

CORRUGATIONS

— memory runs in ripples of even amplitude.

My life hangs in a corrugated sling suspended between myself as a child and myself as a mother, twin poles of corrugated security, slung from rural Boneo in the fifties to suburban Darwin in the nineties.

Sleeping under rooves of corrugated iron I have never felt frightened by the sounds of the wind scraping on the roof, and have dreamt on to the incessant drumming of the rain on the tin skin above me. My entire childhood was spent sleeping under rooves of corrugated iron.

The sound of rain on a rippled tin roof is a lullaby to me.

I went to school - one teacher, one room, fireplace at one end, under a corrugated iron roof with high glass mesh skylights where the trapped starlings huddled. I chased boys and ate my playlunch in shelter sheds and bike sheds wrought of corrugated iron.

In the Boneo Fire Brigade Hall under a steeped roof of corrugated iron, I went to Sunday School in the Supper Room and my teacher had a box of 72 Derwents; I played Sleeping Beauty on the stage in my Flowergirl dress and learnt the Progressive Barn Dance on the talc slippery wooden floor.

Where I grew up, snakes were everywhere and sheets of corrugated iron protected me from them and concealed their menace from me.

Around our house my father built a high wooden fence of offcuts - the useless side slices of timber from the tall plantation trees (*Pinus radiata*) that grew in The Pines next door to our place, milled first and sold cheap at the local saw mill. Straight and scratchy on one face, and knotty and rough on the other. Where the fence met the ground he nailed a skirt of corrugated iron and dug it into the ground to fool the big red bellied Black Snakes, Tiger Snakes, Copperheads and King Browns that were everywhere.

These were the snakes that Cookie, a grinning ferret of man who worked for my Dad used to spot first with his watery blue eyes - as good as any Black's - and kill. And how he killed them- by picking them up by the flailing tail and swinging them in a hoop like a stock whip until he heard the back crack.

Witnessing this terrifying performance executed with such nonchalance and disregard for the predictable but unforeseen, gave Cookie a certain authority. So when I asked him where my Dad was, and he said, "Up a tree looking for daylight" I believed him, and if he said, "He went mad and I shot him", I didn't believe him. Well not after the first time, but I worried that maybe this time he really had...

But snakes were always around and they certainly didn't come down in the last shower, as I had, so I was always worried about the front gate. I loved to stand on the cross piece and swing on the gate while I watched the world outside the yard. It too had the split sheet of corrugated iron wired onto the bottom, but even when it was shut, there were necessary gaps which any old half smart snake could slither through.

And they must have because my first memory is of me almost putting my hand on one in the Super Room, where the bags of Super phosphate were stored out of the rain. The

Super Room was our playroom where my sisters and I bedded down our doll families and had endless arguments and tea parties. It had one window boarded up with sheets of corrugated iron and under its frilled edge a brown snake lurked; I ran out screaming and Dad came and prised it out with a crow bar and battered its head in. Unlike Cookie my father took no chances.

I like to think that we have a photo of this snake or at least of the ones my Mother killed but our only snake photo is of two monsters Dad got down in the swamp at the back of our place. In the Box Brownie photo, she is in one of those full skirted floral frocks that I used to hide behind when anyone came to the door, a scarf is tied around her head with a floppy bow on top and she still looks like a film star. I am standing beside her, all knees, in shorts. She has both her arms raised and is gingerly holding the tails of the two snakes as far away from her billowing skirt as possible and I have my legs akimbo and both arms stretched out as far as they can go to show how big they were.

Every night before I went to sleep, I shut my eyes tightly and pressed my index fingers on my closed lids to see the stars... then I opened them quickly to check on the half shut door and the window, then drawing my knees up almost to my chin and dragging my nightie down over the knee boulders, I tried to go to sleep. I was convinced that at the bottom of my bed under the chenille bedspread there was a writhing mass of snakes going round in circles chasing each others' tails like the tigers in 'Little Black Sambo'. I sometimes dared myself to stretch out and jab one bare leg down to the bottom of the bed. I was never bitten but stayed shy for a long time.

I loved to run a stick along a rippling corrugated iron fence revelling in the staccato music of thud slide thud and the regular rest of the bouncy twang where the sheets lipped over. We knew it would frighten the life out of all the snakes for miles around, and we were sure we heard them slink off trailing their tell tale tails behind.

My favourite place in our yard behind that fence, was under the corner of the tank stand where the green painted corrugated iron tank dribbled silently from the rusted nail holes. It was always wet and cool, mossy and ferny; a tropical paradise I called it and made it the special home for my Black doll. I planted gardens for her, broke off stems of ruby red Fushcia bush and stuck them straight into the soft ground where they always struck and arranged slimy greenish pieces of broken bricks to make her pools to bathe in during the heat waves of the long school holidays when we wished we were at the beach.

The best job of all was to be sent out to check the tank to see how many rungs it had climbed during the inch and a half that fell last night. I would knock on the corrugations of the tank with my closed fist the way I saw my Father do and pause and listen after each knock for the muffled bass note we hoped for, and then for the fun of it, I would keep on knocking as high as I could reach in case a miracle had happened and the water reappeared after a few hollow ringing rungs. It never did but I liked the empty sound even more than the full sound, but I never told him that.

One Summer my Father made a new cattle trough from a corrugated iron mould; two bracelets of corrugated iron staked in position one inside the other with star pickets into which he poured concrete, like cake mixture. I still remember the artistry of the perfect ripples reproduced in solid, silent form after he extracted the curved sheets. When it was first filled with water from the Furphy on the back of the truck we were

allowed to swim in it, and I had for a few days the delicious dream that we finally had a swimming pool but it soon got brown and slimy and only fit for cattle to lap.

In the new corrugated iron tanks resting on their sides before they were put up on their high wooden stands, we would play, standing up inside, our feet straddling the far edges and rocking them to one side then the other. We pretended we were on ride at Luna Park.

When the Southerlies blew up from Bass Strait; straight from the Antarctic, my Mother said, you huddled under the crenelated chenille bedspread and listened to the squall rattling the roof, and the sighing of the dark Cypress trees. By the morning a sheet might have finally flapped itself off the shed and would be discovered a week later in the house paddock but you wouldn't dare lift it in case there was a snake underneath. Sometimes it might have been already picked up and thrown on the back of the ute and only its impression was left in the grass - a pattern of bloodless stripes - some lime cordial green but darker than the almost white worm like rows even more flattened lying alongside.

My Father visits and he tells me Cookie's son, Terry Cook - my age; we were in Bubs together - is a professional snake catcher. He told my Father that the best way to catch them is to throw down a sheet of corrugated iron on the ground in the morning, and by mid afternoon there'll be snakes centrally heated and sleeping underneath.

I tell Dad there are lots of snakes here, but over the years we've only seen a couple of yellowy green tree snakes looped languidly over a branch like spaghetti left to dry. He reckons they're there alright, and bets me that if he threw down a sheet of iron on our front lawn - there'd be snakes under it by morning. I'm not game to take him up. He says you hardly see a snake down our way these days - once they got rid of the rabbits the snakes went too.

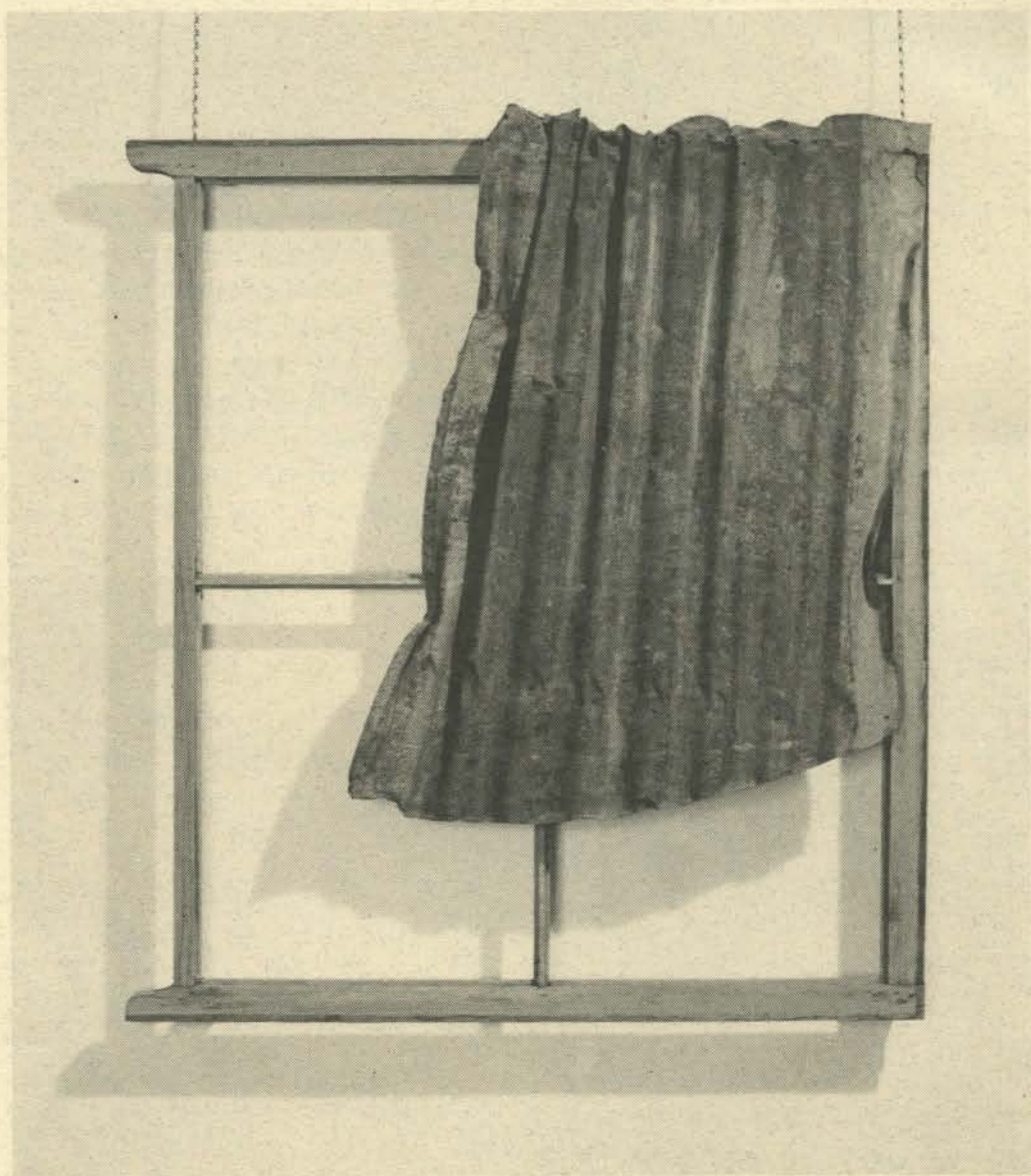
Here, our children sleep under corrugated iron and rotating fans, protected by flywire and horizontal shelves of glass held up by fibro walls clad in a new breed corrugated iron; more properly custom orbe zinc alumine.

They welcome the rain as I did and have never seen a cyclone.

Our children have never been to Sunday School but they know about the Rainbow Serpent and Lightning Man and his wife. The black dolls they have are anatomically correct and the Gollywog their Grandmother knitted for them was always called Gollyperson.

I try to imagine the flying sheets of corrugated iron and the dreadful scraping splitting noise but I can't. Imagination resists the truly terrifying. It is not to be toyed with. We protect them as our parents protected us - with faith and the best of our abilities. We have built upon the rock and not upon the sand - all will be well.

I rely on corrugated iron to keep them safe, snug as a bug in a rug as I was. We are connected by the presence of wind and longed for rain, snakes and Rainbow Serpents - encircled in the even curves of iron. Regular curves of equal amplitude, the wavy ripples in the wet sand left by the departing tide, which I love to step on and flatten with my bare feet. An Ancestor figure marking the land where she walks . . . indifferent to the fate of individual corrugations. ■



Pink Window, 1975
by Rosalie Gascoigne

100% tracy

curated by steve fox & thelma john
Darwin, 1994



ISBN: 0 646 22041 1

100% TRACY

1

100% TRACY

100%tracy

A R T I S T S

Rosalie Gascoigne

Franck Gohier

Ted Jonsson

Ingo Kleinert

Kim Mahood

Judith Christian Miller

Chris Mulhearn

Sally Mumford

Dan Murphy

Peter Quinn

Skye Raabe

Christine Turner