

Steven Kay

by Ned Winn-Dix

I want to impart a story which, when I first heard it years ago, so struck me with its strangeness that it has held fast in my mind, defying the twin tides of age and forgetting. It concerns a man whose life took on a dimension so fantastic that he was immediately and completely entered into the whispering halls of legend. I had idly read, like so many others, what existed in the newspapers about Steven Kay but it was only over a chance beer in Warialda that the details of his sorry tale were filled in. The story I have put down here is the product of my subsequent research in dusty archives and over stained bartops. Like all legends, the facts shimmer and re-form, so I cannot attest to the exact order or intricacies of events. However, do not think that this tale is the work of an old man's imagination or a drunkard's yarn for, if you ever have the luck, and even now I am not sure if it is good luck or bad, to see the figure of Steven Kay moving through the scrub, that image and the queer feeling on seeing him will stay with you forever.

Steven grew up on a property outside Moree, the asthmatic fourth child of a cattle farmer he spent his youth the target of his brothers' practical jokes and his mother's floury embrace. Because of his weak lungs, he did the jobs that required less strain – distributing salt lick, fence repairs, washing out the silos. He would enjoy his tasks alone, content to meander down the fence-lines. His angular frame could often be seen in the distance, bent over a tangle of metal like some old soak over his glass.

At harvest time he would strip down to his underwear and wash out the insides of the big, cylindrical silos with pesticides, readying them for the gathered sorghum. One summer, his brothers, bored from a day's harvesting, loosed the sorghum into the silo that Steven was cleaning. The sorghum-dust thickened his spit for weeks afterwards, and the mechanical pinging of the grain on the metal walls still filled his ears. His lungs never fully recovered from the incident and, four months later, Steven left the property for Sydney.

He found an apartment and a job at a small firm which sold construction materials. At first the smog suffocated him, like bushfire season back home, and he would wake sweaty and anxious, watching for a glow outside the window, but with time and the improved puffers, he became used to this new air. He settled into a routine; moving from his work to his apartment to the local park in a small triangle of existence. In the park he would sit with a crossword and watch the pub across the street fill up with smoke and flashes of laughter until the night descended so low that he couldn't make out its clues.

The tranquillity of this existence could offer him few references when the steady passage of his life jack-knifed off its track. In fact, it is through the soft light of these suburban streets that the beam of the fantastic shines ever brighter with its bizarre glow. Around this time his mother died and Steven, feeling his last links to the country crumble, started to have dreams. It was always the same dream, he would be wading in bore-mud with his brothers and start to sink. The mud would cover his body and press into his mouth and lungs; he would fight in vain, thrashing around until his struggles were reduced to the small kicking movements of a gored dog. He would wake up wide-eyed and gasping for air, in a bed strewn with sheets and sweat and pull in vain on his puffer.

Soon, the tight feeling in his chest started on him during the daytime. His lungs felt like they were confined by steel bands, and each breath came pulled from the depths just in time. At work he was tired and irritable, and would take numerous breaks where he would sit and will his rusty diaphragm to move. He stayed out late in the park, trying to tire himself out, and would climb into bed carefully, so as not to disturb the memories that rose off it like seeds from a windswept field. Steven, for the first time since leaving the farm, resorted to alcohol yet even the thick rationality of liquor couldn't stem the dreams.

His sick days became permanent, he would go for long walks to escape the chalky scrape of his lungs and it was only while he was moving did his breath come more easily and his muscles soothe his aching body, the rest of the time he suffered. The walks became longer, he would stay out until his mind numbed with the effort to stay awake. He became late on his rent and his apartment fell into disarray. The morning would come like surfacing from a deep dive.

His doctor could not understand his affliction, it was not the old asthma, this was something different and the prescribed rest and drugs only clamped his lungs and brain. Tortured by the uncertainty of his condition, it was in his walks, increasingly, that Steven found solace. As he paced the streets, he gradually became aware of the most curious sensation. The night air stopped flowing around him, like wake around a liner, but seemed to pass right through his pores. It was as though his body had lost its exterior shell, he was opened up to elements that were taking the liberty to traverse his organs. He had the impression that his skin had been peeled away; he was invisible, untouchable, permeable. No callous border separated his being from the particles that enveloped it. When he paused, the tightness would again grip him, squeezing air out of his body like paint from a tube until he was forced to move off again in search of breath.

They found Steven's lungs wouldn't operate unless he was moving; the moment he paused the oxygen leaked from his body and his heartbeat dulled. He was trapped in a body that couldn't ever stop, half-man, half-shark. It was at this fantastical point that Steven's story briefly entered the consciousness of the populace. In newspapers articles, Steven was heralded as a medical miracle for a time yet, with the steady succession of failed experiments and diagnoses, interest faded and Steven quietly slipped from the public gaze.

It was in the pub in Warialda that I heard of him again. A man was proclaiming he had seen old Steve down near Croppa Creek when his cattle had got loose. I offered to exchange a beer for his story and so he happily trotted out the old legends with the ease of an experienced handler. Yet when I pushed him for concrete information his eyes grew dark and I left him with his beer and friends and returned to my room upstairs. As I lay on my bed, the image of the protean figure pacing the neighbouring fields echoed in my thoughts, looping through the stays of my brain until it formed a dense knot. I scratched around for more information but Steven had taken on the aspect of a myth, a man who had fallen into the town's history from another age and, like that history, was no more important. Tired of rumour, I spent days camping out in the scrub, with a swag and a small pack, scanning the horizons for a human form. The schools of kangaroos would startle me, and I would quickly lift the binoculars to my eyes, but watching as they surged across the expanse I felt myself wonder if he had not changed himself into another form, another being, one beyond my recognition. I would retire to my bed nicked with doubt.

I finally saw him at dusk many weeks later. I was standing on a ridge, looking out over Coppham plain. In the failing light I saw a hazy image of a man, receding into the purple shadows with a light pack and a rifle slung over his shoulder. I couldn't make out much more, yet it was not the figure but the movement that held my attention, he did not have the gait of a man. There was no swing or roll to his step, so common for people of the country; he glided, still and erect, across the earth. He moved with such ease that it seemed like the world itself turned while he strode, permanent, above it. I started to descend the ridge but halted, remaining still as he moved away in a perfectly straight line, crossing that wide expanse of dirt and scrub until I lost him in the murky distance. As I made my way back to the pub, the evening air suddenly lost its warmth and, hurrying, I turned my collar up to the animals calling the onset of darkness.