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Written by

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Nightswimming in Dungog

WRITING NSW FEATURES

**And like a wind I yet want to blow among them one day
and with my spirit take away the breath of their spirit.**

Friedrich Nietzsche, from *Ecce Homo: how one becomes what one is*.

When my brother visited me one time in Dungog he wound up chatting on the main street with a geezer. The old white man in his

torn leather hat asked Sloan where he was from and at the mention of Sydney, the bloke snorted and said he went there on a school excursion in the '50s. 'Didn't never go back,' he said. 'Too noisy.'

Now he's dead.

Two hundred-and-some kilometres north-north east of that noisy sprawl lies Dungog, a small town at the base of the Barrington Tops, a mountain wilderness of rivers, granite and ancient forest.

With a population of a tad over 2000, the town of Dungog is the 'capital' of a lush, rolling shire of the same name which is home to a little upwards of 8000 people across a scattering of hamlets and villages, the other notable, mildly urban centres being Gresford, Paterson, Vacy, and Clarence Town.

A few television productions including *Tomorrow When The War Began* and *The Secret Daughter* have used locations in the shire, but only as generic rural settings. I don't know of any writing set in the area. Dungog doesn't seem to have an identifiable presence in Australia's creative works. While I've written three books from here in Dungog, my writing's not about this place. At least it doesn't seem to be. I don't know anymore.

This verdant, rippling region is homeland of the Wonnarua and Worimi clans, a major subgrouping of which are the Gringai people – the name 'Dungog' being a Gringai word for the hills.

But about 200 years ago the British Empire arrived with its diseases and surplus populations, hungry for farmland and resources such as the cedar trees that grew in thick riverside swathes of Gringai country. Smallpox, measles, syphilis and other viruses left Indigenous people dead in large numbers. In *A History in Three*

Rivers, Michael Williams estimates that measles killed 30 per cent of the area's Gringai children in one winter alone.

Those who survived the pestilence were unable to stop the ever-penetrating, ever-expanding waves of 'settlement' by Britain's piecemeal conquistadores. Their El Dorados were whatever grazing land, pastures, timber, coal or women they could get hold of.

In 1827, a flock of sheep was reportedly attacked by dogs of the Gringai. When a white shepherd who drove the dogs off reported that a spear had been thrown his way, a gang was raised that found and killed a dozen Gringai.

The Gringai, out-gunned, out-numbered, out-manoeuvred, were pushed to the fringes of their own country. With their hunting grounds and meeting places taken, their free movement stopped, rustling punished severely, their social inferiority reinforced at every turn, they lived in camps around town, available as seasonal labour for their conquerors. The white overlords showed their benevolence by giving them blankets.

Generations later, my wife and I buy a house in Dungog, where we've now lived for a decade.

The party at the rental around the corner has finally come to an end, but it's spilled out some young fellas who are riding an improvised motorbike up and down the roads. The dumpster has no muffler and is loud as hell. It's nearly two in the morning; Renae and I are seething; we have a sick little daughter who stirs whenever the bike comes back within a few hundred metres.

From the front porch on this late summer night I spot them - one of the fellas is blaring it up the hill towards the main street while his

mate strings along on a push-bike.

Over the top the engine cuts out.

All is quiet.

Back in bed I try to zone out; amongst everything else that's vexing about all this is, I've got a job early tomorrow. I'll be heading to Jailbreak, a one-day bikie festival staged in the decommissioned maximum security Maitland Gaol. It's hosted by the Gladiators MC Australia, a Hunter Valley club that dates back to about 1961 and was the first outlaw crew established in Straya.

It took some sweet-talking perseverance to get approved for entry because, forever under pressure from the law and at times feuding with other gangs, the Glads don't much like attention and I'll be there for the Newcastle *Herald*. I suggested an article to the paper after seeing a hand-written sign about Jailbreak tacked to a power pole near the Tomago aluminium smelter.

I don't write newspaper articles much anymore, not since quitting work as a journo at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and quitting Sydney along with it. Now I write and study from Dungog while doing casual sub-editing in Newcastle. A few afternoons a week I drive the 75-kilometres in, heading against the stream of tradies leaving the city. At shift's end, I drive home.

Late at night the deserted country roads are another world; the forest presses in strong and dark; mist whips by low to the ground; some nights the fog encases me in a blind ball of light. One night I hit a roo but it just bounced and ran off. Another night it was an owl, its body lodged in the smashed-in headlight cavity, a wing flapping over the bonnet.

Anyway, tonight I'm home; it's quiet at last. Sleep time.

But they let rip again with that ear-splitting, night-shredding roar. 'Fuck it,' I say, reaching for clothes. 'I'm going to find them.'

'Be careful,' Renae says. 'Don't do anything stupid.'

Grabbing the keys to my big old Ford and a hefty Maglite, I start the engine and lock the doors.

Sick of this shit. The town's had no police for a year or more because the local cop is off with a shoulder injury from when a drunk came wild at him out the back of a paddy wagon. You'd think the police force would replace the cop even temporarily but no, apparently there's a policy that says because he is still on the books, even if on extended leave, Dungog doesn't get a new cop.

So petty crime, burnouts, and low level crap build. The town miscreants know that even if someone calls the cops it's gonna take them half an hour minimum to get here, and even that's only if the police drop what they're doing miles away and floor it across the hills to Dungog because they think some serious violent crime is in progress. Otherwise it's hours, or a request to call some other number.

One night while I was away and there'd been a run of thieving from the yard, Renae heard an odd little click and went out to see two blokes cracking open the neighbour's car boot. Before she thought, she'd yelled at them. They bolted, slamming over a fence up the road and vanishing. They left behind a stolen phone, torch and the screwdriver they'd used to pop the car - which I was glad they didn't try to use on her. The neighbour had several hundred dollars' worth of cricket gear in his car and he gave her a bottle of wine.

Not long back, the year we moved here, I spent months looking for trouble in Colombia. Spent time with the multitudinous street hoods cum paramilitaries, men who had power in their communities because the law was absent. If this was Colombia, I'd assume the dumpster dickheads had guns or rapid access to them and stay away, but here, now, I'm in a tonne of car, and it's not long for the wreckers so I don't really care about a few more dents.

Cruising up the hill, passing house after house after house, it strikes me that all kinds of people must be wide awake because of these arseholes. As usual no one's doing jack shit about it. I got the urge to take on a life of writing about this weird reality we inhabit back in the nineties. I was transfixed by coverage of the bloody crack-up of Yugoslavia. Among the strange aesthetic hangovers of that obsession is not being able to look at a pretty little hill-town like Dungog without imagining gunners holding the high points and all the roads cut off.

I remember in the nineties people saying Yugoslavs are all screwballs and that sort of fratricidal horror would never happen here where modern history doesn't have such teeth. But living in Dungog has me convinced that all it would take would be for a critical mass of the town's young brutes to fully grasp that they have the run of the place and to get organised.

Preventing rule by thug would take others to step up and put them in their place. But no one does. After all, when some drongo did burnouts around town the other week – in the wee hours, as ever – shredding the quiet, filling the air with stinking rubber, and waking our daughter, I clenched my fist and muttered about hurling half a brick through his window. But I didn't go out and do it, instead just pacing the hall, hating him, hating myself, hating this town.

Meanwhile – have you heard this one? – Hugo Weaving's supposed to

have a place here. The elf king from *Lord of the Rings*; Mr Smith from *The Matrix*. Numerous people have told me that his-Hollywoodness-himself is often here. ‘Y’ever seen him?’ I used to ask. Might have, they say, not sure.

I have more faith in the occasional reported sighting of former cricket international Doug Walters, the most famous son of this boys’ town, a man once famous for his ability to drink and smoke all night and then put in a good day’s work at the crease. I’ve never seen Walters here, though, even if the local RSL club has a Doug Walters Bar. Years ago at the Great Northern in Chatswood a geezer with a constant schooner and a designated seat was pointed out to me. ‘That’s Dougie Walters.’ I didn’t know who he was then and I doubt I’d even heard of Dungog either.

But now I’m patrolling the town, my new home town, in an old Fairmont, looking to bring peace to its streets and sleep to its citizens. The dumpster racket has stopped again, though, so after cruising its byways and thoroughfares for five minutes I swing back to my own street.

And there the fuckers are, down by the railway bridge, back near where the party was, half a block from my house.

The squat, peroxide-headed teenage lunk on the push-bike shrinks away as I line up my headlights on his mate with the dumpster, stopping a stone’s throw away and letting the car idle. The cyclist is very nervous, very eager to leave, and seems unlikely to escalate the situation, whereas the twentyish dumpster rider rears up and grins. His eyes, his hair, his teeth are all wild. He shimmers. He’s wired. He has a laugh.

‘Help you, mate?’ he says.

‘Keep that bike turned off, will ya. You’re waking everybody up.’

He laughs some more. ‘Just go home.’

‘Fuck you, mate. Get the fuck out of here.’

‘Just go home.’

The jumpy fella looks all furtive as I sit pointing a tonne of metal at this cunt. ‘Let’s go,’ peroxide boy says to his bold mate. ‘Let’s go.’

But the feral meth-clown ignores him, too jacked up on whatever shit is in his veins to think of anything but dominance and sneering. ‘You fucking just go home, mate,’ he tells me, a man twice his age. He steps a little to the side but not any closer. It’s nothing that a turn of the steering wheel won’t fix. ‘Go home,’ he says.

Checking the mirrors and scanning each way to make sure he doesn’t have mates closing in, I feel the idle radiating through the chassis and switch to high beam. ‘You piece of shit, keep that thing off and get the fuck out of here.’

‘Come on,’ his friend pleads. He’s straining – urging – the clown to step down from this confrontation.

But the punk fuck grins even wider. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Nice car, mate. Whyncha get out of it?’

Such small movements it would take: lift my foot from the brake and step on the accelerator. ‘Fuck you. This street’s full of old people and little kids and you’re here waking everyone up. Get the fuck out of here.’

‘Go home. No one needs ya. Useless old cunt.’

I ease off on the brake. The engine tone alters. The clown's eyes change; his head tilts. Like I've earned a few points – like maybe I will drive into him. Like he might want that.

He pushes the dumpster towards my place – entirely the wrong direction for his home, I'm sure, as I've never seen this lad before and I live on the edge of town. We all roll slow and serpentine up the wide road, shouting at each other in this stalemate. Amidst all the oldies, a few able-bodied adults live on this block, including the cricket player. Where are they? Renae is up on the porch, phone in hand, no doubt calling the absentee police again. Our little dog, Noodles, is watching from the bedroom window.

But here's someone entering the fray: Darrel, a tractor mechanic my age from a couple doors up whose marriage recently broke down. He strides out onto the road wearing just shorts, and holding up a mobile phone camera. Dumpster boy looks at his mate and steps towards Darrel. I touch the gas and surge closer. 'Get the fuck out of here,' I shout again.

Darrel has a sneer to more than match this kid's, and he's bristling with an older, hardened don't-give-a-fuck fury as he videos the youth. 'Want to fucking try it?' snaps Darrel. 'Think you fucking scare me? Come on,' he says. 'Come on.'

Renae yells that the police are on their way and push-bike boy is making pleading noises to his friend and I'm poised to leap out and attack if meth-clown strikes Darrel.

But the kid falters. He turns the dumpster around to pass back by my house. 'Go inside, love,' he says to Renae. 'Oh, and nice tyres.' He's looking at her little hatchback. 'Shame if something happened to 'em.'

‘Go on, fuck off,’ one of us says. The three of us watch the pair go down under the railway bridge and leave the area.

‘Thanks for coming out,’ I tell Darrel, who is checking the footage on his phone. ‘Don’t know where everyone else is.’

‘No worries,’ Darrel says. ‘These fucking kids don’t frighten me. I’ve been angry for ten years.’

Now we have the quiet of a true country night – animal calls and solitude working around each other in the blackness. A coal train.

Renae pokes me out of sleep. ‘Police are here,’ she says, and indeed there’s a paddy wagon pulled up, lights flashing, in front of my Ford. Quiet chirp of radio chatter. It’s hours since she rang, though. Must be about five in the morning. So again I reach for clothes and a torch.

As I run the police through what happened, Darrel comes jogging down, calling out: ‘He’s right here by your car! In the gutter!’ The police and I look over to see the meth-clown pop up. Veering clear of Darrel, he speed-walks towards the end of our block where he’ll be able to make a run for the river.

The cops jump in their vehicle and chuck a hard and fast U-ey as I sprint after them. Jerking along, the guy leaves the road for a clutch of bushes en route to a paddock leading to the blackness of the tree-lined river bank. But the cops ditch their wagon and one of them has run him down and tackled him face down into the dirt. He’s wearing a backpack with a X-shaped tyre iron poking out.

‘Bad timing, wasn’t it mate?’ I say. ‘Bad timing, huh?’ But he’s gone dead quiet, even as I put my Maglite right up to his face and give his eyes a good dazzle. ‘Shame about the timing.’

‘OK, mate, that’ll do,’ says one of the cops.

My wife and Darrel come up. ‘He’s taken the wheel nuts,’ she says. ‘Back tyre’s been stripped of them.’

‘Did you take them?’ asks a cop.

‘No,’ he says, now with no attitude at all.

‘What’s this then?’ The policeman removes the tyre iron from the backpack and reaching further in grabs a handful of wheel nuts.

‘Where did you get these?’

‘Dunno.’

They cuff him and lock him in the back of the wagon. ‘What happened, Darrel?’ I ask. ‘How did you know he was there?’

‘My corgis started up. Thought I’d have a look and there he was. Would have been right there in the gutter the whole time you were talking to the cops.’

The lout doesn’t utter a peep while we stand around the wagon giving statements. It’s getting light. ‘If you guys hadn’t been here right at that moment I might not have noticed the wheel nuts were missing,’ I say. ‘And this morning I’ll be doing 100 down the road to get to a job I gotta do.’

Taking a fast bend through farmland on the drive to the prison, I imagine losing control and screaming until it’s done.

Thank you, corgis.

It takes a long difficult conversation to get past a bikie on the gate.

He eventually relents but says to watch it, and that before I leave he'll be going through my camera and notes.

Hundreds of people – bikies, their chicks and mates, kids and others – wander the sunny interior of the sandstone and iron prison. Seeing a cluster of mums, dads and kids near the wall of an exercise yard, I find bikies pouring water over women who've stepped up for a contest.

'No.' The slim, well-groomed, topless young woman shakes her head at the calls to get naked. 'It's a wet t-shirt competition, not a strip show.' She is one of two finalists left, but her rival – a feisty short-haired sheila in her late thirties – is not nearly so precious, swigging a drink and cackling as she points again at her bare shaved cunt. What's more, she turns and bends over, walking her hands to one side and then the other so in order to give everybody a prime view of her puckered arsehole. She is victorious.

After another beer, I talk my way into an air-conditioned shipping container where the Gladiators' president, Frank, sits with an esky full of alcohol to one side and a surgically pornified woman on the other. Frank stares in something of a daze as his resident leprechaun – a bearded little chap with a walking stick, thick glasses, and a near impenetrable brogue – brings me in and fetches an extra chair.

The leprechaun seems excited to have a writer here and he leans from one side to the other, telling me all kinds of things, little to none of which I understand. The woman shifts her mammoth chest and fixes in place her gigantic carved smile. Frank just mutters from time to time, once with more emphasis than before, prompting the leprechaun to produce a small paper-thin square that he places on Frank's tongue.

It may be a breath freshener for all I know.

Excusing myself, I go to a dirty little cell and sit on one of the bunk-bed frames, staring at the stained walls. When the prison was operational Renae went to school near here, the teachers running regular lockdown drills if a man broke free.

Liberty and threats to it are on Angry Anderson's mind. He and Rose Tattoo take over on stage from a troupe of professional strippers. 'Freedom doesn't translate into Muslim,' he yells, as drinks thrust high spray everywhere. The day is fast coming, Angry adds, when patriots' blood will be shed in the defence of Australia.

On cue from Angry, guitarist Mick Cocks, looking like death warmed up, fixes a slide to his finger, plants his boot on a stage monitor, and unleashes a huge wall of sound. The riff slips up and down, ultra-loud, ripe with sleaze. The mob surges.

'I'm a rock'n'roll outlaw,' screams Angry. 'And I'm on the run. I'm a rock'n'roll outlaw – never needed anyone.' The mad little peacock bastard is ablaze: the energy of his hate, his rage, his rabble-rousing bigotry: all inseparable from his glee. With the band blasting inside the stone walls, Angry soars in a ferocious joy. He's higher than anyone but there's always the hint of a sneer, always something kept in check so that everybody knows he's the master and not the slave.

'What you need is mates, staunch and true,' roars Angry, filling the air now with *One of the Boys*, 'Hold out your back – they're gonna see you through.'

With Angry continuing to rev the crowd up about outsiders, I call it a night and slip out without hassle. Steering the Ford at speed back through farmland, wishing I could see how debauched the scene will get at the Gladiators' clubhouse tonight, I think of Sigmund Freud.

'The inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting

instinctual disposition in man,' writes Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*. People get an incomparably stronger charge when gorging their untamed, primal appetites than from seeking satisfaction in more sublimated, secondary realms of conceptual art and harmonious human relations. Freud comprehends Angry's incendiary posturing and the general paranoia of his audience:

The advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness.

The aggression of men may well, Freud writes, lie within the 'remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilisation'. Despite the many 'incontestable' benefits of order, its innumerable pacifying regulations choke our essence: even our sex lives are 'severely impaired', rendered so insipid by the dictates of propriety that 'it sometimes gives the impression of being in process of involution as a function, just as our teeth and hair seem to be as organs.'

How true. How widespread one finds contorted marriages, contorted people. The remnants of their libidos, of their raw erotic selves, forced down under every manner of prudish justification or distraction: over-eating, obsessive exercise, or the bitter possessiveness of the impotent.

When Renae and I hit the social circuit things sometimes fizzle because we fail to follow the requisite repression regimes. One

doesn't need to be an outrageous libertine to fall foul of the order in Dungog. Here, there's a pronounced divide of the sexes. While homosexuality (and much of the rest of the spectrum of fluidity) remains hidden, homosociality is endemic.

At parties men cluster near power tools or around totemic drinking or sporting items. Women stay closer to the kitchen (but not the barbecue). A man hanging with the women could arouse suspicions of either wanting to crack onto someone else's missus, or of being less than a man. A woman hanging with the men could be spying for the women or she might just be a trollop. It's more than parties, too. Under the banner of sport, men routinely take leave of their families on weekends.

To Freud, when the work of civilisation, of making and enforcing the order, is largely the business of men, then society can decline into homosocial affairs. Men often just don't have the 'psychical energy', the zap, left for the ambiguous dance of mixed company. After being the man, playing the man, whatever you want to call it, with all the implied virility of power, ironically many men just want to be, as Angry sings, 'one of the boys'.

Freud could be looking at Dungog's parties, at the seating patterns in the pubs, at the RSL gatherings, at the fellas taking off in their footy or cricket gear on Saturday mornings, when he writes:

What he employs for cultural aims he to a great extent withdraws from women and sexual life. His constant association with men, and his dependence on his relations with them, even estrange him from his duties as a husband and father. Thus the woman finds herself forced into the background by the claims of civilisation and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it.

Or, in words I hear more often, becomes another whinging, nagging bitch.

The men search for what Freud calls the oceanic, a sense of oneness with the universe, not in a mingling or resolution of opposites but rather in the singularity of mateship.

It's the morning after the Sydney launch of a book I've been working on for a few years, *Running with the Blood God*, and Renae and I are driving from a CBD hotel to my parent's house on the lower North Shore. She's going to drop me off en route to Dungog; I'm staying on to talk about *Blood God* and related matters of entrapment and liberation on TV this evening, and to spend a little more time with my parents. Last night at the Gaelic Club was too hectic to really catch up, although my dad beamed at it all and sank a good few Guinneses with old friends.

As we approach the Harbour Bridge, one of my brothers calls: 'Dad's dead.'

Dad's on the floor in the breakfast room when we arrive, on his back, eyes partially open, the neat rows of his teeth showing. He has the last smile: the smile of final release. The awe of the dead – he's dead. My father's dead. Torn out of the world. I touch his cheek, his hand.

Trees seethe and rustle, their branches and leaves in flux with the air. So buoyant: here it comes, a wave, a wave, a wave of grief, another and another over and over and over he's dead and so much was never said and now never will, it's over, and here it comes harder and harder and harder until I can't breathe I'm in the trees falling into the air oh Jesus, oh man. God, it's so sweet when it lifts, when these rushes of grief ease, won't they please never end, now I know I was made, I know I was created, conceived, and the man, the

father, is gone.

Everyone eventually goes but I stay with my mother. We sit up together to hold each other and weep.

‘He started on your book when we got home last night,’ my mother says. ‘And the last thing he said was “Gee, Matt can really write.” Then I went to sleep and this morning he didn’t bring me my coffee so I got up to see where he was and found him.’

My dad’s snoring had led to him sleeping in another room, somewhere he could read late and listen to the radio and snore without consequence. He hadn’t made up the bed before dying so I slip into its rumpled covers just as he had slipped out of them this morning.

Beside the bed sits *Running with the Blood God*. The bookmark shows he got past the prologue, in which I introduce the deity of the title: ‘a supreme being whose love hinges on us meeting our fate with open hearts’. We’re all going to be dead before too long, I add, and ‘to realise this, to sense it deep inside, is to know that the only path to run is the one leading to the end: our end.’

Two days later my dog, Noodles, needs a lethal injection. Cancer has destroyed her. The vet is booked to come over when I get back, which will be soon. The train is curling through the shire, past cattle and horses and hills and grass and trees that ripple and breathe and swirl me into their air, their skies, and as another wave approaches I shake away the last tears and push in earbuds for Van Morrison’s *Ballerina*, the opening ‘Spread your wings’ closing grief over me and over me until it’s so immense that when it lifts, there’s nothing left but air.

So much death.

Reeling.

We bury Noodles in our yard, in the soil of Dungog with a tree over and mountains in the distance. And with the winds. And we weep.

A few days later it's time for a family viewing of my dad: Phelan, his name was. I've been grim ahead of it but as soon as we enter the room it all lifts. He's gone. He's dead. He was incomplete as a man, as a human, but he's complete now. The grief is over.

I miss it.

The cop and I vault a fence into the floodwater which has hit Dungog hard and filled the house in front of us. What a night of wind and rain. 'Get me a door entry tool,' I say over the radio as the constable and I wade into the cold brown mucky water, unseen heavy objects banging into our shins as we move forwards. 'Robin!' I yell, using the name we've been given for the woman who lives here with her pets. Neighbours are afraid for her. 'Robin!' Silence.

Renae wades through the thigh-high water with a Halligan tool, a heavy steel bar with a variety of protruding edges and spikes at each end. We've become part-time firefighters and rescue operators based at Dungog 282, the local station of Fire & Rescue NSW.

The back door is less submerged than the front but it's shut tight with no gap for me to get the Halligan's teeth into, so Renae and the policeman push hard and now it's in and I reef it until the door breaks open. But not far because something's jammed against the door. I set my shoulder and press and see it's a laundry in there with a toppled washing machine that we push clear. I wade in, Renae and the policeman following. I trigger the radio: 'We're in the house.' A toilet seat floats past, followed by a steak in plastic wrap. 'The

neighbours reported she has pets,' says Renae. 'Dog and a magpie.'

'Ok. Robin! This is Matt from Fire & Rescue NSW. Are you here?'

No one answers.

There's a line of mud about a handspan from the ceiling. The house has been filled with water.

Into the flooded chaos of the living room now where amongst the chaotic debris a small white dog scrambles to stay above water, working like mad to stay on the protruding corner of an armchair. Nearby the top of a birdcage pokes out of the floodwater.

'Found a dog,' I yell, but as I wade towards it, it leaps into the water and swims towards a hallway. I grab it before it gets far and pass it back, then press on up that hallway.

'Robin?' There's a bathroom to the left and to the right a glimpse through a slightly ajar door of a submerged bed. Pushing the door gently wider, I see a red blouse floating, a woman's in it, it's her neck and upper back that are visible, she's floating facedown – her head, like much of the rest of her, hangs beneath the surface. She has drowned in her bedroom.

'There's a body in here,' I call back.

'Ok. I'm coming,' says the policeman. I wade out of the room for him to see it all as it is. 'Poor old lady,' he says.

It's windy now, the giant clumping bamboo outside my study window swaying and whooshing, leaves and shadows all a-ripple.

It's been a hard year, full of trials and torments. Renae doesn't like the wind, which after the floods seemed to carry disease. It's as if something was released. Scores of people fell ill with serious respiratory ailments including atypical pneumonia, our daughter included. One of her schoolmates coughed and vomited so hard from pneumonia he split his oesophagus, which apparently let gases into his body, causing subcutaneous emphysema. Another kid fell ill with Kawasaki disease, a rare inflammation of the body's blood vessels. Researchers are looking closely at its correlation with certain tropospheric airflow patterns.

But I love the wind. To me it is the water in which our spirits swim.

Postscript: The car saboteur was charged with crimes including damaging property with the intention of endangering life. I later heard he copped a fine and suspended sentence and was not allowed to come within a couple hundred metres of me. If I stood in the middle of the main street, he wasn't allowed to be at either the top or bottom pub. Frank, the president of the Gladiators, was later ambushed while riding alone on a country road in the Hunter Valley. He survived several gunshots to the chest and abdomen. Renae left the fire brigade when the toll of not being 'one of the boys' was simply too high. This summer I finally saw Hugo Weaving. He was picking up grog and smokes at the IGA bottle shop. He didn't recognise me.

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