

ARCHIE'S
WORDS

by

John Hepher

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For Leola.

ARCHIE'S WORDS

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END OF TERM. END OF YEAR.

End of life.

The day I, Archie Baldwin, had unconsciously worked toward, for forty-four years. And it had come. That day when society says you have done your bit, there are others waiting to do theirs, move over old man. Relax; your time of leisure beckons.

Did I want it to end like this? No. But as it had, and as my end would be a beginning for a new young teacher such as I had been forty-four years ago, my attitude was one of pragmatism.

I have worked hard for it. I deserve it. Take it and blend forever into a background of beige, there's a good little retiree.

The golf course, Grey Nomadia.

Pasture.

Was I *really* ready for this retirement? Would anybody have been ready for it? I wondered again, and if it could be that they thought they *were* ready for it, this retirement thing, were they really?

I was not.

A picture, solidifying in the photographic developing tray of my mind's eye, was emerging: Constable-esque. Reminiscent of the masterpiece, 'The Hay Wain', in its style and light, I imagined a picture of an old white horse lit by a ray of sunshine, standing by a stream in the shade of an ancient apple tree with a solitary wind-falling Granny Smith, captured. Still. Not yet to the ground, and in mid fall, whizzing past the ear of the old, white, equine Isaac Newton.

But it is curious that Constable's picture, 'The Hay Wain' is incorrect. I learned when I researched the painting many years ago that John Constable included the wain (a hay cart), crossing a stream, as an afterthought, and Constable asked a local artist to send him sketches of such a vehicle, the local artist got it wrong, and the vehicle that was finally painted was in fact, a log wagon. A jinker.

A metaphor?

Yes, maybe a metaphor. The apple had, so the story goes, actually hit the human Isaac Newton on the head, promoting his thoughts and investigations of gravity. The old white horse? He had been spared the missile and

grazed on oblivious.

The classroom was empty; my year eleven English class had departed, not to be seen in this playground, this library, this classroom, again. Not until they became somebody else's year twelve responsibility. Someone else's set of pubescent mixed metaphors. The empty classroom was still reverberating, or it might have been my head, to the fading whoops and hollers of the final period of the suburban academic year. The heads of the tall and sinewy students passed the window in full view, the shorter ones? They went by un-noticed, under the window sill. I, Archie Balwyn, was average height; I had, of course, passed under most window sills since my own high school days. Beyond the window, the bicycle racks, the car park, the playground, were all spewing the outgoing tide of apprentice humanity towards Christmas, towards family holidays.

The long break. The heady days of teenage summer. The eels and yabbies in Warby's Creek, the skinny-dipping in the Woolwash.

This long break for me was, I realised, final. Terminal. There would be no return after Australia Day, to the hubbub of next years' challenges.

And next years' challenges?

Same really for every next year's challenge for the past almost half century. Forty-four next years' challenges. I had been at this, my only posting, since graduating

university, for nearly the entire life of the school. I had seen many students and staff come and go. Only one other, Mrs Little, (Violet) whose husband had died last year, had been dedicated to Campbelltown High School for as long.

Mrs Little, (no upper case), (Violet), (upper case), had been Miss Hughes, (Violet), when she and I had met on our mutual first day. And so too, the school itself had evolved from being a normal, unremarkable suburban high school to one of the new breed of educational facilities, the Performing Arts High School, and I was proud that I *had* had a small influence over that particular evolution. An evolution which had seen the school transmogrify from a trajectory for boys towards industrial and commercial subjects, and for girls, secretarial, and what they called 'home economics', a euphemism for instruction into how to be a wife and mother.

Do wives and mothers have sex? Nobody seemed to know. And the Mother-Daughter, Father-Son nights held at the school in the early years only seemed to add to the confusion. And to be a wife and mother? That, in those days, seemed to be the more important pathway. The secretarial? A mere stepping stone, a gap-filler. Between school, and wife and motherhood.

The school metamorphosed into what some referred to as arty-farty. Creative? A useless, unprofitable excuse for those who didn't want to work. Or so said a large

percentage of the stolid population, those who had never put pen to paper, or brush to canvas. Or chisel to stone.

Or had held a drumstick, or tuned a guitar. Or had spoken the words of a playwright on stage.

I was part of the committee that oversaw appeals and correspondence to the departmental bureaucrats and a succession of ministers in the debate as to whether this school should change its focus more towards the arts.

There were whispered rumours, many years ago, of Miss Hughes (Violet) becoming Mrs Balwyn. Until Mr Little, (Barnaby), (no upper case), a local accountant put paid to those. And I continued on.

Continued on, just me.

Was I lonely?

Sometimes, but I always had my books, and my words.

And now? There would be no more teachers, no more students. It was yet to sink in. Just as it had been for my entire life, things had happened in a natural order that I was simply not prepared for. I, of course, knew this day would come. I, of course had forgotten, or put out of my mind, this day's arrival. And now it was here.

It had snuck up.

From habit, I cleared the blackboard (which had been painted green some years ago for some obscure reason of it being sympathetic to sight or something). I wiped the board clean, of the final lesson. And, this too would be the end for the green blackboard. No doubt it too was

earmarked for demise. Relegated to landfill. How I had held onto his chalk, felt duster (eraser, yes, felt surface backed with a block of wood), and blackboard technology, in this age of digital, was much to do with my tenacity, stubbornness. And I had managed to secure the same classroom for many years. It reflected some respect successive headmasters had shown me. It was all whiteboards and marker pens, or digital screens and projectors and PowerPoint presentations these days. And my blackboard, chalk and duster, would be retired with me. The renovators would be in during the Christmas holidays and renovate. My blackboard, the last fragment of me and my dinosaurs, would be extinct.

My final lesson, my whole life, reduced to a cloud of chalk dust. And I wondered that the only transigent (was that the opposite of intransigent?) thing in life, was language; knowledge. And yes, the knowledge of the English language, as far as I could see, was in fact, something like the fluidity of compromise, it is an evolution, despite my protestations of the rules of the English language being broken by this current evolution.

An evolution which was moving as ever more rapidly, as technology. And technology too was a catalyst for this evolution. And, with advances in technology, I realised, more new words and applications to the language were forthcoming. But still, I could not validate American spelling. Yes, thought I, the word honour is spelt with a

U, despite spell check underlining it with a red squiggly line.

And to call a zed a zee!

Someone may someday remember my words on a blackboard in chalk. Some spelt with a U, and no red squiggly line. Archie Balwyn's words now reduced to dust. Every one of my blackboard words, forty-four years of words, the words of others, and my own words, were no more. Did it really matter? They were, after all, just words. Dinosaur words.

No emojis here thank you very much. But there probably will be now, now that I am no longer here. And too, there were issues that I was glad to be leaving behind. I was seeing the emergence of education as a commodity, where students or more likely their parents, were now mere consumers, education had become a product, and many of the private schools had very slick marketing to entice parents into paying up to thirty thousand dollars a year to educate each child. Private schools, openly competing against each other in some sort of marketplace. The government schools couldn't compete. Principals were not academics anymore, I say they are CEOs. And there were emerging spin off industries. Tutoring and so-called educational placement experts had emerged, and were charging parents three thousand dollars to place each child in what *they* recommended as the right school. And then copping a kick back from the school as well.

Are these people regulated? Are there safeguards for the parents, or is this just another scheme in the long line of shady practices that had recently been exposed in the private colleges. Some, many, of which had placed themselves into bankruptcy, taking students' money with them and leaving the students with no money and no qualifications. And crippling debt.

I lamented at the dumbing-down of academia in the quest to entice international students and their parent's money.

"Getting a degree from a corn flakes box", I was quoted as saying. And I did think that.

I could see the government allocating money to the private schools to the detriment of government schools. And I was dead against government support for private schools. I imagined a system in the future where government schools would be privatised. Just like the electricity industry and the Commonwealth Bank. Both of which were now in crises for different reasons, and of course it was the consumers, the mums and dads who would suffer, and I saw that this new education model was clearly open to corruption. Schools and Universities were being graded simply on how many Higher School Certificates, or degrees they handed out, and it was made easier for the paying international students to gain a degree. It was good for the marketing.

I didn't like what I saw in the future, just like I had

foreseen, many years ago, the emergence of robotics and impact that *that* would have on society.

But I was also encouraged that a group of parents had got together recently and were lobbying the New South Wales government to allow for a fifty-fifty split of vocational subjects and artistic and humanities subjects. They said there had been too much focus on the vocational subjects, and nothing for the imagination or social enhancement. Nothing to encourage thought. Imagination. And *that*, in the future, may be necessary to the peace and wellbeing of the people.

And there had been times during my early years, my university years, that I had had, aspirations. Sydney University was the catalyst, where I read English Literature, but was pulled towards modern literature, and, modern theatre. And, oh, there was the nemesis of my father, patriarch over the 'domestic regiment' of me, Archie Balwyn, my mother, and, of course, the maid. Patriarch, Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn. But it was the university theatre, where Archie's passions lay, buried, hidden, safe, from my father, the Captain, retired.

And it was so, that Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn, saw creativity as an impediment to the regimental form of his stubborn military Victoriana. The students of Newington College, that Captain, retired, Balwyn's staff educated, and they would become engineers, dentists, mathematicians, biologists, chemists, food technologists,

and doctors. No philosophers, or artists, or especially, *subversive writers*, here. The staff of the English department were chosen for their lack of imagination. It was the useful, profitable occupations in Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn's realm, there was no room for thinkers, artists, or philosophers. The arts? They were unprofitable, unproductive, unpredictable; unruly. Un-fucking-everything.

Anarchy!

And his son, Archie? I was such a person. It was unintentional, but it was.

And he judged me as only being intelligent enough to gain an arts degree. Little did he realise that as far as me, and my world, were concerned, that was a compliment.

I was a disappointment to the Captain, retired, and to add to my father's misery, I was not a fine specimen of the human form, unlike the Captain, retired, who stood bolt upright six feet two, shoulders an axe handle wide that had borne military paraphernalia, three pips on each shoulder, and possessed a commanding voice that could instil fear and humiliation into the hardest and most cynical of Sergeant-Majors and house mothers, Matrons, to the boarders.

I, it seemed was a throwback. Even my mother, as demure and dainty as she was, and was expected to be, had a physical presence. Not tall but her slim figure was well carried, and well covered by Grace Bros and David

Jones and Mark Foy's. Archie could lay claim to neither a military, athletic, or for that matter, artistic body, but that, in itself, was never a problem to me. I was what I was, and all the athletic or military sculpting of my figure would not change that.

And, after all, did it matter?

Well, yes, it certainly mattered to the Captain, retired. He claimed once, and with a measure of disdain at a regimental dinner, that "I have sired an anarchist, blob." Appearances were all, to the Captain, retired.

But it was there, in the student theatres and studios of Sydney University, that I, young Archie Balwyn, was drawn inexplicably to my crossroads. So, I thought five decades later I had prepared myself for my 'putting out to pasture'. For many years since, it had been decreed, this life of Archie, by my family, or really, my father's expectations.

Archie Balwyn, me, son of Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn, Headmaster of Newington College, repository of the sons of the Methodist pillars of the affluent suburban societies of the Inner West. Strathfield, Burwood. And of the sons of the pastoral squattocracy of far flung sheep and cattle stations, Headmaster, Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn was not, apparently, of the truly affluent, like the boys in his charge. But rather, seen as one of the keepers of the knowledge, discipline, and morals of Newington College.

Discipline.

Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn, self-proclaimed erudite.

Methodist disciplinarian.

Cruel.

He had been a war hero. Officer, medals, Anzac Day. Captain. (Retired), Hamish Balwyn. But a teacher? That's what he called himself, but no actually, an administrator. A bureaucrat, a would-be Vice-Chancellor, but had not possessed the academic or philosophical attributes to be considered for any university.

I, it was decreed by Captain, retired Hamish Balwyn, was therefore, by succession, supposed to follow the apparent, and self-judged as illustrious, vocation of my father.

My mother, Mrs Balwyn, seemed not to have a Christian name; the Balwyns were always introduced, announced, as Captain, retired, Hamish, and Mrs Balwyn.

And she had no say in *it*, whatever the 'it' of the moment was, even if she had an opinion. I was never aware of one. She had a submissive but comfortable role. In short, she was lazy and content to be ruled. My mother was a contemporary of Stamford Raffles, and my mother, when she was Gwyneth Woolfe, had been privy to the indulgences of the ruling class in the colonies. She was born in Singapore. She had married a Captain. The

natural order of things actually. Singapore Sling?

And I, young Archie knew there was no point in resisting. I could not escape my destiny. The Balwyn household, in the grounds of Newington College, just a stone's throw from the great sandstone University of Sydney, was run along military lines. Spit and polish.

"Stand to attention young Archie!" He would say.

But I was not a student at Newington, too much of an embarrassment to the Captain, retired. I was sent elsewhere. My secondary alma-mater was the public high school, Newtown High School at Erskineville.

And I, simply according to the chronology of war and peace, would never be a war hero. Or a Captain, retired. I had even missed out in the ballot for Vietnam. Maybe I *could* be a teacher. But a teacher unlike my patriarch.

Then there were words I had written, as asides from essays and dissertations.

My Bachelor of Arts, Sydney University thesis, was a conglomerate in its many and varied drafts, and re-drafts. Corrections, attributions. In the end, sterile words to academia. Clumsy. Technically checked and edited. Peer review was a hasty proof read by William Roach, my nearest thing to a friend. And sterile it became, once the dissertation had been edited. Fucked with. Denuded of love and emotion.

But there were other words that had been discarded, edited, rendered impotent by their emotion.

I had discovered the emotion of language at the Tin Sheds, an art/theatre space annexed to the university. It was there my curiosity was piqued. Oh, how the actors, amateur though they were, embellished the often unknown and unrecognised playwright's written words, with their own interpretations and nuances. I often visited East Sydney Technical College and its art department to marvel at the paintings. Abstract, most of them. And, there were the poets. They were in their own world of abstract, obscure English. But that, I thought, was alright. It had its own legitimacy. Appropriate even. Poets were allowed literary licence.

I likened poetry to jazz, or to abstract painting or modern sculpture, and it took fine musicians to play jazz, just as it took fine writers to compose poetry. And fine painters to apply their brush and palette knife to the canvas of modern art. And fine sculptors to massage their medium into form, and fine architects to conceptualise fine buildings. And fine thinkers to philosophise.

"And," I said to a fellow student, "If it is done properly, this jazz, and modern art, nobody can truly understand it". It was an enigma to the untrained.

"But," I continued, "I love the concept of abstract, of personal expression with no rules. Is it anarchy? If it is, so be it."

But it was a form of freedom and after all, was freedom not a good thing, did it matter if it made no

sense to the masses? I thought not. But there were of course, the Philistines, the Captain retirees, of the world, those who needed boundaries, rules. Those whose imaginations and creativity had been somehow stifled, those, who would never understand.

And there were speakers who frequented The Domain. I used to catch the train to St James station and walk down Macquarie Street to The Domain to observe, and pay secret homage to the thinkers, wishing one day to be amongst them.

Soapboxes, emotion, rage, sandwich boards, rantings.

Inspiration. Alternative points of view.

And Webster, the self-propelled philosopher, grist to my mill.

And *Eternity*.

Eternity? A word, written in beautiful scrip, that appeared in chalk on footpaths, walls, and other places at random in Sydney.

I mistakenly related these experiences to the Captain, retired, Hamish Balwyn, and was duly ostracised most severely for wasting time on these “far-fetched, outrageous, subversive literary pursuits”.

“Nothing but troublemakers, anarchists, and whores.” roared the Captain, retired. Headmaster, Victorian officer.

Puritanical, boorish authoritarian.

Whores? Now, I knew there were people of what some

would call, loose morals, I called them alternative morals. Free people who would use their bodies in a form of expression, be it artistic, or just for pleasure, mostly for pleasure. But *never* for profit. Never whores. It was a new world with new people doing new things, thinking new thoughts.

And I remembered my father's mistress.

Yes, I knew about her. Somehow the Captain, retired, had let it slip, years ago when I was very young, but I remembered.

And my mother also knew about that too. And while-ever the Captain, retired, fiddled on the side, he was leaving my mother alone. In peace.

Fucking Captain retired! Never father, or dad. Or husband.

Hypocrite!

And Mrs Balwyn? Never mother.

And I discovered homosexuality. Men with men, women with women. And other forms of gender. Not for me, but seemingly, just another way. It seemed there were many other ways. I felt no abhorrence to it. I felt no attraction to it. It just was.

My sole lesson in sex came when, at ten years old, two stray dogs were fucking on the lawn outside the headmaster's residence and the Captain, retired, my father, called me to view the goings-on and quipped, "that is how babies are made, boy."

Mrs Balwyn, always retired, never did anything really, but could see some merit in my theatrical dalliances and appreciation of arts and letters, but she was never consulted. I thought my mother was in agreement with The Captain retired. And despite the Captain, retired's remonstrations, quotes stuck in my mind and became part of the ever-wondrous language that I was beginning to appreciate.

'To have loved and to have lost, is better than to have never loved.' I had never loved, or lost.

And, Fredrick Nietzsche's masterpiece, 'if you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.'

And here was my abyss, it was gazing back. I had no desire to be my father, but knew there was no escape. It was not that I could not have walked away, of course I could. It was not like I couldn't rebel. But here was my abyss. My black hole, my vortex. I, Archie Balwyn, was to be swallowed whole by the gravity, of duty. And there, there was a concept. Duty of succession. Which I had no respect for, but it just was.

And I, Archie Balwyn, just was.

And so, I, Archie Balwyn (just was), *became*.