

From the Back Verandah

It is my melancholy duty belatedly to inform you that on 19 March, 2001 Charles Kenneth Johnson of California breathed his last. He was 76.

Dwelt on a separate plane, did our C.K. — from the age of eight. “Plane” is right, for he was the president of our beloved International Flat Earth Society.

The IFES, in case you have forgotten, is the direct descendant of the Universal Zetetic Society that began in England in 1832, under the leadership of Sir Birley Rowbotham, and thrived in the 1880s thanks to the heroic efforts of Sir Walter de Sodington Blount. In more recent times the president was Samuel Shenton of Dover, from whom in 1972 the mantle passed to our zealous American friend Charles Johnson and his Australian-born wife Marjory.

Under Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons’ guidance (“the Earth is a disc with the North Pole at the centre”), the Society grew to

nearly 4,000 members, but then two tragedies struck. In 1995 the Johnson house burned down, together with all the Society’s records, and a year later Marjory died.

Today, the IFES membership is no more than a hundred. So what will become of it now?

I hear your pain — but fret not. I feel sure that all of us who heed the authentic truth can have every reason for optimism. Somewhere, somehow, sometime soon someone will take up the sacred torch again, and our loyal band of platygeographers will be able reconstitute ourselves in a manner befitting our illustrious heritage.

In the meantime, please be upstanding and join with me in singing the Society’s anthem, which, as you all remember, begins with these moving words:

Flat, flat, flat
is the contour
of my true Earth’s face.

— Fizzgig

BIKWIL

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No Marriage or Deed Poll, but a Name Change Anyway

How many of you noticed that as from the last issue *Bikwil* has been sporting a new subtitle?

So why the change after five years from *The Newsletter of Quiet Enthusiasms*?

Well, when I began, I fully expected that *Bikwil* would remain a small undertaking. And that's why I chose the word *newsletter*. But really it's never been a newsletter. News, in fact, has been conspicuously absent.

When I put it on the Internet, I soon realised what a misnomer that *newsletter* business was.

But how to subtitle *Bikwil*?

Certainly not as a *journal* — if I called it that, I'd be derided for high-falutination quick smart.

Not as a *periodical*, surely — a lifeless term, I reckon. A word that in all my years of working in a major library I hardly ever saw used in subtitles.

The Bimonthly of . . .? Somehow I don't think so.

Roget remaining serenely uncooperative on the matter, for better or worse, then, *Bikwil* is now *The Magazine of . . .*

Colophon

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Back Issues Are Still Available

To you I'm an atheist; to God, I'm the Loyal Opposition.
Woody Allen

*The less I behave like Whistler's mother the night before,
the more I look like her the morning after.*
Tallulah Bankhead

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

Edith Sitwell? I am fairly unrepentant about her poetry. I really think that three quarters of it is gibberish. However, I must crush down these thoughts, otherwise the dove of peace will shit on me.
Noel Coward

*Tell your boss what you think of him,
and the truth shall set you free.*
Anonymous

*Reminds me of my safari days in Africa.
Somebody forgot the corkscrew and for
several days we had to live on nothing
but bread and water.-*
W. C. Fields

expression. Music can say it better. In rare moments I've had a strange experience where "it", whatever "it" is, is known absolutely. Everything comes together. I feel I know what it's all about. I feel I've touched the heart of the mystery. But the moment goes and what I thought I knew goes with it.

I believe in the nature-nurture connection. I'm part of nature. When I die I hope my nature is the nurture of some new being. I say it in my poem *Cliff Walk*.

TR: Years ago you told me, "I'd like to live forever — I want to see how it all turns out". Does that still hold true?

BB: The opposite of it, of course, is the reality. I won't live forever. I won't see how it all turns out. But in moments of euphoria and optimism I'd probably say it again. Let me tell you about another statement I heard years before you heard mine. A child was asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and the child replied, "Everything!" The feeling of exuberance, the joy of being alive, the enthusiasm and the hope that that child expressed in

one word, I'd like to think I expressed in mine.

I have dreams and hopes. I'd like to be around to see people reconciled, to see people at peace with one another and the planet. I'd like us to find difference interesting rather than being afraid of it. I'd like us to care more for each other and practise co-operation. There are people already trying hard to live this way, while others are trying just as hard to go in the opposite direction. So much of what we see and hear daily on television and radio is ambiguous and horrifying. We're told things are getting better but the pictures tell the opposite story. Like the poet Robert D. Fitzgerald who regretted he wouldn't be around to stand on Mars, I regret I won't be around to see my hopes fulfilled. But I'll keep on hoping and get on with the life I have for however long I have it.

Like I said, living, despite the aches and pains, is a wonderful experience. I'd like to make some contribution. At the end of my life I don't want to ask as plaintively as Peggy Lee sings, "Is that all there is?"

The Aussie Hunter

When I was working a real job, years ago, instead of trying to be something as nebulous as a "writer", I asked a coworker who he thought the nicest people were. You see, he was in the U.S. Navy for two years and travelled all over the world.

"Australians," he replied without hesitating.

"Really. I thought they were kind of loony, from baking their heads in the sun all day."

"No. They're just like in the TV commercials, where they say, 'We'll throw another shrimp on the barbie for you.'"

"Really," I replied again, more as a statement than a question. I told you I was a writer, such a gift I had.

"They're very friendly. When you go to a bar, they buy you drinks and act like they've known you a long time." Neil spent a lot of time at the bars. Someone buying him a drink would be a big thing. I wonder if he took the trouble to see anything else, like say, The Sydney Opera House.

I always remembered that conversation for some reason, possibly because nothing exciting ever happened to me. When I got a chance to travel for an article I decided to head Down Under.

As I strolled down a busy street in Sydney upon arrival I marveled at the people I saw. The women were very nice indeed. I thought about moving instantly.

I saw someone reading a magazine, *Bikwil* it was called.

"Excuse me, sir, what is a 'Bikwil'," I asked politely.

"Oh, you're a Yank are you?"

"Yes, how could you tell?" I decided to test this Aussie lad.

"It was just a wild guess. Anyway, Australians are not allowed to tell foreigners any of our state secrets." He went back to reading his magazine.

“And what if I’d put on an Australian accent when I’d met you?” I said in my best Aussie accent.

“That’s Scottish, you twit. Now go away.”

This guy was good, really good. I had to admit failure. I went off again in search of prey.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” I said in my most courteous voice to a lady in her sixties. “Would you say most Australians wrestle alligators at some point in their lives?”

“I wouldn’t know, son, I’m from Brisbane originally.”

“Is that bad?”

“It’s not really living there. It’s more like a constant state of hell. The only things to eat are breaded dragons. Cannibalism is on the rise.” She made a face that said “don’t tell anyone”.

“Don’t you mean ‘bearded dragons’?” I asked politely.

“I like them breaded, actually.”

“How do they taste?”

“Blah,” she said and spat on the sidewalk, some of which hit my shoe. “Sorry.”

“How about buying me a drink?” I asked, trying another tactic.

She stepped back and looked me up and down.

“I’m feeling hungry, mister. You best be on your way. I still have some bad habits I picked up in Brisbane.”

Not wanting to stretch my luck, I decided to press on. I had time for one more interview before I had to go to the airport (it was a short vacation). I saw a tall, blonde looking in a shop window.

“What are you looking at?”

She kept looking at the window, but could see me in the glass’s reflection.

“Not much,” she replied.

Hurt, I decided to retreat.

“Come back. I was only kidding.”

ahead. But something humorous that lets me laugh at myself and that I can share with others, well, that’s a tonic.

If I didn’t have humour, and music and poetry and nature and my family and close friends in my life, I might as well be pushing up daisies or a gum tree.

TR: Are you religious?

BB: In the strict sense of the word, Tony, I’d have to say “No”. I don’t belong to any faith. I don’t go to church and I was never christened. But I was brought up to follow the Christian principles of helping neighbours, doing unto others, respecting others and believing thou shalt not kill, commit adultery, steal and so on. I went to Sunday School, too. In fact I tried out most of the Protestant churches in New Lambton, and I remember going to choir practice in a city church in Newcastle.

At High School we had a period for religious instruction held in the Assembly Hall. I remember vividly one day the Minister taking the class said, “Stand up all those girls who are

Christians.” Every girl except me stood up. I got some strange looks and my face burned. But in conscience I couldn’t have stood up and appeared to be something I wasn’t.

That happening must have stirred me to think about my religious identity or lack of it. But I didn’t do anything serious about it, like getting christened or joining a church. I was in my early teens. The world was at war and such terrible things were happening. I thought a lot about life and death and souls and wondered as I always had, what it was all about. I still had a notion of God or a supreme being or a force. Some of my early poems reflect these thoughts. At some stage I thought of myself as an agnostic without really understanding what the word meant. Later when I studied Philosophy for three years for my degree and did another year of it in Aesthetics, that shaped my thinking and the way I conduct my life.

I feel that life, the universe and how it all began is a mystery. I’m part of it. Living, being is a wonderful experience. I can’t give it adequate

Meet a Quiet Enthusiast

[No.1: A Conversation with Bet Briggs]

[This concludes an interview *Bikwil* began in Issue 31 (May 2002).]

Tony Rogers: Do you think it would be true to say that you are essentially a people person?

Bet Briggs: I've never thought of myself as a people person really. I do like to be with people I care about and love. And it's always good to be able to share pleasures and confidences with a friend. Generally I don't feel comfortable in large groups of people, especially huge crowds. I avoid them if I can. The only times I'll join one — and even then it's not easy — is if it's for a cause I feel very strongly about.

Years ago I marched with other like-minded people against our participation in the Vietnam War and against Apartheid in South Africa. And recently I walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of Aboriginal Reconciliation. That was quite an uplifting experience.

The mood of the people and the goodwill among us was palpable. I felt good in myself about being part of it.

I suppose I could sum your question up by saying I like and love many people as individuals, but I'm also a bit of a loner, too, and I love solitude. It gives me time to think and reflect and try to keep myself together.

And I need it to write.

TR: What part does the humorous play in your life?

BB: Humour, like music and the beauty of nature, helps me keep balance in my inner life, helps me maintain a sense of proportion about me and the world out there, especially when I feel dispirited. And I do feel that way more often, now that I'm closer to the end of my life than I am to the beginning. Old anxieties surface — unresolved anguish I call them — and I can't know what new ones are

"You know, that's my name."

"What, 'come back'?"

"No, Kidd."

"But I said 'kidding'."

"Well, I was cutting corners," I replied, wondering if she'd catch the joke.

"I'm not going to sleep with you. I'd really, really like to, though."

"Why not?" Even though the thought hadn't crossed my mind, I was still hurt at the rejection.

"I'll not have you Scots thinking all Australian women are tramps, even though quite a few from Brisbane are."

"I'm heading there next," I lied.

"Then I'd recommend not bathing for a few days beforehand. The worse you smell, the less chance you have of being someone's lunch."

"Brisbane must be awful."

"Oh, it is. But the worst place in Australia is called 'North Rocks'. Don't ever go there!"

She wouldn't tell me why North Rocks was so bad. She ran away hysterically when I tried to ask her.

I headed toward the airport for my flight home. As the plane lifted off the ground I thought about the people I'd met. They were weird all right, but a lot like me. I could feel at home here. I decided I would come back again. I settled in for a nap, but just as I was becoming comfortable, the Captain's voice came over the speakers.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news, and some good news. The good news is, we are having some technical difficulties and have to make an unplanned landing for repairs. The bad news is, we're landing in Brisbane. I suggest all passengers grab whatever foul-smelling substances are around and rub them on yourselves. It's nearly dinner time in Brisbane, need I say any more?"

I only had time to grab some Vegemite and begin smearing it on my face. I could only hope it would be enough.

— Don Kidd

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

It was Sir Les Patterson, on *Barry Humphries' Flashbacks* (a 1999 TV series about recent decades in Australian life), who made the memorable announcement that “one of the big buzzwords in the eighties was ‘buzzwords’”. But he wasn’t the first to utter this one-liner, as this quotation in *OED2* shows:

1980 *Time* 28 Jan. 90/1 The air is thick with devalued buzz words, including “buzz words”.

A *buzzword*, of course, is a currently fashionable jargonesque catchword, “used more to impress than inform” (*OED2*). And yes, buzzwords *were* rife in the 1970s and 80s, so much so that several types of “buzzword generators” soon appeared. More of which in a sec, but first a bit on the word *jargon*.

Did you know that until the 15th century *jargon* meant “the inarticulate utterance of birds, or a vocal sound resembling it; twittering, chattering”? (*OED2*). Later it took on the general and sardonic sense of “unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing”, which just about sums up a lot of modern jargon usage too, though the *OED* is characteristically more precise:

Applied contemptuously to any mode of speech abounding in unfamiliar terms, or peculiar to a particular set of persons, as the language of scholars or

philosophers, the terminology of a science or art, or the cant of a class, sect, trade, or profession.

Some lines of work are notorious for their jargon, aren’t they? Computing, the military, business management, sociology, to name just four. Lovely utterances like these:

information superhighway
collateral damage
downsizing
antifoundationalist.

I’m very partial to the jargon of sociology, and in a later issue I’ll bring you a few really preposterous gems. Meanwhile, here is part of a well-known buzzword generator from the business management field:

integrated	management	concept
total	digital	options
parallel	incremental	capability
balanced	reciprocal	paradigm
functional	organisational	policy

All you have to do with a buzzword generator is to select one word from each column at random and string them together (e.g. *parallel + management + paradigm*). Immediately you’ll have a bombinating catchphrase with which to sizzle the ears of all and sundry. With any luck, it’ll mean nothing, and therefore you’ll be all the more likely to impress the trusting uninitiated.

— Harlish Goop

swollen. She loved her husband she said and would not leave him; she would leave Longbourn instead.

For a while afterwards everyone was amazingly kind to me, especially Eurydice. I do not know whether she felt responsible because Mrs Bushell was her cousin, but for whatever reason she devoted a great deal of time to me, teaching me all sorts of songs and riddles and bits of verse as well as how to sew samplers and say my prayers — things I had not the least trouble learning whilst ever she was my teacher. (I could recite the whole of the twenty-third psalm before I was four.)

Papa too was very kind. He would take down a picture book and sit me on his knee and I would perch there, stiff and shy, until the ordeal was over. He saw that I was afraid of him of course but then at that time I was afraid of all men.

I was also frightened of raised voices and sudden movements, and it was now that my sister Jane (dear Jane!) saw that music calmed me. She herself was only eight years old but already acutely aware of the feelings and

needs of others. She would have me sit on a little stool beside the pianoforte as she practised and wonderfully soothing I found it to watch her sweet face frowning over the keyboard and listen to the melody however imperfectly executed. (Elizabeth would also let me sit by her, but would shush me if I hummed a bar in accompaniment.)

It was at this time too that I learned to read, although here my progress was disappointingly slow because of my poor eyesight — I did not begin wearing spectacles until I was six — and also because I was being taught not by Eurydice but by a young curate, Mr John Knowles, recommended to Mama by the then tenant of Netherfield Park.

I still had not the least trouble learning by heart however-- poetry or prose, songs or sermons. Putting together this storehouse of carefully arranged words in my head gave me immense pleasure — words which could be unpacked whenever I felt afraid or uncertain. No matter if they became stale; they were predictable and therefore safe.

— Jennifer Paynter

Mama and Papa greeted the arrival of a fourth daughter with amazing fortitude. In the months before the birth Papa had forbidden any talk of Gordon Gardiner or the buying of blue baby linen, but at the same time he was more patient with Mama, taking care not to provoke her. He even made her the odd present, notably a small gold brooch of two doves set in a circle of seed pearls. But most importantly, Elizabeth was now judged old enough to be taught by the Lucases' governess and was no longer always underfoot in Papa's library.

Kitty was a sickly fretful baby however and soon Mama's nerves were being torn to shreds by her constant crying. Once again Mrs Bushell's services were called on, only this time Mama did not wish her infant daughter to be living quite apart from the rest of the family. Arrangements were made for Mrs Bushell to be installed in a farm cottage on the Longbourn estate — together with her husband and two small children.

And now alas I come to a time I remember all too clearly though I was not quite three years old. With Jane and

Elizabeth spending the best part of every day at the Lucases, it was decided I should accompany Kitty to Mrs Bushell's. I remember Mama telling me what a treat was in store for me, what fun I should have playing with little Peter Bushell and how much I should enjoy helping Mrs Bushell care for my baby sister.

Listening to Mama, I remember of a sudden finding it impossible to draw breath. Later, I recall waking in the darkened nursery with Eurydice Morton tiptoeing in holding a lamp. Eurydice told me that I had held my breath until I was blue in the face and that they were all very concerned about me. "Why do you not wish to go to Shushy, Mary?" (Shushy was my name for Mrs Bushell.) "She is so fond of you, you know, and you will be able to make pets of all the farm animals."

Eventually of course it all came out. Mrs Bushell was unable to conceal her husband's drunken outbreaks and Kitty had not been in her care a month when Mrs Bushell herself confessed the whole to my father. I vividly recall watching her walk out of Papa's library, holding her infant son, her face bruised and

Rawleaf

A Visit

I was napping when the doorbell rang. I nap at odd hours. What had I been dreaming about? I stumbled to the door. "I'm so sorry to trouble you when you're busy . . ." What was she selling? Milk? Insurance? Housekeeping services? Home renovation? "Busy's the word," I snapped, pulling the door shut. In my heart I am kind, gentle and charitable, but my exterior is a nasty bit of business, gruff, curt, anti-social. A middle-aged man living alone with no occupation — I will qualify that in due course — tends to acquire those outward signs of social disengagement. What am I doing, you ask, in Nectar, of all places? I should be living in a forest or mountain hut, with bears and wolves for company. Well, I'm in Nectar precisely because I don't know how to cope with bears and wolves.

Something was wrong. Something was missing. Of course: the sound of retreating footsteps. I tiptoed into the living room, moved the drawn curtain a

fraction of an inch, and peeked outside. She was still there, staring numbly at the shut door — a young woman, with milk-white lightly freckled skin and soft chestnut hair, shoulder-length, not strikingly pretty, not strikingly the reverse either. I remembered my dream, vaguely: I had given a speech and was being lustily applauded. I went back to the door and opened it. She gasped, stammered an apology, broke off in mid-sentence and gaped at me, her eyes wide with terror. They were blue. "Well, come in," I said. "Come in. You're selling something? Struggling to feed hungry children? Husband drinks, and a gambler besides? I know, I understand. Come in and tell me what you're selling."

"N-natural food health drinks," she stammered.

"Do you stammer naturally, or is it because you're afraid of me?"

Her self-possession was returning. "Why should I be afraid of you?"

I laughed. “Well, young women have been known to experience a twinge of fear at the proximity of an eccentric old man, sometimes with reason. In this case, not. Natural food health drinks. Take a good look at me now. How old would you say I am?”

“I’m sorry to have troubled you. I think I’d better go.”

“Nonsense. You shouldn’t have come, but since you’re here, step in. Would you like some hot milk?”

“Hot milk?”

“I was just about to fix myself some. I always nap between twelve-thirty and one-fifteen, and when I get up I have hot milk. Even on the hottest days, of which today, I know, is one. Hot and sticky. Global warming. I was reading of it this morning in the paper. Does the prospect alarm you? I probably won’t live to see the disasters in store for us, but you might, and your children certainly will.”

I turned and walked into the kitchen, quite confident that she would follow, as indeed she did. I took a carton of milk from the fridge, measured out two cups, poured the milk into a pot, and switched on the fire. “Sit.” The

kitchen table was a mess of books, papers, notebooks; I had been working that morning. “Just ignore the rubble. Seriously. How old do I look to you?”

“Forty?”

“Fifty-five. Never been sick a day in my life. All through my childhood, more than anything in the world, I wanted to be sick, have a fever, stay home from school, be fussed over by my mother . . . never. Not once. I even prayed to God: ‘Dear God, please make me ill so that I may know the joys of convalescence . . .’ Hm. Natural health food drinks. Are their health-giving properties general, or specific to this or that condition?”

Her eyes surveyed the room. “Do you live alone here?”

“Oh yes, quite. You needn’t worry. No one will disturb us. How old are you, may I ask?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Married?”

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Are you deeply in love?”

She blushed and smiled. She lowered her eyes. “Yes, I think so.”

Mary Bennet

2

Instead of the longed for son and heir then, the Bennets had been burdened with yet another daughter. Mama was stupefied. What had she done to deserve such a *bouleversement*? She found it impossible to look on me, to hold me, without weeping. My father was more philosophical. “You will bear me a son eventually my dear, depend upon it. And if you do not I can always divorce you, you know. Like King Henry the Eighth.”

I’m told Papa made these sorts of remarks more often after I was born. He had always enjoyed teasing Mama but hitherto his jokes had been good humoured. Mama of course was incapable of laughing at herself even at the best of times — a failing Elizabeth believes I have inherited. So now tears and hysterics became the rule at Longbourn, my father spent more time than ever in his library and the Bennets could no longer pass for a happy couple.

When I was about a month old my father’s old friends, Mama’s nerves, took a hand in my fate. Out of consideration for them I was farmed out to a wet-nurse, one Mrs Bushell, a cousin of Eurydice Morton who lived in Meryton. I confess I still feel extremely angry about this. For one thing it had never been the way of the Bennet family to engage wet-nurses: Jane and Elizabeth had both been suckled by Mama. But that aside, Mrs Bushell’s husband was a bully and a drunkard and although his wife was a decent conscientious woman she was not always able to check him.

Of course none of this was known at Longbourn at the time, and after I was weaned at the age of six months I still remained with Mrs Bushell. And although I visited at Longbourn regularly I did not actually return there to live until I was nearly two years old — by which time Mama was once more in an interesting condition.

I have no memory of Kitty’s birth but Lady Lucas says both

Web

For the past six months *Bikwil's* Web site has been availing itself of the popular Atomz search facility. Here is a summary of how our visitors have been using it.

Based on the reports Atomz provides me, I have to confess that fewer visitors are exploiting its advantages than I'd expected.

Why? Well, it's my belief that first-time visitors to our site are of two types: (a) those looking for an electronic magazine to subscribe and/or contribute to, and (b) those wanting material on specific subjects, to which they are pointed directly by the hundreds of entries to *Bikwil* in the Internet-wide search engines.

Of the searches that do get done at *Bikwil*, however, some intriguing info about the interests of those performing them can be deduced.



Line

As often as not, the interesting thing is what people are searching for and *not* finding.

One category includes newsy or controversial subjects like

Tampa
Kim Hollingsworth
Big Brother.

Such topics would — if I may be so presumptuous — lie well beyond *Bikwil's* sphere of influence.

On the other hand, a second group of “failed terms” being searched on might well serve as jumping-off points to inspire *Bikwil* contributors to more daring feats of enthusiastic writing. A short selection follows:

Christina Rossetti
Emily Dickinson
Byzantium
I Love a Sunburnt Country.

So, thinking caps on, everyone!

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.bikwil.zip.com.au/SiteSearch.html>
<http://search.atomz.com/search/>

“Good, good. Splendid. I was deeply in love myself once. Would you like to hear the story?”

She stood up. “Look, I’m sorry, but I’m supposed to be working, you know?” She gave a self-conscious little laugh, either at the idea of working, or at being in what must have struck her as an absurd, if not frightening, situation.

“The milk's ready. Here, you can have the cup with the whistle. It's the cup I drank hot milk out of as a child. The whistle doesn't whistle anymore, but to this day, I can close my eyes and hear the sound it used to make. This, you see, is my childhood home. I inherited it when my parents died. I'm an orphan, but I'm well housed.”

A Tree

You will naturally suppose that we proceeded, having got to know one another over our milk, to sport on my childhood bed. No, reader, no. It all passed off quite innocently. She admitted that, to her surprise, hot milk was indeed a fine refreshment on a hot day. She stood up, wiped her milk-stained lips with the back of

her hand, smiled, thanked me, and bid me good-bye. I saw her to the door . . .

“Adios, senorita,” I said in my courtly way. With that, I went back to work. Back to my kitchen table.

My work. What work? The work of an independently wealthy man, for such is my occupation: independently wealthy man. I live off my parents' fortune while guarding and protecting it. Well, to make no further bones about it, I am the writer Jason Rawleaf. The *unknown* writer Jason Rawleaf. My published works number two: a short story written in college, and an essay written some years afterward. The story appeared in *Canadian Fiction Quarterly*, now defunct some quarter of a century. The essay you will find in the September 1973 issue of *Epoch* magazine. I will not suggest that you consult it, for editorial revision turned it into an object of shame and disgrace for me. I thought, Well, if that's how it is, I will publish no more. And, true to my word, I haven't, though I have written voluminously. Why? Why, because it is my calling to write.

A frequent subject of meditation is, should I burn my writings

before I die, or should I leave them to be discovered by the god of all failed writers, Posterity? I can't seem to make up my mind one way or the other, except temporarily, for at moments I am very decisive indeed: I *will* burn them; I *will* leave them. How do people in the outside world make decisions? I swear, I am incapable of it, and there have been times when I have gone without dinner, unable to decide between an omelet and a tuna sandwich.

I go out three mornings a week, my destination always the same: the Feinberg Provisions shop on Golda Meir Avenue. That's four blocks from my ancestral home on Maharal. (It seems to me that if I were a young couple in the market for a house, the last house I would choose would be one situated on Maharal Crescent, but my young parents obviously thought differently, if they thought at all. Neither had had a particularly Jewish upbringing, and it's quite possible Maharal had no significance for them. I didn't have much of a Jewish upbringing either, of course, but a lifelong compulsive reader like me picks up this and that, here and there.)

The Feinberg Provisions shop on Golda Meir Avenue, then, is my thrice weekly matinal destination. A bell tinkles when you open the door. There I stock up on such necessities as canned tuna, salami, eggs, bread, lettuce, tomatoes, milk, coffee and so on. Milk I buy in quantity, for I make my own yogurt. It's quite simple: you merely skim off a teaspoonful of yesterday's yogurt and mix it with a carton of warm milk. You let it stand overnight, and in the morning you wake up and admire the bacteria's handiwork.

Mr. Feinberg and I have what you might call a bit of a friendship. He is a man of about my own age, though I look younger than my years and he looks older. We have common interests: in, for example, the question of suffering. Mr. Feinburg, behind his innocuous white apron and his foolish avuncular smile, is a well of secret suffering. His eldest son died in a car accident. His wife has cancer. His mother died when he was a child; his father, ancient and senile, lives still, and threatens to go on living forever. He is a resident at the Albert Einstein geriatric home on Parklawn, just behind the store. Every day Mr. Feinberg goes to visit his

I watched the embers
and thought of a song
heard once in choir;
now, like a prayer
I heard again men sing
"The long day closes."

When I am gone
I will not see
or hear as then
those tender beauties:
a solitary sail,
the feathered dancers,
moon serene above the sea,
light soft as lace in grace
unfolding,
song remembered and the voices
singing.

As my day closes
I will be part of them,
an element of elements,
a particle of light,
a tonal bud
for some new
flowering.

A moment so delicate
I could not speak of it,
that leaping beyond self.
The unspeakable remains
within to be recollected
in another moment
of tranquillity.

Our cliff walk ended then.
From The Gap we turned
away from sea and moon
and scanned the harbour shoreline
from city north to city south
and the Bridge between,
symphonic curve and sweep,
an arc of tensions frosted
with unblinking light:
tower windows, signs
pale blue and red,
far more of ghostly white.

Distant on the city's fringe
the west was still on fire
and high over all the towers
and neon's eerie glaze
the limpid sky becoming
between moonrise and sunclose
a watercolour rainbow
colours melding, drifting
down and deeper down
deepening into the burning west
burnt sienna burning down
to charcoal cloud
and the fire slowly died.

father — who of course doesn't
know him — ready if necessary
to perform in perpetuity the rites
of sonship.

His endurance fascinates me.
Not only his endurance — his
cheerful endurance. Slicing sa-
lami seems to give him genuine
pleasure. I can't fathom it.
Mocked by the fates as he is, why
doesn't he put an end to it? Is he
too dull to feel despair? Or too
intelligent? "Mendl," I once said
to him, "Mendl, don't you see
how miserable you are?" It was a
tactless remark that slipped out
before I had time to repress it.
But he was not offended. He
smiled. How can a man with bad
teeth have a beautiful smile? He
does. And he said, "I am alive in
God's world. How can you talk
of misery?"

"I don't understand," I said.

He grew excited. "Come here,
come with me." He took me by
the arm and led me outside.
Across the street was a little park,
and in the park was a tree, don't
ask me what kind, that was just
then sprouting new leaves. He
pointed at the tree. He said
nothing, and I, puzzled at first,
realized at last that the tree, the
tree was his answer. All right,
yes, I see the point, the beauty of

nature. There are men, I know,
for whom the beauty of nature is
an answer to all despair, all scep-
ticism.

"Mendl," I said, "did you read
the newspaper this morning?"

"I read it."

"Then you know about the
earthquake in India? Tens of
thousands dead?"

He lowered his eyes. He under-
stood me very well.

"And about the starvation in
Afghanistan? The genocide in
Yugoslavia? The famine in North
Korea? The AIDS in Africa? The
persecuted minorities in China?
You know about all this?"

"I know, I know."

"You know. And your answer
is . . . a tree?"

He raised his eyes to me and
smiled. I wish I could describe
his smile. Don't they have den-
tists where he comes from? But
he comes from right here; he's a
native. He smiled, and said, "Yes.
My answer is a tree."

— Michael Hoffman

[Part of a linked series of short
stories entitled *The Nectar Chroni-
cles*, set in the imaginary suburb of
Nectar, to be published in 2003.]

Cliff Walk

On winter's shortest day
 in June at moonrise
 over sea and Watson's Bay,
 we tracked the sea-wind-sculpted cliffs
 and looked for northbound whales,
 but saw no sign, no swirl,
 no curving rise and fall
 of form so loving of the water.
 No gentle whale.
 Another year perhaps.
 Yet to us appeared
 a gift of sweet surprises:

 there, off North Head,
 silent, soft and still,
 like a pale fin
 unmoving on moving water:
 one small sail
 as gentle and inseparable
 as whale from wave and wind;

 rarer still to needing eyes,
 almost within reach:
 a tiny miracle
 twinkling along the path,
 a dance of wrens
 too quickly come and gone
 from bushes at cliff's edge
 and back to bush again.

As though their going were a sign,
 in consolation for their loss,
 like a caress, the moon
 almost full and fully risen
 cast its net of light
 on shadowlands of ocean
 and into deeper reaches still:
 its tender trawling
 held us both enthralled
 and quiet in our own thought.

I was caught
 for a moment at The Gap
 feeling I could leap
 without falling, step
 with lightest step, up
 and up that ribbon of light
 and walk on the moon
 as a friend
 leaving nothing there:
 no claim to violate
 its peace, pollute
 and make unclean
 its feature, cloud its air,
 disturb its broad sea
 of tranquillity.