

JUST ROOSTERS by David Watson

Roger moved into the miner's cottage tucked behind the grain store in late July. He spent weeks fixing up the greyhound pens that took up the entire back yard, covering the cracked concrete with packing sand, patching holes in the cyclone mesh, plumbing in water troughs, rigging trimmed branches for perches, sewing shade cloth to the top bar with baling twine then tensioning it up, twitching loose corners with tie wire, closing gaps, keeping them safe. He planted a passionfruit vine at the corner closest to the house, near the mossy downpipe that leaked whenever it rained hard.

Each pen was about the size of two single beds end to end, a fenced-in corridor running the length of one side facing ten latched doors. Tall enough to stand up in, each pen housed ten to twenty birds. Bantams were in the first two, cockerels in the next two, then the old bastards in their own pen, full size roosters in the next three, then the highly-strung birds in the back two cages. Although the size of bantams, jungle fowl were the fiercest and most belligerent, flaring their hackles like bullfighters' capes, throwing themselves at rivals, wielding their spurs with deft kicks and parrying lunges. For whatever reason black roosters didn't bother them, so he kept them in with the big Australorps and they all got on just fine, their blazing mantles like tiger lilies against glossy foliage.

Each morning he'd sweep around the silos and sheds, cleaning up spilt wheat or barley, pigeon shit, papery elm leaves and the odd mouse carcass. If sweepings were scarce, he'd fill a wheelbarrow or two from the mouldy grain in the last silo and share it all out

among the cages. Crates of spoiled fruit and vegetables, bags of stale bread or a trailer-load of lawn clippings would be dropped off out the front, often after dark. Every fortnight, he'd shovel out the shit from each pen, bag it up in hessian sacks and leave them out the front of his house for the nursery down past the race track. By the time the passion fruit had grown over the first two pens, these jobs had become the new tempo.

At first, people would just drop off birds; two old roosters in a cardboard box, four cockerels in an onion bag. He'd size them up, check them for injuries and lice, give them a dusting or oil their legs if needed, then put them in their own milk crate with a can of water wired to a corner. He'd leave the crate in the corridor in front of the pen he thought would be the right one and give the birds a couple of days to get acquainted. If the newcomer didn't settle, he'd move it in front of another pen until they calmed down. When the new birds were released into their appointed pens, there'd be a stand-off or two, a bluff, a fight, some chasing and head-pecking then, within minutes, the flocks would return to normal.

The first thing that struck you when visiting Roger's place was the sound. It was quiet. Weirdly quiet. Sure, you'd hear the sound of chickens, but not the chaotic din you might expect. Just the odd cluck, an occasional squawk, that's it. The strangest thing though, and what most people commented on, was that there was no crowing. Now and then, a newcomer would beat his wings and start crowing but straight away the rest of his pen (and often, birds in neighbouring pens) would pile in and shout him down, drowning him out. This might go on for a few days but, eventually, the newcomer learned. The uncanny silence returned.

People started to come by, wanting to buy a rooster. The answer was no, an immediate no.

I mean, come off it, whadaya think this place is, a bloody pet shop?

People persisted and, eventually, Roger decided he'd never sell a bird or give one away, but he would trade. He kept a ledger, a spiral-bound pad of blue-lined graph paper long discarded from school work. Every rooster that left was marked with a cross. People would come at all hours. Early evenings were favoured by the real poultry people—the birds were calm, the air was still. They took the longest to choose a bird. Mostly old blokes with ropey necks creased under the collar. They'd walk up and down the corridor, crouching sometimes for ten minutes or more in front of the pens, watching the birds intently, talking to them. They'd enter the chosen pen, always closing the door behind them and handle the birds methodically, checking the wings, feet, bases of the feathers. Young families with noisy kids would come on weekends, often mid-morning. They'd typically want a particular breed with an unfamiliar name. He'd tell them if they saw one they wanted, to point it out and he'd get it for them. But when he explained that it was for trading only they looked puzzled, exchanging embarrassed glances before they left. He tried 'renting out' roosters to families with backyard chooks, but they rarely came back.

The poultry people would share information with him, point out flaws, compare breeds.

“See that fella there, the one preening. That’s a good tail, that’s what you want in a Welsummer. See how it curves down all the way but stays thick and tapers real gradual.”

“Now that’s a proper comb, that’s how an Ancona should look. See how the points are the same size and they’re all lined up. Yep, if he had a proper white cheek, mate, he’d be a champ. Make a good breeder that one. Might want to hang onto him”.

For someone who’d spent twenty-odd years working with chickens, Roger knew remarkably little about poultry. He had no idea there were so many different types. At the hatchery there had only been two kinds: female and male; wanted and unwanted. As his knowledge grew, he became more selective about which birds he would and wouldn’t trade. He knew the Chinese wanted silkies for making soup, a special broth for women after their period to restore their strength. As long as they brought him a new bird or two, that was fine. But those squirrely blokes who wanted the angriest roosters, who traded nervous birds with deep cuts and scarred combs. They walked away empty-handed.

Now and then, a big lot of roosters would arrive, either from one of the feed stores that stuffed-up an order or from a ranger who’d seized birds from a cock fighter. He got to know one of the rangers fairly well. Frank, a heavy-set bloke with scarred arms, a fleeting smile and metal-rimmed glasses that darkened in the sun. It was Frank who taught Roger about rubbing paraffin on the birds’ legs when they had mites and to check their armpits and arses for lice. It was Frank who told the green grocer down the road that his spoiled vegies were always welcome at Roger’s place. He’d come by

occasionally after work, and just sit on the back veranda having a beer and watching the roosters.

It was Frank who taught Roger how to kill.

“A quick death mate; it’s the least any animal deserves”.

He showed him how to tuck the bird under one arm, hand braced against the bird’s shoulders, holding the neck with the other hand, heel of the thumb against the base of the base of the head, then pulling the head from the neck with a gradual tug. No fuss. With practice his hands grew surer, their shuddering death more familiar.

One morning, when it was still dark, Roger jerked violently awake to a terrible commotion. Some roosters were crowing, others were screaming. He jumped out of bed, hurried down the hall and stood on the back veranda, eyes straining in the low light.

Carnage and mayhem, everywhere. Roosters hurling themselves at each other, at the walls of their pens, doors rattling, feathers everywhere, blood tainting the air.

fucken foxes I knew this was gonna happen I fucken told ya

He checked all the pens and there were no holes, no doors open, no birds out.

Then he heard noise coming from the front of the house, unfamiliar noise. Around the corner, beside a pile of halved pumpkins, there were three plastic crates full of birds. They were different. They were hens, a dozen or more in each crate, dishevelled faded feathers and burned-off upper beaks.

some fucken do gooder dropped them off here and now they're your fucken problem

What should I do? What can I do? My boys know they're here—they'll tear each other apart! What do I do? Kill them all? Move them? Where?

He tried lifting one of the crates; it was lighter than expected, no heavier than a bag of wheat. The chickens muttered as their weight was suddenly shifted, triggering a frenzy in the pens behind him, the crazed roosters shrieking in synchrony. He propped the bottom edge on his hip and headed to the far side of the grain store. There was a culvert there, down a steep bank behind the machinery shed. One by one he hulked the crates down there, the chickens crouched silent and limp but watching intently through the plastic slats as the morning sun broke through low clouds. He left them stacked in the shade, two eggs rolling in the bottom corner of one crate, untarnished, the colour and sheen of onion skin.

Once they were gone, Roger checked back on his pens. It was worse than he feared. Dead and dying birds on the ground in the first few pens, all the birds he could see with gashes, hunks of feather and skin caught in the mesh. He hosed the pens out, removing the dead birds and dusting sulphur powder on the birds he could catch. Forty-three dead birds. All the Australorps were dead. The Hamburgs' immaculate white breasts streaked red. The old English panting and cowering in a corner, covered in dust.

As he was wrestling with what to do next, a vehicle pulled up. A fresh-faced woman in her early twenties appeared. He recognized her as one of the trainee rangers who sometimes accompanied Frank.

“Hi Roger—thanks for taking care of those birds I dropped off last night. We had our hands full with all the pigs and ducks and I thought you'd know what to do with them...”

“Where are they?”

It took every fibre of strength not to scream and shout at her and run her off his property. The roaring in his ears. The death swimming before his eyes, the gasping bubbling sound of birds in his hands, clotted down feathers sticking to his arms and hands. All he could manage was:

“They're over there”, gesturing to the silos as he strode past to find some chaff bags.

He knelt and began methodically transferring the broken birds into bags. Looking back up, he realized she had no idea what she was looking at; what had happened.

“It was the hens. The bloody hens drove ‘em crazy.”

“Don’t ever bring hens here again”.

“Don’t—”

He stopped himself, clamped his mouth shut, squeezing his eyes tight, burning and continued bagging up the still-warm bodies.

She left, took the chickens with her and Roger was alone, again.

He carried the bags two by two, out to the skip beside the silos, blood staining the muddy brown bags, the rough fibres hot in his clenched hands.

As he returned for the last bag, a rooster began crowing.

Uninterrupted.

Then another.

Soon, it seemed every rooster joined in, shouting, the air crashing and roiling like the ocean. Birds climbed to the highest perches they could, necks arched, eyes bulging as they cried out with every ounce of energy they could muster.

It took weeks for the hierarchies to re-establish. More birds died, most of the survivors limped or had a drooping wing or an eye crusted shut. The crowing became less regular, the fighting subsided. Eventually things returned to normal.

On an old tail gate he'd found propped up in the machinery shed, Roger painted "NO HENS—JUST ROOSTERS" in red enamel paint from a tin in an unopened box from Judith's old room. He tied it to the front fence and walked back inside.