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EIGHT VOICES OF THE EIGHTIES

Stories, journalism and criticism by Australian women writers

EDITED BY GILLIAN WHITLOCK

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Thea Astley



EDITOR'S NOTE

Thea Astley has published nine novels: *Girl with a Monkey* (Angus & Robertson, 1958; reprinted Penguin, 1987); *A Descant for Gossips* (Angus & Robertson, 1960; reprinted UQP, 1984); *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (Angus & Robertson, 1968; reprinted Penguin, 1983); *A Kindness Cup* (Nelson, 1974); *An Item from the Late News* (UQP, 1982); *Beachmasters* (Penguin, 1985). Three of her novels have won the Miles Franklin Award for Literature: *The Well Dressed Explorer* (Angus & Robertson, 1962; reprinted Penguin, 1988); *The Slow Natives* (Angus & Robertson, 1965) and *The Acolyte* (Angus & Robertson, 1972; reprinted UQP 1985). *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (Penguin, 1979) was her first collection of short stories. Her second collection, a series of linked stories, *It's Raining in Mango* (Viking, 1987) won the inaugural Steele Rudd Prize in 1988.

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Heart Is Where the Home Is

The morning the men came, policemen, someone from the government, to take the children away from the black camp up along the river, first there was the wordless terror of heart-jump, then the wailing, the women scattering and trying to run dragging their kids, the men sullen, powerless before this new white law they'd never heard of. Even the coppers felt lousy seeing all those yowling gins. They'd have liked the boongs to show a bit of fight, really, then they could have laid about feeling justified.

But no. The buggers just took it. Took it and took it.

The passivity finally stuck in their guts.

Bidgi Mumbler's daughter-in-law grabbed her little boy and fled through the scrub patch towards the river. Her skinny legs didn't seem to move fast enough across that world of the policeman's eye. She knew what was going to happen. It had happened just the week before at a camp near Tobaccotown. Her cousin Ruthie lost a kid that way.

"We'll bring her up real good," they'd told Ruthie. "Take her away to big school and teach her proper, eh? You like your kid to grow up proper and know about Jesus?"

Ruthie had been slammed into speechlessness.

Who were they?

She didn't understand. She knew only this was her little girl. There was all them words, too many of them, and then the hands.

There had been a fearful tug-o'-war: the mother clinging to the little girl, the little girl clutching her mother's dress, and the welfare officer with the police, all pulling, the kid howling, the other mothers egg-eyed, gripping their own kids, petrified, no men around, the men tricked out of camp.

Ruthie could only whimper, but then, as the policeman started

to drag her child away to the buggy, she began a screeching that opened up the sky and pulled it down on her.

She bin chase that buggy two miles till one of the police he ride back on his horse an shout at her an when she wouldn't take no notice she bin run an he gallop after her an hit her one two, cracka cracka, with his big whip right across the face so the pain get all muddle with the cryin and she run into the trees beside the track where he couldn't follow. She kep goin after that buggy, fightin her way through scrub but it wasn't no good. They too fast. An then the train it come down the line from Tobaccotown an that was the last she see her little girl, two black legs an arms, strugglin as the big white man he lift her into carriage from the sidin.

"You'll have other baby," Nelly Mumbler comforted her. "You'll have other baby." But Ruthie kept sittin, wouldn't do nothin. Jus sit an rock an cry an none of the other women they couldn't help, their kids gone too and the men so angry they jus drank when they could get it an their rage burn like scrub fire.

Everything gone. Land. Hunting grounds. River. Fish. Gone. New god come. Old talk still about killings. The old ones remembering the killings.

"Now they take our kids," Jackie Mumbler said to his father, Bidgi. "We make kids for whites now. Can't they make their own kids, eh? Take everythin. Land. Kids. Don't give nothin, only take."

So Nelly had known the minute she saw them whites comin down the track. The other women got scared, fixed to the spot like they grow there, all shakin and whimperin. Stuck. "You'll be trouble," they warned. "You'll be trouble."

"Don't care," she said. "They not takin my kid."

She wormed her way into the thickest part of the rainforest, following the river, well away from the track up near the packers' road. Her baby held tightly against her chest, she stumbled through vine and over root, slashed by leaves and thorns, her eyes wide with fright, the baby crying in little gulps, nuzzling in at her straining body.

There'd bin other time year before she still hear talk about. All then livin up near Tinwon. The govmin said for them all to come

long train. Big surprise, eh, an they all gone thinkin tobacco, tucker, blankets. An the men, they got all the men out early that day help work haulin trees up that loggin camp and the women they all excited waitin long that train, all the kids playin, and then them two policemen they come an start grabbin, grabbin all the kids, every kid, and the kids they screamin an the women they all cryin an tuggin an some, they hittin themselves with little sticks. One of the police, he got real angry and start shovin the women back hard. He push an then the train pulls out while they pushin an they can see the kids clutchin at the windows and some big white woman inside that train, she pull them back.

Nelly dodged through wait-a-while, stinging-bush, still hearing the yells of the women back at the camp. Panting and gasping, she came down to the water where a sand strip ran half way across the river. If she crossed she would only leave tracks. There was no time to scrape away telltale footprints. She crept back into the rainforest and stood trembling, squeezing her baby tightly, trying to smother his howls, but the baby wouldn't hush, so she huddled under a bush and comforted him with her nipples for a while, his round eyes staring up at her as he sucked while she regained her breath.

Shouts wound through the forest like vines.

Wailing filtered through the canopy.

Suddenly a dog yelped, too close. She pulled herself to her feet, the baby still suckling, and went staggering along the sandy track by the riverbank, pushing her bony body hard, thrusting between claws of branch and thorn, a half mile, a mile, until she knew that soon the forest cover would finish and she'd be out on the fence-line of George Laffey's place, the farm old Bidgi Mumbler had come up and worked for. She'd been there too, now and then, help washin, cleanin, when young Missus Laffey makin all them pickles an things.

For a moment she stood uncertain by the fence, then on impulse she thrust her baby under the wire and wriggled through after him, smelling the grass, smelling ants, dirt, all those living things, and then she grabbed him up and stumbled through the cow paddock down to the mango trees, down past the hen yard, the vegetable garden, down over a lawn with flower-blaze and the

felty shadows of tulip trees, past Mister Laffey spading away, not stopping when he looked up at her, startled, but gasping past him round the side of the house to the back steps and the door that was always open.

Mag Laffey came to the doorway and the two young women watched each other in a racket of insect noise. A baby was crying in a back room and a small girl kept tugging at her mother's skirts.

The missus was talkin, soft and fast. Nelly couldn't hear nothin and then hands, they pull her in, gently, gently, but she too frightened hangin onto Charley, not lettin go till the white missus she put them hands on her shoulders and press her down onto one them kitchen chairs an hold her. "Still, now," her voice keep sayin. "Still."

So she keep real still and the pretty white missus say, "Tell me, Nelly. You tell me what's the matter."

It took a while, the telling, between the sniffles and the coaxing and the gulps and swallowed horrors.

"I see," Mag Laffey said at last. "I see," she said again, her lips tightening. "Oh I see."

She eased the baby from Nelly's arms and put him down on the floor with her own little girl, watching with a smile as the children stared then reached out to touch each other. She went over to the stove and filled the teapot and handed the black girl a cup, saying, "You drink that right up now and then we'll think of something. George will think of something."

It was half an hour before the policemen came.

They rode down the track from the railway line at an aggressive trot, coming to halt beside George as he rested on his spade.

Confronted with their questions he went blank. "Only the housegirl." And added, "And Mag and the kids."

The police kicked their horses on through his words and George slammed his spade hard into the turned soil and followed them down to where they were tethering their horses at the stair rails. He could see them boot-thumping up the steps. The house lay open as a palm.

Mag forestalled them, coming out onto the veranda. Her whole body was a challenge.

"Well," she asked, "what is it?"

The big men fidgeted. They'd had brushes with George Laffey's wife before, so deceptively young and pliable, a woman who never knew her place, always airing an idea of some sort. Not knowing George's delight with her, they felt sorry for that poor bastard of a husband who'd come rollicking home a few years back from a trip down south with a town girl with town notions.

"Government orders, missus," one said. "We have to pick up all the abo kids. All abo kids have got to be taken to special training schools. It's orders."

Mag Laffey inspected their over-earnest faces. She couldn't help smiling.

"Are you asking me, sergeant, if I have any half-caste children, or do I misunderstand?" She could hardly wait for their reaction.

The sergeant bit his lower lip and appeared to chew something before he could answer. "Not you personally, missus." *Disgusting*, he thought, *disgusting piece of goods, making suggestions like that*. "We just want to know if you have any round the place? Any belonging to that lot up at the camp?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know, missus." He went stolid. "You've got a housegirl, haven't you? Your husband said."

"Yes, I do."

"Well then, has she got any kids?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Mag Laffey lied vigorously. Her eyes met theirs with amused candour.

"Maybe so. But we'd like to speak to her. You know it's breaking the law to conceal this."

"Certainly I know." George was standing behind the men at the foot of the steps, his face nodding her on. "You're wasting your time here, let me tell you. You're wasting mine as well. But that's what government's for, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean, missus." His persistence moved him forward a step. "Can we see that girl or not?"

Mag called over her shoulder down the hall but stood her

ground at the doorway, listening to Nelly shuffling, unwilling, along the lino. When she came up to the men, she still had a dishcloth in her hands that dripped suds onto the floor. Her eyes would not meet those of the big men blocking the light.

"Where's your kid, Mary?" the sergeant asked, bullying and jocular. "You hiding your kid?"

Nelly dropped her head and shook it dumbly.

"Cat got your tongue?" the other man said. "You not wantem talk, eh? You lying?"

"She has no children," Mag Laffey interrupted coldly. "I told you that. Perhaps the cat has your ears as well. If you shout and nag and humiliate her, you'll never get an answer. Can't you understand something as basic as that? You're frightening her."

She looked past the two of them at her husband who was smiling his support.

"Listen, lady," the sergeant said, his face congested with the suppressed need to punch this cheeky sheilah right down her own hallway, "that's not what they tell me at the camp."

"What's not what they tell you?"

"She's got a kid all right. She's hiding it some place."

George's eyes, she saw, were strained with affection and concern. *Come up*, her own eyes begged him. *Come up*. "Sergeant," she said, "I have known Nelly since she was a young girl. She's helped out here for the last four years. Do you think I wouldn't know if she had a child? Do you? But you're free to search the house, if you want, and the grounds. You're thirsting for it, aren't you, warrant or not?"

The men shoved roughly past her at that, flattening Nelly Mumbler against the wall, and creaked down the hallway, into bedrooms and parlour and out into the kitchen. Cupboard doors crashed open. There was a banging of washhouse door.

George came up the steps and took his wife's arm, steering her and Nelly to the back of the house and putting them behind him as he watched the police come in from the yard.

"Satisfied?"

"No, we're not, mate," the sergeant replied nastily. "Not one bloody bit."

Their powerful bodies crowded the kitchen out. They watched contemptuously as Nelly crept back to the sink, her body tensed with fright.

"We don't believe you, missus," the sergeant said. "Not you or your hubby. There'll be real trouble for both of you when we catch you out."

Mag held herself braced against infant squawls that might expose them at any minute. She made herself busy stoking the stove.

"Righto," George said, pressing her arm and looking sharp and hard at the other men. "You've had your look. Now would you mind leaving. We've all got work to get on with."

The sergeant was sulky. He scraped his boots about and kept glancing around the kitchen and out the door into the back garden. The Laffey's small girl was getting under his feet and pulling at his trouser legs, driving him crazy.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly. "All right." He gave one last stare at Nelly's back. "Fuckin' boongs," he said, deliberately trying to offend that stuck-up Mrs Laffey. "More trouble than they're worth. And that's bloody nothing."

The two women remained rooted in the kitchen while George went back up the track to his spade-work. The sound of the horses died away.

At the sink Nelly kept washing and washing, her eyes never leaving the suds, the dishmop, the plate she endlessly scoured. Even after the thud of hoof faded beyond the ridge, even after that. And even after Mag Laffey took a cloth and began wiping the dishes and stacking them in the cupboard, even after that.

Mag saw her husband come round the side of the house, toss his hat on an outside peg and sit on the top step to ease his earth-stuck clobbers of boots off. Nelly's stiffly curved back asked question upon question. Her long brown fingers asked. Her turned-away face asked. When her baby toddled back into the kitchen, taken down from the bedroom ceiling manhole where George had hidden him with a lolly to suck, Nelly stayed glued to that sink washing that one plate.

"Come on, Nelly," Mag said softly. "What's the matter? We've beaten them, haven't we?"

George had picked up the small black boy and his daughter and was bouncing a child on each knee, wagging his head lovingly between them both while small hands pawed his face.

Infinitely slowly, Nelly turned from the sink, her fingers dripping soap and water. She looked at George Laffey cuddling a white baby and a black but she couldn't smile. "Come nex time," she said, hopeless. "Come nex time."

George and his wife looked at her with terrible pity. They knew this as well. They knew.

"And we'll do the same nex time," Mag Laffey stated. "You don't have to worry."

Then George Laffey said, "You come live here, Nelly. You come all time, eh?" His wife nodded at each word. Nodded and smiled and cried a bit. "You and Charley, eh?"

Nelly opened her mouth and wailed. *What is it?* they kept asking. *What's the matter? Wouldn't you like that?* They told her she could have the old store shed down by the river. They'd put a stove in and make it proper. Nelly kept crying, her dark eyes an unending fountain, and at last George became exasperated.

"You've got no choice, Nelly," he said, dropping the baby pidgin he had never liked anyway. "You've got no choice. If you come here we can keep an eye on Charley. If you don't, the government men will take him away. You don't want that, do you? Why don't you want to come?"

"Don't want to leave my family," she sobbed. "Don't want."

"God love us," George cried from the depths of his nonunderstanding, "God love us, they're only a mile up the river." He could feel his wife's fingers warning on his arm. "You can see them whenever you want."

"It's not same," Nelly insisted and sobbed. "Not same."

George thought he understood. He said, "You want Jackie, then. You want your husband to come along too, work in the garden maybe? Is that it?"

He put the baby into her arms and the two of them rocked somberly before him. He still hadn't understood.

The old men old women uncles aunts cousins brothers sisters tin humpies bottles dogs dirty blankets tobacco handouts fights

river trees all the tribe's remnants and wretchedness, destruction and misery.

Her second skin now.

"Not same," she whispered. And she cried them centuries of tribal dream in those two words. "Not same."