

DIASPORIC LITERATURE

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A Birthday To Remember

Jan 21, 2010 02:00AM

The food was prepared, the table set. It looked like a subject for a Renoir or Bonnard. Just luscious to look at. Time for a relax, guests due to come at 7 p.m. Divine aromas of luscious food cooking permeated the atmosphere. Bliss!!

The guests arrived on time. The first drink was poured and then we heard the fire siren, and then another. The hills around reverberated with the sound.

Oh no!... I was a member of the voluntary Country Fire Authority.

Hearing those sirens, I made up my mind; "Sorry folks I have to go, enjoy, I won't be long."

Driving carefully to the tin shed Fire Station took one and a half minutes. Park, throw keys on floor, grab yellow coveralls, hat, goggles, large handkerchief, pull on boots.

Two trucks with engines revving to build up brake pressure are being scrambled upon by seven or eight people. Two female fire fighters are stuffing their hair under helmets. One sits in the front with the driver to assist on the radio, another joins us on the back of the truck. Some of us sit outside on the narrow covered bench behind the cabin, the rest stand hanging on to the handrail or anything around the tank overflowing with the water and retardant.

A yell from the driver, "Looks like a big one in the State Forest." Sirens yelping, flashing lights, we're on the move.

Off down the steep road curving every whichway - most of us are adjusting or still putting on our gear properly. You can hear the vehicle creak as it shoulders the corners, the weight of all that water makes you aware of what we carry. Someone checks the pull cord on the pump. We eye the hoses rolled on the floor, look up to the sky to see where the smoke is - not much is said.

Some one on the other side of the tank says, "Oh shit - I think I want to crap!" Some ribald response to that mixed metaphor.

We seem to roar through the township. People all stop and stare as other trucks from other areas follow us. Some people wave. Down some other hills and for the first time we see the smoke. Atom fallout shaped clouds, tinged red, are covering a wide angled view, police cars have blocked a major road and they have directed us up a hill. A helicopter sits in the middle of a traffic island.

My heart beats faster, adrenalin is now being pumped through my system ready for fight or flight. We enter the State Forest, ancient trees, mainly Eucalypts, or Gum trees as we know them, tower over 50 metres tall, and here we see them as giant fireworks all aglow. Explosion of treetops shower sparklers down around us and on us. Each side of the truck has fire on the ground on our sides and above. The pump has been primed and started, we direct broad volumes of water at the lower level

flames. We do not get out of the truck.

We move slowly, almost leaf by leaf up the hill, the radio crackles and splutters, the speaker in the back must have a loose connection. We have to guess a lot. The cabin crew know more than we do. Other trucks follow us and aim their water high on the now red glowing tree trunks.

It is as hot as Dante's proverbial hell. We are the lead unit. Our other truck has been sent off to another track parallel to us. New smoke clouds start to come in through the flames, another area had been ignited.

Instructions just received, "Do not worry about the area you are fighting, others will cover it. Go on to near the ridge and turn right to the open area and knock back that area."

In its lowest gear the truck goes up the hill, steeper, steeper and rockier, on and on.

How could it remain stable? Such an incline, the rocks under the wheels, you could hear them being crushed and dislodged. Steep one minute, the truck on an angle the next. We kept on to a more open area and saw the flames flaring and roaring, green on our left. Some safety? Out of the truck we get, hose unrolled, water on. We are going to knock this off!

Native possums and some feral cats run by on fire. A large snake writhes on the ground. Half an hour later this site was cleared.

"Go around the green area, the other edge is beginning to burn." The wind is changing. The air around us is so full of debris soot now covers our faces. My goggles are steamed up and I clean them.

Into the green area means going down. I do not know what feels better, hanging on so you don't fall backwards or hanging on so you don't fall forwards!

A sudden thump, and we stop, we are caught on a hidden rock, we are literally now like a seesaw. Our driver curses. Everyone on the truck looks sideways to see new flames hitting the sky. A long minute of manipulated revving of the engine and we move again. A bulldozer is creating a track, we keep going left, put out little spot fires and we come to a V shaped valley. We have to go around it. Time for a drink from the water container.

Eddies of air current are carrying embers and leaves like a circle of tea leaves in a cup. A bit more talk amongst the crew now.

A wind gust came. Burning branches fly in the air and land in the unburnt area. There was this enormous "woof" a huge fireball of flames setting the whole area alight.

We were trapped, flames surrounding us and above us. Those on the back bench seat dropped the thin aluminium blind to shield themselves against radiant and direct heat.

We had the pump on, the hoses trained on us with fine mist that evaporated instantly, but our clothing was wet. You could just breathe, a succession of mini gasps gave enough oxygen to take

the next breath. The heat was so intense. You could smell on top of the wood smoke, pungent odours of burning rubber. The radio operator was desperately sending messages for assistance, to no avail, being in the hollow or whatever, no messages were being transmitted.

Touching the sides of the red painted truck the paint sloughed off like skin. For a second I thought this is how we will be soon. Burns that no surgeon could repair. Death.

The two women held each other, one pulled out a crucifix from under her gear.

The sound of a plane made us look up. We couldn't see it. Within a minute we were all coloured in bright orange, and drenched with water. Steam and acrid smoke coming from all around us. We had been bombed by fire retardant. We breathed again. There was silence and then a shout. "Yahoo!"

We sat for a while longer and four other trucks came to us. One filled us up with water, one guided us out and we continued putting out burning areas as we wandered down and around the hill. Radio communication was back and we were ordered to a base down on the highway for refuelling and cold drinks. It was now three hours later but not finished, the next part of the operation was mopping up where we had been before. More fires had been flaring and we had to be on call. On and on raking the burnt earth until not one bit of white ash was left, all had to be black.

Tiredness was setting in, not so much gusto for the task now. Half an hour past the bewitching hour and the water emptied, we could go home. Down the hill again, up the curvy road to the fire station.

Off the truck, clean up, refill water, sign off the white board, which told everyone our location, a chat and a debriefing. "Might be more work tomorrow guys," said the captain. "Hotter temperature and north winds."

I go home exhausted. My wife is asleep, the house and dinner table clean. On the dinner table are several packages and cards. Seeing these I was brought up with a start. I had completely forgotten about my birthday.

P.S. It was found the next morning that the fire truck had a hole in its sump, and the fires had been deliberately lit by a deviant ex firefighter.



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Homage To Frederick

Jan 20, 2010 01:38AM

For fifty years every April 11th, my birthday, I have taken from my bookshelf a small, blue, relief stamped volume, entitled "Life of Frank Buckland," printed by Nelson. Not a great book, but fascinating, a grand opening to a new world for a young man obsessed with learning.

When I open this book it is with remembrance more than nostalgia, in fact reverence, that I view the inscription "From F. Thomas to Michael on his 12th birthday, April 11th 1952."

I have always been blessed in my life when all seems to be a struggle, when creative drive goes, when the daily news of world events begins to overwhelm, my guardian angel gives to me the gift of a situation, or person, to transform and regenerate my life. Frederick was such a gift. A mentor and someone who has always inspired me.

I was absolutely hopeless with mathematics - numbers, figures, adding up, multiplying, subtracting, dividing. I might as well be dealing with Aramaic, Hebrew or Chinese.

To baffle my teachers I used to work on the principle, if I put hundreds of numbers on a sheet, by natural selection somehow a right answer might occur at the bottom of the page when I put in the equals sign or the minus sign or the division sign. This dyslectic approach to all things tied up with numerals was compensated by a passion, a thirst for all information on zoology, biology, histology, morphology, geology, palaeontology, microscopy, anatomy, botany and drawing.

My adopted parents despaired. They could not understand. They got me a mathematics tutor, and so I met Frederick. I still remember Frederick on that Saturday morning for the first session of instruction. Frederick, about seventy years of age, quietly spoken, white haired, very thin, moustache, and oh! those vivid clear mischievous blue eyes.

We both sat in a room completely lined with bookshelves at a round Blackwood table, papers everywhere, pictures, folders stacked on the floor, and fruit trees blossomed outside the study.

Frederick told me quietly "we will do long tots today". This was his term for adding up columns of numbers.

With "Waterman's" fountain pen he made each sheet of lined paper become a calligraphic masterpiece. Black ink numerals, some cursive writing, a conversation, than a cup of tea and the first two hour session was over.

Several sessions went by ... and Frederick informed my adopted parents that he felt that not much could be done to increase my skills at this stage, but he would still try.

Every Saturday I dutifully went to his home for "tuition" and lunch. My life had changed. Frederick was an ex zoologist, a watercolour artist (not a prissy dabbler but a full bore master of the large mop brush. He was a literary critic for an international newspaper, a gardening columnist, and also had a beautiful ancient brass microscope.

My mathematics time (unknown to some people!) was spent for many, many months learning about literature, the techniques of

laying down a wash on rag paper, on preparing a graft on a fruit tree, and how to draw an image viewed under the microscope.

Frederick talked and told me about an old fashioned thing called "beauty," about the tyranny of fashion, but mostly about being authentic and always to push and extend whatever you became involved with.

I am absolutely sure that most people can look back and remember one or two humans with special affection, or some one they had a crush on, but Frederick, that man with a multiplicity of talents, and such scholarship, had a lasting influence on my life. He inspired me with his moderation, a model of a person who could be trusted and relied on, and I relied on his aesthetic judgement as though it came from Moses.

My first mentor, my greatest friend, my sage, my first idol, "Your writing in that book is still a talisman for what goes on in my visual art. Frederick, I used to think it futile you would live forever - but you do."



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I Held History In My Hand

Aug 20, 2009 09:16AM

Tesserae.



Adamantine Rock.

A Gift.

Freeform fragment from the birth place of Artemis.

My touching a 3000 B.C. surface gives an earth perfumed energy to my soul.

Put next to my cheek the temperature of time gone makes me travel to a sacred land.

In my minds eye, I see a wonderful breathing light.

Did that Macedonian Greek, the last Pharaoh in Egypt, see the snake form, birds and dolphins portrayed and crafted on the floor?

Did her ecstatic body, soft contoured, lie between the phallic pillars as the sound of the sea enhanced a graceful serenity?

Was the asp that killed her represented here?

A portent before or after the event?

My treasure held in my hand from the place meaning "revealed" projects scenes and characters into my mind.

Dreams and legend.

Evocation.

A fantasy world and a microcosm of past reality.

It is a talisman for my being.

In homage to "Nonda"

Epamondas Papadopoulos - Artist

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