

# Broken Egg

*I K Paterson-Harkness*

1

They come bounding at me bow-legged,  
expecting beaks like upside down spoons and brass eyes unblinking.

*Oi, get off*, I skip backwards, I gave you the wheat!

Don't you remember pecking my hand and hearing me squeak?

I check for eggs inside the roosting shed, poke my head in,  
perceive a hen-like shape and beak swiveling my way.

*Oops, sorry* – I say, retreat, retreat.

A rock in your place, a sleeping cat, even,  
so stuffed with shadows, I'd think it a hen.

Sometimes I hear you wailing all the way from the front fence.

With misshapen eggs, I wonder why you lay.

Maybe because, secretly, you enjoy the quiet, dark,

the rustle of your feathers in the straw,

the curve, the release.

2

My mother owns sixty-one eggcups

though seldom eats her own eggs.

They sit in a brown cabinet

beside the lamp whose height hides a layer of dust.

The rest of her house is spotless, of course.

She's a short woman, it's not her fault.

She tried to have more kids but was stuck with just the one,  
then my dad won big with the bonus bonds and moved away  
with the lady who cut all our hair.

Two of the eggcups were wedding presents.

They sit front, centre, polished brightly.

Mum doesn't receive many gifts.

In the early eve she's sleeve-deep in the garden

speaking to her hens, upturning rocks.

Beetles and millipedes have no safe nooks.

I'll never understand the pleasure she gets, digging potatoes,  
wrenching sticky weeds from the mischievous earth.

She lays her carrots with care,

side by side on the lilac rug we used to take to the beach.

It's covered in holes, I don't know why she doesn't biff it.

I sit with her till dusk while she shovels compost, full of broken shells.

She told me once that when hens eat a broken egg they get a taste.

### 3

Dad could catch a wave with his body, like a rocket,  
arms stretched straight in front, strong legs kicking.  
Mum and I skulked beneath the parasol, watching him.  
I hear he has three kids now – probably brown, and fit, like him.

As a teenager I hated this farm.  
I'd climb the overgrown rhododendrons,  
perch like a pissed-off gargoyle, listing unfairnesses.  
There's nothing fun about being a kid.  
When the doctor told me I couldn't have any I was glad.

Dad sent me a postcard once, from France,  
wrote it like he wrote them every week.  
I didn't recognise the handwriting  
till Mum pointed out his name at the bottom.  
I remember she cried.  
She told me once she would've liked grandchildren.

Sometimes I see you running wide-armed at me,  
scabby knees and bright eyes unflinching.  
I've seen plasters with pictures on them, at the supermarket, just for kids.  
*Oi, get off*, I tut, holding you at arm's length  
and poking your tummy till you squeak.