view,
and the stockman's sweaty beads.

She lies within the small green shoot
once fire has left town.
She hides beneath the split red earth
once drought unfolds its gown.
And there she is within the calf
that wobbles to its feet.
She rises from the copper mine
that blisters in grave heat.

She guides the Flying Doctors' wings
above the flooded streams.
We hear her voice, the high-pitched call
as newborn babies scream.
As the farmer shakes his neighbour's hand,
and thanks him for the loan.
As the miner ends her groundhog shift,
and shares a car ride home.

That's when we see the Warrior rise
against the azure skies.
She lifts her head and spurs us on
with courage to defy.
The fence goes down, the dam depletes,
the crop fails to succeed.
Yet, setbacks in The Curry Land,
mean resilience in us breed.

The Mitakoodi and Pitta Pitta
have seen her magic weave,
embedded in their dreamtime tales,
the badge upon their sleeve.
Oh, Spirit is her common name,
And Outback is her last.
She links us all in this great land,
from current day to past.

Oh Spirit, let us all hold hands
and feel your call to rise.
I'll lift you up and you'll lift me,
with mateship as our prize.

Where the Outback Spirit Lives

Helen Harvey

As the first light of the morning breaks along our Eastern sky,
and a kind breeze stirs the lifeless leaves of Mallee scrub nearby,
then the blinding beams of sunshine flood the landscape with its gold,
till it could not look more lovely garbed in colours bright and bold.

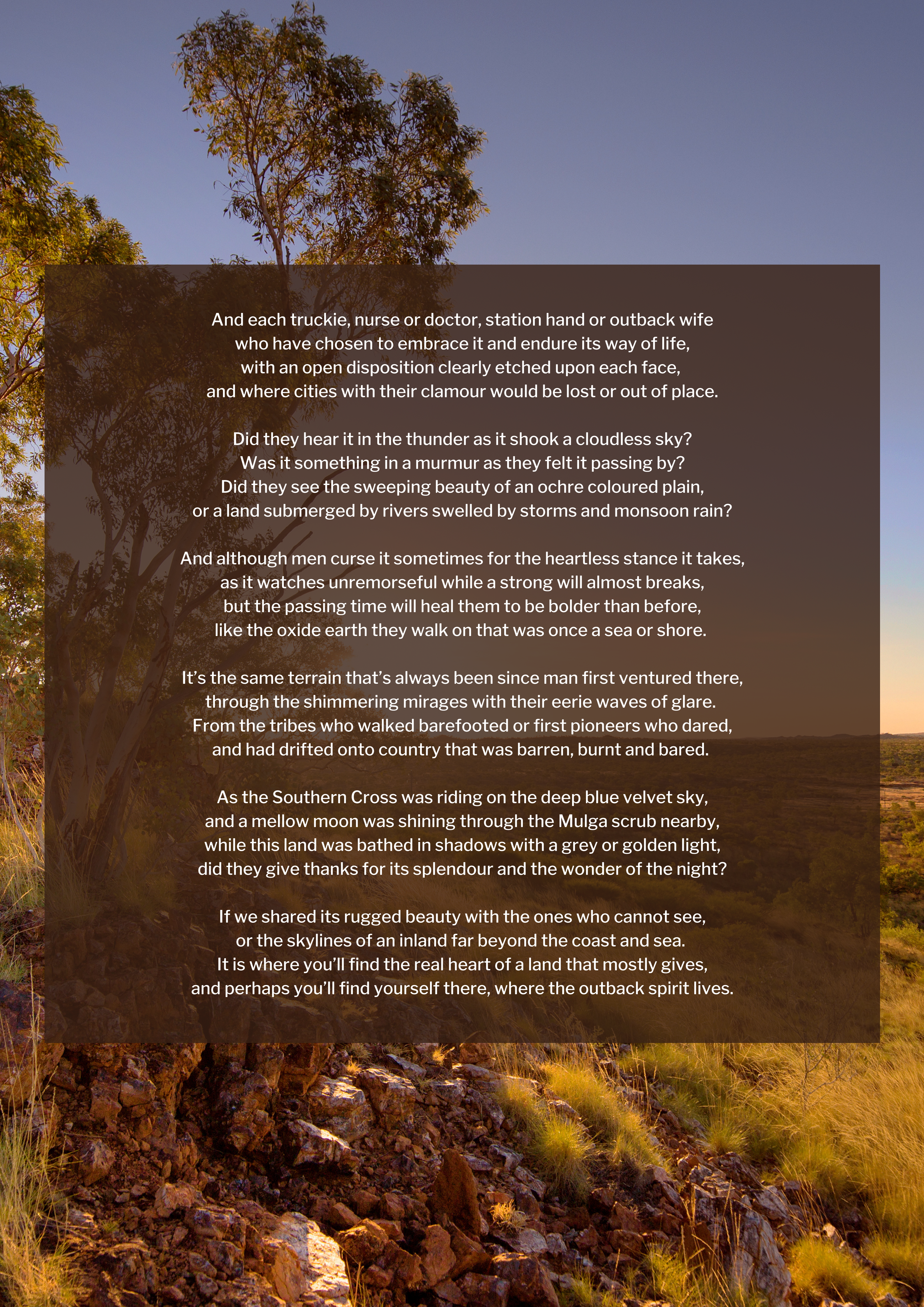
On the red tracks some will follow as they trek toward the west,
which reflect the ochre colours as they travel on their quest.
Like a string line stretched before them that will guide straight as a die,
is the road they know will take them where the outback spirits lie.

You can almost hear it breathing and the strong pulse of its heart,
as it keeps a steady rhythm which can make you feel a part
of an endless land that stretches so afar you cannot see
to the centre of its being with a spirit that roams free.

There are those who cannot hear it as it lures us with a hum,
which entices some to wander out to where they feel the drum
of a heartbeat like no other with a rhythm all its own,
and the life they knew before then had diminished or had flown.

There, the yellow ochre grasses grow in mountains made of stone,
and if signs of life are missing then a man can feel alone.
But there's others who will wander to embrace those endless skies,
for they know that's where their heart is and an outback spirit lies.

You can see it on the faces of the stockmen as they grin;
when the seasons turn against them, they just take it on the chin,
or the miners who must travel back and forth across the land,
for it's in the earth they work on and its worth is in their hand.



And each truckie, nurse or doctor, station hand or outback wife
who have chosen to embrace it and endure its way of life,
with an open disposition clearly etched upon each face,
and where cities with their clamour would be lost or out of place.

Did they hear it in the thunder as it shook a cloudless sky?
Was it something in a murmur as they felt it passing by?
Did they see the sweeping beauty of an ochre coloured plain,
or a land submerged by rivers swelled by storms and monsoon rain?

And although men curse it sometimes for the heartless stance it takes,
as it watches unremorseful while a strong will almost breaks,
but the passing time will heal them to be bolder than before,
like the oxide earth they walk on that was once a sea or shore.

It's the same terrain that's always been since man first ventured there,
through the shimmering mirages with their eerie waves of glare.
From the tribes who walked barefooted or first pioneers who dared,
and had drifted onto country that was barren, burnt and bared.

As the Southern Cross was riding on the deep blue velvet sky,
and a mellow moon was shining through the Mulga scrub nearby,
while this land was bathed in shadows with a grey or golden light,
did they give thanks for its splendour and the wonder of the night?

If we shared its rugged beauty with the ones who cannot see,
or the skylines of an inland far beyond the coast and sea.
It is where you'll find the real heart of a land that mostly gives,
and perhaps you'll find yourself there, where the outback spirit lives.

The Spirit of the Outback

David Judge

‘The Spirit of the Outback’ is a term we often use,
to conjure up an image for our poets and their muse,
to focus on Cloncurry and a million Aussie cents,
in honour of Dame Mary and the traits she represents.
But those who live there understand the Outback is profound,
that having just one Spirit’s not enough to go around.

They span the generations from the Dreamtime until now,
across a sprawling spectrum which we cannot disavow,
and even though we find some that give reason for regret,
we need to recognise them all as pieces of a set.
So where are all those ‘Spirits’ which define that special place,
where endless curved horizons meet the stars in outer space.

We find them in the books we read, of fiction or of fact,
like Mary Durack’s stories or where Davidson had tracked,
with camels and a dog to give some meaning to her life,
as fortunate as Facey with his struggles and his strife.
We also read the gripping tales of Burke and Wills and Eyre,
of Stuart, King and Cunningham, whose courage we can share.

We find them in those paintings on a wall or in a frame,
on Joel Fergie’s water tank, or signed with Chaplain’s name,
depicting Outback images and characters we know,
like ‘Barrack’ and ‘Brianna’ from the Deadly Dancers Show.
We see them in those landscapes from the Namatjira art,
or in a dotted masterpiece and colours from Pro Hart.

We find them where the Kalkadoon are recognised at last,
in ways that understand the hate and horrors of the past,
ensuring that equality is more than poli-speak,
and those who have the where-with-all, provide the things we seek.
There are no simple answers to the challenges we face,
but we can be reminded that there’s just one human race.

We find them in our Outback pubs we know are so unique,
where people from all walks of life mix seven days a week,
from miners, stockmen, truckies to the nomads with their vans,
and kids from all around the world who backpack with no plans.
Referred to as a ‘waterhole’ for those who like a drink,
our Outback pubs are so much more important than you think.

We find them in those shearing sheds that Lawson wrote about,
of ringers, pressers, roustabouts, in times of flood and drought,
and drovers who spent months away from loved ones we all know,
from verses by 'The Banjo' – 'Clancy of the Overflow'.

In recent times we can revere those shearers we applaud,
like 'Daffy', Howe and Elkins who were masters of the board.

We find them in so many places easy to forget,
like rodeos and racetracks where the punters have a bet,
and not just on the horses but on camels from the scrub,
where city folk are entertained with beer and country grub.
We can't forget the Schools and Clubs and places where to stay,
or Festivals, Museums and the local Market Day.

We find them in the wildlife we all treasure as our own,
like things that hop and have a pouch and birds that have not flown,
that stand upon our coat of arms and make it so distinct,
reminding us of how we'd look if they became extinct.

We need to value habitats which have a major role,
maintaining our identity, the Outback's heart and soul.

We find them on a doctor's mind or on a nurse's sleeve,
where patients are remote in places you would not believe,
without the Flying Doctor as those angels in the air,
the Outback would not be the same without their loving care.
The distances are vast and even though they breed 'em tough,
the people of the Outback know, that's sometimes not enough.

We find them in those musos who can play or sing a tune,
with songs that make your feet tap or that see young lovers swoon,
or maybe you're an oldie who remembers days gone by,
and sang aloud with Slim along the road to Gundagai.
Whatever Country Music does, it makes you feel so great,
to be connected to the bush, just like another mate.

And lastly but not in the least, we read poetic verse,
to understand those 'Spirits', which for better or for worse,
are numerous and varied in the ways they symbolise,
those wonders of the Outback which may come as a surprise.

And if the urge to travel bites you on that bit we know,
remember all those 'Spirits' of the Outback when you go.

Where Heroes Abide

Brenda-Joy Pritchard

We've left behind the urban sprawl, traversed the rural lands
to reach the realm of emptiness the bushie understands,
and once again, in Nature's space, we feel our spirits start
attuning with the rhythmic pulse of Outback's beating heart.

The Smoke is but a distant blur, a past now left behind,
as each expansive vista brings a greater peace of mind...
the Mitchell grasses, emus running, eagles flying high,
the trackless landscape stretching out to endless cobalt sky.

We sight the gouged meander trail of dried-out, gum-lined creek
as rustic outcrops shelter mystic secrets that they keep.

The underlying gold and copper casts an ochre hue
on quartz-seamed, rich conglomerates. The Curry comes in view!
It warms the heart to near the hub that was our life support
through all our years of station life, the decades that were fraught
with fire, with storms, with dust and flies in soul-destroying drought –
the ravages of climate's wrath that 'sorts the weaklings out'.

Thank God we'd had the radio to help allay our fears,
the legacy of Traegar's team of network pioneers.
Thank God the Flying Doctor service helped us all to bear
our traumas and anxieties – those 'angels of the air'!
The Flynn Place in Cloncurry pays its tribute to the man –
a visionary of his time, a hero who began
a legacy of medicos and pilots who deserve
each breath of thanks that's given from the far-flung world they serve.

Through times when catastrophic flood depleted land and stock
then only town-based networks helped alleviate the shock.

The fledgling, fragile human links prevented deep despair
from constant trials when lack of rain left paddocks dust-bowl bare.

Then on the day when health and age and debt and lack of kin
meant giving up our station life, the townies took us in
providing hospitality in true blue Aussie style –
the helping hand, the open ear, the sun-lined friendly smile.

And in our new environment we came to understand
how those who lived in clusters shared our passion for the land.
Descendants forged of hardy stock, they played essential parts
towards the station way of life that had consumed our hearts.

Where distance is the nemesis, the outback's crucial code
is selfless co-reliance aimed to ease each other's load.

Co-operation's needed for the region to survive
and services have grown and spread to keep the West alive.

It's been a year since we departed from our town abode –
your need for surgical procedures forced us down that road,
but we were strangers in the city, lost within the throng
while aching for the open space where men like you belong.

For men like you share memories of musters in the dawn,
of campfire glow and star-filled nights where mate-ship ties are born,
that special bond with horses, years of caring for your stock –
the mutual respect that reminiscences unlock.

Frugality, simplicity, fulfilling basic needs
the sense of satisfaction long-enduring hardship breeds.

Necessity will mould a man to struggle, toil and strive
so men like you share values that have helped the west survive.

You followed through traditions built by outback pioneers,
by those intrepid souls who lived in formulative years,
the legendary characters who'd go to any length
to challenge the environment with grit and guts and strength.

In coming back we have returned to where ideals reside,
where history is honoured, where the deeds of men abide,
and here within the vast expanse that skirts our little town
immersed in blaze of colours as the sun is sinking down,
in awe-inspiring atmosphere, both reverent and grand

I consecrate your ashes cast to spirit of the land.

Here where the wind of freedom chants its everlasting song
with heroes who have gone before – you're home where you belong.