

About the author

Few writers mark their 90th birthdays by releasing a new book, but Patrick White Award winner T.A.G. Hungerford has always been remarkable. In his sixty years of professional writing he has turned out novels, plays, short stories, poems, articles, public relations material and 'virtually anything thrown at him'. His awards include membership of the Order of Australia, the Crouch Gold Medal for Literature, the Western Australian Government Literature Week Medal, and the Patricia Hackett Short Story and Patrick White Awards. Twice, in successive years, he won Australia's largest money prize for fiction, the Sydney Morning Herald Literary Competition.

He is best known, perhaps, for his outstanding novel *The Ridge and The River*, for which he drew on personal experiences as a Troop Sergeant M.I.D. in the 2/8 Australian Commando Squadron in New Guinea and other islands north of Australia during World War II. The book was described as one of the finest three novels to come out of World War Two, the other two being Shaw's *The Young Lions* and Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*. As Tom Hungerford says: 'I was in pretty good company.' "Weary" Dunlop described it as "the essence of jungle warfare as it was fought by Australians." Fifty years after its first publication the book is still in demand; last year the Penguin Australian War Classic edition sold more than 4,000 copies.

The first of Hungerford's three autobiographical volumes, *Stories From Suburban Road*, was adapted for stage by Alan Becher of Perth and has played many times throughout Australia.

Tom Hungerford has travelled on every continent in the world except South America. He was a member of the summer expedition to Antarctica in 1953/1954. This was during the seven years he spent covering Australia, writing publicity material for overseas dissemination by the Australian Government. He spent three years as Federal Government Press Officer in New York, then worked for six years as Federal Press Officer in Perth. He then freelanced for about three years, and in 1969 lived alone in Macau, having become interested in Asian affairs during the year he spent in the Japanese Occupation Force immediately post WWII. He worked from 1971 to 1978 as Public Relations Officer for two successive Western Australian premiers, John Tonkin and Charles Court. He regards as his most interesting and rewarding trips his solo top-to-bottom, side-to-side journeys through Russia and China.

Currently he is making good but slow progress from a ten-week spell in hospital, and working on four new novellas. In 2004, he was designated a Living Treasure of Western Australian Culture.

Also by T.A.G. Hungerford

The Ridge and the River

Sowers of the Wind

Riverslake

Shake the Golden Bough

Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox

Stories from Suburban Road

Knockabout with a Slouch Hat

Red Rover All Over

Travel a Million Square (with Richard Woldendorp)

Fremantle (with Robert Garwood)

The Day It All Ended (stage play)

Help Me Cut Up A Cat (radio play)

Looking After Bert (radio play)

Swagbelly Birdsnatcher and the Prince of Siam (children's
fiction)

What happened to Joseph?

Stories and poems by T.A.G. Hungerford

Winner of the Patrick White Award

First published 2005 by Jacobyte Books
165 Belair Road
Torrens Park
South Australia 5062
www.jacobytebooks.com

ISBN (e-book) 1 74100 182 X
ISBN (paperback) 1 74100 178 1

A CIP listing for this book is available from the National
Library of Australia.

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Printed using Print on Demand technology by DigitalPrintAustralia,
Adelaide SA
www.digitalprintaustralia.com

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O Moon of Mullamulla was first published in "New Country", FACP 1976. 'Black Mountain' was first published in *Meanjin* in the 1950s.

'Sex Among the Tomato Bushes' was first published in *Summer Shorts*, FACP. *In the hill, in Kowloon* was printed in *The Australian*, date unknown. 'Fascination Waltz' was first published in *Summer Shorts 3*, FACP. The author and publisher have not been able to ascertain other details of previous publication of stories and poems in this collection, and will be grateful for information.

What happened to Joseph?

O, Moon of Mullamulla

The moon was just rising, red-gold, when Mortlock pulled up at the main gate of Mullamulla. It was a beautiful night for the visiting poetess. A couple of hours after sundown the sky was still a deep royal blue, paddocks pale with the luminous silver of dried grass, thickets of standing trees hovering above them here and there like rainclouds. He cut his engine for a moment to savour the stillness. It was not stillness, anyway. It was an absolute harmony of swamp night sounds, frogs, crickets, rustle of undergrowth, occasional birdcall contented and sleepy. Somehow, nevertheless, it all added up to a deep, restful silence.

The entrance to Mullamulla was through a magnificent grove of paperbarks, the biggest Mortlock could recall having seen anywhere in the south of the State. The Winters' private road in from the highway ran along the crest of a natural sand ridge, the ragged white boles of the trees rearing up on either side, almost locking their foliage overhead. In the spring, still, the verges were pink with the little puffball wildflowers which had given their name to the place. Mortlock unlatched the white-painted gate and swung it back against the solid white-painted strainers. An apple-pie white-painted fence took off from it at a sharp angle on both sides, like the wings of a north-coast aboriginal fishtrap. The soles of his shoes clanked on the solid steel bars of the cattle-trap, and he thought, with a smile: *Good old Charles! Cattle-trap and gate! He'd put up a bloody drawbridge, if he could!* Still, it was an example of the thoroughness, the superlative farming and real love of the land that had enabled five generations of Winters to hang onto Mullamulla when time and taxes had caught up with so many, the early Mortlocks among them, who had started off at the same time with just as much going for them. Four men were permanently employed and housed on the property with their

families – as their fathers and grandfathers had been; the dynastic habit did not begin and end with the owners. Three thousand acres of rolling sand-plain, with good stretches of timber and half-a-dozen lakes and swamps teeming with wildfowl and other game. At least two thousand acres of improved pastures, and dams galore. Stout fences, good roads, first class sheds with equipment of the best and most modern. One of the most well-thought-of merino studs in Australia, and a newly installed beef cattle stud edging up the ladder at no snail's-pace. And all within thirty miles of the capital. A developer's dream, Mortlock mused, standing on the cattle-trap with his hand on the gate, listening to the night sounds which some developer would – one day, for certain – banish forever under desirable brick-and-tile. And all held together simply because Winter after Winter had grown up with the place, had learned to know it and to respect it, paddock by paddock, lake by lake, hill, swamp and gravelly outcrop. Had worked with it rather than on it, to make it the superb machine and lovely artefact and – of course – million-dollar asset it was.

Except young Charlie, Mortlock thought, as he walked back to his car. Charles the Sixth. The heir. His great-great-great-grand-daddy must be turning over in his grave like a bloody rotisserie.

The visiting potentate, as Mortlock had come to think of her, was not being entertained at the main homestead. Well, fair enough. She was young Charlie's kettle of fish. The barbecue was being staged at the old overseer's cottage, several hundred yards inside the gate. When Mortlock turned in to it, there were already a score or more of cars pulled up under the towering double row of pines some long-dead Winter had planted, and had watered and guarded from the stock until they could fend for themselves. Three fires had been lit, and the glow from them flickered beautifully among the lower branches, without really penetrating the shadows below. Two

of them were spanned by lengths of railway line resting on logs at either end, with plates of quarter-inch steel laid across them. Between the fires there was a solid timber bench loaded with trays of sausages and steaks from a Mullamulla cull, bowls of salad, assorted sauce bottles, piles of cut and buttered bread, cutlery and paper plates and napkins. On the third fire, off to one side, a large stainless steel urn bubbled. A second bench, beside it, bore a huge enamel teapot and mugs on the same heroic scale, obviously on secondment from the Mullamulla shearing shed, and cartons of milk, and tea and instant coffee in jars, and china bowls of sugar. Beside it, also, stood Charles Winter, a tall, round-shouldered, rather pot-bellied man with abundant pepper-and-salt hair and the beaked-nose, mildly pop-eyed look of the cartoon English lord. There was no real friendship between him and Mortlock, and whenever they met, Mortlock made the same mental observation: That whereas it had taken twenty generations to evolve that look in Britain, it had surfaced after only five in Australia. *Must be the inbreeding early on, before the convicts came to W.A.!* he thought, again as he walked toward Winter. *Damn lucky I escaped it!*

"Hello Charles!" he said. He gestured toward to tables. "Still doing the loaves and fishes act?"

"Pro forma," Charles Winter said. His voice was recognisably and pleasantly, Australian. "We've got it down to a fine art." He did not quite like Mortlock, feeling for him the mild distaste which the class-proud, class-conscious, class-responsible feel for the dropout from their class. The Mortlocks had relinquished their holdings, taken up only a few years after Mullamulla, through a combination of bad management and indifferent land, and a consequent disinterest on the part of the three generations that had held it. Mortlock had been able to bounce back among the landed gentry simply through a shrewd prescience as to when to buy and when to sell during the nickel boom of the Sixties. He had been able to buy back most of the old family land, and to

install as a manager a graduate of Muresk Agricultural College who very soon began to run the property at a profit: all of which seemed somehow unfair to dedicated farmer Winter, who entertained for him, but never indicated it, something of the sentiments the ant is supposed to entertain for the grasshopper. He ran his protuberant blue eyes over Mortlock's trim shape, still easily contained in a body-shirt and slacks outfit designed for a man at least twenty years younger. "You don't get much older."

"Don't try to," Mortlock said. He was, nevertheless, as always, gratified by the compliment. When people said to him, as they often did: *Well, I wouldn't have put you much past thirty-five!* he always replied: "Go on! I'm damn near fifty!" When, in fact, he was only forty-six. He glanced around the expanse of dry couch lawn in front of the little cottage. "Where's the visiting potentate?"

"Mollie Wilcannia?" Charles Winter laughed. "That's good. The visiting potentate, I never thought of it that way."

"Some sort of a poet, isn't she?"

"Like I'm some sort of a bloody cow-cocky!" Winter liked to ocker it up occasionally to relieve the strain of being, at all other times, the Winter of Mullamulla. "She had a skinny little book published a couple of years ago in Sydney. Some fly-by-night Commo outfit, more interested in stirring than they are in Abo poets."

"How the hell did you get a hold of it?" Mortlock asked. "I didn't think poetry of any kind was your bit."

"Young Charlie had it. He showed it to me. Rubbish."

"Not all of it, apparently. I heard some reviewer on about it. He read one piece, she's sitting in a creek-bed listening to what the old people are saying to her. That was good."

"Well, yes," Winter admitted. "When she was talking about her own experience."

"And before someone steered her onto what the noble savage suffered at our hands!"

"Before the Canberra mob latched onto her as some sort of

Judas-goat to lead them into this new world the poor bloody tax-payer's being milked to set up for them!" Winter turned and stared with sudden, prim, Mullahulla disapproval at where most of the guests were gathered under one of the pines. Laughter and chatter and the clink of bottles on glasses bounced out of it, against the movement of cigarette ends in the gloom. "That's her, over there. Holding court with the local Noongahs," he observed sourly. "The Canberra mob could have done better for their money, I think."

"They don't have much to choose from, I guess." Mortlock said. "Look... here's Bonnie Francis." A dumpy, fair-haired woman of somewhat middle age had just walked into the firelight from the direction of the parked cars. She was wearing a white linen trouser suit with a belted safari jacket and two vivid purple scarves, one knotted at her throat and the other around her hair. Mortlock hailed her, and she picked her way cautiously toward them, as though over a dangerous stretch of reef. "What's up with your feet?" he demanded, as she pulled up alongside them. "Broken a fetlock?"

"It's these damn platform soles," she said. "I'm scared of falling off them."

"Then why wear them?"

"Us oldies got to stay with it!" Bonnie Francis glanced with an oblique grin at the still hard and flat male breasts outlined by his skin-tight shirt. "You in your body-stocking, me in my platform shoes." She turned to Charles Winter. "Hello, Charles. As I always says...you got a glorious place here."

"*And sanctified by six generations of uninterrupted possession of the spoils!*" Mortlock said.

"Oh, shush!" Bonnie Francis said. "On a night like this! That moon!"

"We arrange it for special guests," Charles Winter said.

"Including, tonight, representatives of the original owners, and a wise woman from the east to read the auguries," Mortlock said to Bonnie Francis. "You know what it's all for, tonight, don't you?"

"Well...this Aboriginal poet?"

"That's only a blind. Charles is going to give Mullamulla back to the boongs."

"Yes," Charles Winter said. "When you give back yours."

"The hell! We gave ours back long ago!"

"A nice euphemism for goofing out," Bonnie Francis observed. "Still, you've got most of Milong back again."

"That's what I mean," Winter said.

"I earned that by the sweat of my chinny-chin-chin," Mortlock protested. "I bought it with good, hard-earned nickel-shares. You got Mullamulla from your old man, Charles. And he got it from his, and so on – right back to when it was reefed off the poor bloody blacks."

"It was Crown Land," Winter said, equably. "We didn't hunt anybody off it. I mean great-great-great-Grandfather Charles didn't. He actually paid the Crown for it."

"And who was wearing the Crown that picked up the loot?" Bonnie Francis demanded.

"Bloody old Vic," Mortlock said, knowing it would offend Winter's well-known Royalist loyalties.

"I bet it wasn't old King Billie of the Bibbulmun!" Bonnie Francis looked out of the circle of firelight at the shadowy trees and the silvered paddocks, the lake of darkness that was the paper-bark swamp down by the road. "Poor beggars. I never come here, but I think...lakes, bush, duck, kangaroos. What an Eden it must have been for them!"

"Have you ever thought it might be just as much an Eden for us?" Charles Winter demanded, smiling indulgently at her. "And with a lot of bloody hard work entailed! And what do you think they'd do with it if they *were* to get it back?" He paused for a moment before adding, pointedly: "Presuming we could find someone who has any right to it?"

"They'd live in it, like they always used to. Like they were intended to."

"By whom?" There was still a touch of humour in Winter's voice. "And what makes you think they even *want* to live on

it?

"Of course they'd want to live on it!"

"Then pardon me for disagreeing with you, Bonnie." Winter's tone had taken on a harder edge, as though, suddenly, he had become tired of humouring her vagaries. "You've got rocks in your head if you think they want to do anything but what they're doing right now. What they've become used to doing – what *we've* made them used to doing. Made them regard as their right. Sitting around in parks sucking bombo. Having sob-sisters from the Welfare outfit running them, hand and foot. Bitching about how hard they're treated...but just offer one of them a job that's likely to raise a sweat! I saw a very funny cartoon, once, very funny, but very pointed. And very damn appropriate to what we're talking about now. These two dogs are running along either side of a wire fence, snarling blue murder at each other through the wire. You know how they do? Well, they come to a break in the fence, and if they want to, they can get at each other. Not on your life! They take off again, on the other side of the break, snarling their heads off like before. That's how it would be with the Abos – nine out of ten, at any rate. Give 'em a break in the fence, and they wouldn't want to go through it." His sudden vehemence had taken the other two by surprise, and it showed in their faces. He grinned, sheepishly. Suddenly, once again, he was charming, urbane Charles Winter, of Mullamulla. "Hobby-horse," he said, by way of explanation. "Sorry."

"Darling!" Bonnie Francis laid a hand on his arm. "We were only pulling your leg!"

"I get brassed off, sometimes, people telling me what I should do," Winter said. "I think about it myself, believe me. Quite a lot." He grinned at them, wryly, and glanced around the clearing. "For instance. I could have forbidden Charlie to have this shivoo here, tonight. It's still my property." He shrugged. "He'll do what he wants with it when I'm gone – and Marcia. If I go first, she won't have any crazy shenanigans

when he takes over." He referred to his wife, who had been a most expensively educated, widely travelled, beautiful but brainless 'society-girl'. In return for becoming chatelaine of Mullamulla, she had delivered a handsome *dot* from another of the old landed families which, also, had managed to hang onto their property. In their case, however, principally by using a relatively modest pastoral fortune to found the city's first credit company. It was, in fact, one of a succession of dynastic alliances which had helped the hard-working Winters to weather the storm until the very growth and prosperity of the State had rendered Mulla's farming and stud operations impervious to anything but another, even more monumental, depression than that of the Thirties. Marcia Winter was not in evidence anywhere around the barbecue fires, and Bonnie Francis grasped the legitimate excuse to give another direction to what had become rather an embarrassing conversation. She turned away from Charles Winter, and appeared to search for his wife.

"I don't see Marcia," she said.

"Don't be Uncle Willy," Charles Winter said. He quite purposefully affected the ocker again in order to cover still further the subject which Bonnie Francis had just shoved decently beneath the carpet. "It's not entirely her cup of tea."

"I can't quite see her bending the knee to the visiting potentate," Mortlock said.

"I was looking forward to seeing her," Bonnie Francis lied.

"Then you'll have to go up to the house," Charles Winter offered.

"Not yet. I think I'll go and have a look at Mrs Thing, first. What's her name, again?"

"Mollie Wilcannia?" Charles Winter said. "Keith, here, calls her the visiting potentate. I thought it rather good."

"I'll come with you, Bonnie," Mortlock said. "Excuse us, Charles?"

"Sure. I'm going to round up the cooks."

The group around the visitor had broken up. Now that

they were out in the open, it could be seen that they were about half-and-half black and white, half-and-half men and women. The whites were mostly young, jeans and desert boots, T-shirts with slogans, worn and greasy leather jackets with arm-flashes proclaiming foreign travel, actual or imagined. The few earnest, middle-aged white people among them commuted from group to group as if looking for something. They appeared to be apprehensive about missing something that might happen while they were somewhere else. Bonnie Francis had worked on enough charitable committees, including those for Aborigines, to recognise the type quite readily. They laughed a lot. They smiled a little too readily, and a lot too winningly, at any Aborigine they might happen to meet in the no-man's-land between groups. Tonight, as always, they were displaying their anthers far too desperately – and tonight, as always, they would go away unfertilised by the contact they yearned for. She pitied them. The blacks were all youngsters, a surprising number of them full-bloods, willowy, shy, withdrawn, seeming unable to credit what was going on, perhaps even that they were mixing so intimately with white people. All wore what might have been a uniform – of pretty, brightly coloured print dresses for the girls, and brightly coloured slacks and open-necked shirts for the boys. A few, from their confident bearing, were fairly obviously old hands at the meet-the-Abos kind of party arranged by white fringe-dwellers. They were at pains to establish their veteran status, button-holing white strangers unmercifully, using Christian names like bumper stickers, crying out to whites in other groups: *Hey! Ain't seen you since that night we was at Bill's!*

"It's all so damned depressing," Bonnie Francis said to Mortlock. "I suppose young Charlie's heart's in the right place, or whatever it is you say on occasions like this. But I really don't think this's the way to go about it. Just look at that poor little pair over there. They haven't a clue about what they're here for, or what they're supposed to do." She touched

his arm and pursed her lips in a curious, unintentional parody of the Aboriginal method of indicating direction. Following her hint, Mortlock saw a young couple standing by themselves at the edge of the firelight. The girl was pregnant. Ordinarily she would have been as slender and as brown as a spear, but the hard, round bulk of the unborn child distended her grotesquely, seeming almost too much for her jabiru legs to support. She was clinging to her companion's arm as her mother, even, might have clung to a buoyant log while crossing a crocodile-infested river – in desperate hope of getting to the other side in one piece. As though wired to a single switch, their eyes moved in a sort of mesmerised wonder from group to group. "What does he imagine *they* will get out of it?" Bonnie Francis demanded, when she was certain Mortlock had identified them. "A bunnush like this!"

"I wonder more what he gets out of it, himself," Mortlock said.

"Look at him, for Christ's sake. Future owner of Mullamulla!"

Young Charles Winter and his wife had taken up residence in the old overseer's cottage after their recent marriage. They were sitting cross-legged on the bare boards of the verandah, more-or-less in the lotus position, she strumming softly on a guitar. Both were barefooted, in blue jeans and embroidered cheesecloth shirts, with ropes of blue ceramic beads and dangles of silver coins and charms around their necks. He was bearded, and wore his red-gold Winter hair in a queue on his neck, twined with a leather thong. The lobe of his right ear was pierced to take the heavy gold hoop which he caressed, incessantly, with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. She wore a small nose-jewel of gold and turquoise in the Indian fashion, although her nostril had not been pierced. Her hair, perfectly straight, long and shiny, fell down either side of her small, pale face, and every few moments she threw back her head in a coltish sort of movement or, forsaking the strings of the guitar, ran one finger down the inner edge of each wing

in turn to keep them out of her eyes.

"They're playing pioneer," Mortlock said. "I guess it's got its points when it comes with a slow combustion stove and a deep freeze stocked with turkey and champers. And colour TV in ye olde parlour, and a few thousand bucks of the best colonial antiques in every room. And a flat in town for when you get tired of roughing it out here."

"Oh – come on! Don't be such a grump!" Bonnie Francis protested. "I think they're lovely. They're only kids. They're playing cubby-house."

"Just in passing, they're not kids, you know," Mortlock said. "They're voters. They're married. Pretty soon, they might be parents. But it's really the playing that gets me. I suppose this business here, tonight – it's part of the game?"

"Does it do any harm, if it is?"

"That remains to be seen, although we might find out a damn sight sooner than we expect," Mortlock said. "All right...you're one of the boongs here tonight. You know that when it's all over, Mr and Mrs Charles Winter, junior, will retire to their old colonial double bed and turn on the air-conditioning. Maybe break out a bottle of bubbly to get them in the mood. *You'll* make your way, somehow, back to some bug-hutch in good old East Perth. Maybe to a sewer-pipe down on the riverbank. What the hell does it do to you?"

"Stop ranting, and listen," Bonnie Francis said. She was looking intently at the young Mrs Winter, her head tilted in concentration. She turned to Mortlock after a moment or two, and grinned. "I don't know whether our hostess knows it or not, but she's playing a sort of answer to the whole shebang."

Mortlock looked at the girl on the verandah, following her drifting white hand through the simple, wandering melody and trying to recognise it. He turned to Bonnie Francis again.

"It's one of Kurt Weil's old songs," she explained. "He wrote it a long time ago, just for tonight." She paused for a moment, nodding to the tune, and after a while began to sing in a husky whisper. *O, moon of Alabama, we soon must say good-*

bye. *We've lost our good old mama, and we must have whiskey. O, you know why.* "It's for them," she said, nodding in the direction of the group under the pine tree. "It could have been written for them."

"Whiskey?" Mortlock said. "They're lucky to get cheap plonk! And I think they prefer it that way!"

"S-s-sh!" Bonnie Francis hushed him. "It goes on..." She waited, listening intently to the sad, minor key air coming from the verandah. *O, show us the way to the next little dollar,* she sang, eventually. *O, don't ask why. For if we don't find that next little dollar, I tell you, we must die.* She stopped singing and looked at Mortlock, her head still on one side, inquiringly. "Just about wraps it up, doesn't it?" she said. "They ask for so much. They need so much. And we give them grog and dollars."

"And the visiting poet," Mortlock said. The strumming on the verandah had stopped, but the sad air hung in his mind like a strip of tinsel. "Don't forget the great cultural binge!"

"She's not really a poet," Bonnie Francis said. "My God, didn't the emperor's clothes get a nice old airing when her opus came out! Nobody was game to slam it for fear of being labelled racist!"

"There were a couple of poems in it," Mortlock said. "I heard them on the air."

"After some editor had a go at them. I was told they had to be polished to the bone, grammar and everything."

"Hell – that could go for any writer. They all get a final buffing, don't they?"

"Two swallows don't make a summer, whatever," Bonnie Francis said. "It's like this bunnish here, tonight. The reviewers tell her she's a poet, and young Charlie tells this lot they can mix it at any level of white society. As it happens – she isn't, and they can't."

"Well, a while ago *you* asked *me!*" Mortlock said, grinning at her. "What harm does it do?"

"It's not fair to kid them. It's their shins get barked in the

long run. Like you said – they go back to the riverbank. Next Sunday afternoon this lot'll be scoffing bombo somewhere. Like under the bridge, at Guildford."

"Then – what do you do?"

"What do you do with anybody who's learning a lesson? Insist on them learning before you give them the toffee-apple."

"Jesus!" Mortlock said. "How long they got to go on in school?"

Bonnie Francis nodded toward the pines. "Look, Mrs Thing's coming out of her lair."

"My God," Mortlock said. "She's a big girl!"

Mollie Wilcannia had come out from the shadows of the pine. With three other Aborigines, and a skimpy white woman who walked backward in front of her, beaming ecstatically into her face, she was undulating toward the barbecue fires. She was tall, and was made more so by the huge, perfectly globular Afro in which she wore her dark, frizzy hair. She was grossly fat, the three mounds of her bust, her belly and her bottom seeming to live lives of their own inside her brightly flowered muumuu. She and her little entourage were, in a way, directed straight toward Mortlock and Bonnie Francis by a flanking row of massive old agapanthus that trailed their long pennon of soft blue from the pines to the verandah steps. She was, Mortlock noticed, no more than quarter-caste.

"Mrs Wilcannia?" he said, when she had come close enough. "Mrs Francis and I were just coming over to pay our respects."

"So the mountain come to Mahomet instead, eh?" Mrs Wicannia continued to undulate toward them, speaking as she came. She had a deep velvety voice, and the laugh that followed her words was as deep and as velvety. When she was still several feet away from them they both felt the impact of the personal magnetism which seemed to move ahead of her like some mobile field of force: Mortlock with amusement, Bonnie Francis with a kind of fear.

"I got to take on a lot of fuel to keep me goin'," Mrs Wilcannia laughed again and patted the peplum of solid fat under the waistline of her muumuu. "I was makin' for where the fuel is." She held out a large, dark-brown hand to each of them in turn. "You poets?"

"Well, no," Bonnie Francis said. She would rather have been able to say yes, and if Mortlock had not been there would have confessed modestly to a bit of random scribbling: it was years since a women's magazine had published several little lyrics evoked in her by the downy innocence of a son and daughter now parents themselves. "But we've both read your collection."

"You like it?" Mrs Wilcannia demanded, directly.

"Only some of it," Mortlock said, just as directly.

The skimpy white woman with Mollie Wilcannia had not taken her eyes off that dark face. She now thrust out both her hands, dramatically, palms down and fingers extended and stretched as if sensing the air. To Mortlock's surprise, and then embarrassment, she began to declaim the opening verse of one poem he had really liked in Mrs Wilcannia's collection.

*"When I sit in the hot sand, and the gum-trees speak
With the voice of my people, does my heart break?
No! Not my heart! The sound that comes nearer
Is the tap of the sticks and the drone of the bull-roarer!
It is the voice of my people! Those dark words
Are stored in the hearts of the scattering tribes!"*

She turned and looked first into Mortlock's face, and then into Bonnie Francis's. "Mollie Wilcannia is one of the true, great Australian poets," she said, earnestly.

"Be a dear," Mrs Wilcannia said to her. "Run on over and tell whoever's doin' the cookin' I want a nice big steak with a rim of fat around it, not too well done. An' some kidney, if it's on the me-an'-you?"

The white woman nodded to her, readily, and turned to the dark young man standing alongside her. Obviously not one of those recently arrived in the Big Smoke from some