



We never found out where she came from, our hen. One morning she was just there, in the back yard. That was one of the times when only two of us, Mum and I, lived in that house. One of the times when Dad had gone off, we didn't know where, driven by demons we couldn't imagine. It happened at unpredictable moments. Something would set him off, he'd start drinking, and he'd disappear. We had the house to ourselves. Life settled down a bit. I'd go off to my Seventh Day Adventist Primary school each day and hurry home, glad to have Mum to myself.

And then someone else came to live with us, this plump, glossy Black Orpington, gentle and sweet-natured. She loved a cuddle, and would sit on my knee, crooning soft warm chicken songs for hours while I stroked and settled her feathers and babied her as my special doll. She had a whole repertoire of contented burbles and trills. Sitting with her warm bulk on my knee I felt happy, protected. I wondered who she was, really.

I found out much later that chickens make about 30 different sounds. We'd do well to learn their language. I tried murmuring her talk back to her, which she seemed to like, arching her neck under my hand, fluffing and resettling herself. I don't remember how long she stayed with us, I only remember the pleasure of having her there. One day she wasn't. There were no signs of pain or mayhem—no foxes in Tasmania in those days. We thought she must have moved on to warble to another family.

My father came home later that year. He'd been in a War Repatriation Hospital for some time, and looked ill and tired, the emphysema beginning to cave in his chest. We never saw the chicken again.

a handful of mash  
that ache for something  
different