

## IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

In an extract from **GAIL MORGAN'S** *The Day My Publisher Turned Into A Dog*, frustrated novel-writer Jane Hardacre has another run-in with the annoying Delphine, doyenne of daiquiris and late afternoon crayfish lunches.

**G**OING to a publisher was like waiting to hear a will read. Benefits usually went elsewhere, and a smile of friendly indifference was the order of the day. Jane Hardacre approached the Lewisham office with apprehension. I ask you, dear reader, to imagine a renovated terrace next to a shabby warehouse — the concept of "poor relation" in this way built into the bricks and mortar.

Hardacre was very much the shabby door-to-door person. Her manuscript was dog-eared, her shoes were so down-at-heel they resembled slippers. "All I need now is an industrial accident," she thought. "It might help the finances for a while. No doubt they have smelt my desperation from as far away as Glebe Fish Markets."

Hardacre had fallen on hard times, as most of us do. Being a serious novelist was looking less novel and more serious by the minute. Her capital was gone. No doubt she'd be offered some piddling advance by Delph. Damn writing to hell. Damn Delphine to hell, too. The woman might be underpaid by corporate standards, but she had a car, credit cards, two marlin, her own townhouse with electric garage door, intercom, swimming pool. Delph lived like a rosella in a gilded cage. At weekends she and Rowena would float on their lilos in the water tank, nibbling on their delectious wholegrain assiduously, parroting whatever accepted wisdom waggled its finger through their cage. It was all too much. Hardacre's imagination began to grow feverish.

Inside her manuscript box was a palpitating heart. Gross, red, revealing. People would one day gather round her book like it was a road accident. "Oh my God, the poor woman. Where's her

marlin? Ugh, there's something revolting there. Ugly and palpitating. Is it alive? It can't be true. Got to get away." She felt too protective of her characters, the ones she'd brought into the world to palpitate and drive away the crowds. It wasn't their fault they'd been written.

Delphine would torture her with the imperfection of it all. She would read out some loose revelation, sip her coffee and look sympathetic. Then she would take five to compare the latest offering with *The Artemis of Anchovy Beach*, her favourite, the only one that wasn't a bush saga.

She couldn't bring herself to go in. What a pretty little terrace. What a piece of Tweedledum, all perky and wistful with wisteria. White and wonderbar with plenty of notices to the postperson. How could she go in. She felt just as gouged out as the building itself. A building that had vomited up its contents to make room for Rowena's Mayan antiques and exercise bike. Delph's domain owned a Bullworker, and had signatures of famous people scrawled on its rustically plastered walls.

Hardacre growled when she considered her own prison on Malabar Road. She got angry at the thought of Val and Dan moving out of their Epping house because it was "too big for them". Poverty had driven them to "Excalibur", where they'd been mugged so often they didn't need to go to the doctor for tranquillisers.

Hardacre had anticipated well the mood at Forget-Me-Not. Rowena and Delph had been placing their hopes on a move out of Lewisham, and into a more salubrious suburb. They had whispered McMahons Point into a deaf corporate ear. But the ailing profits of the company — thanks to bundles of assorted Hardacreage — pointed to

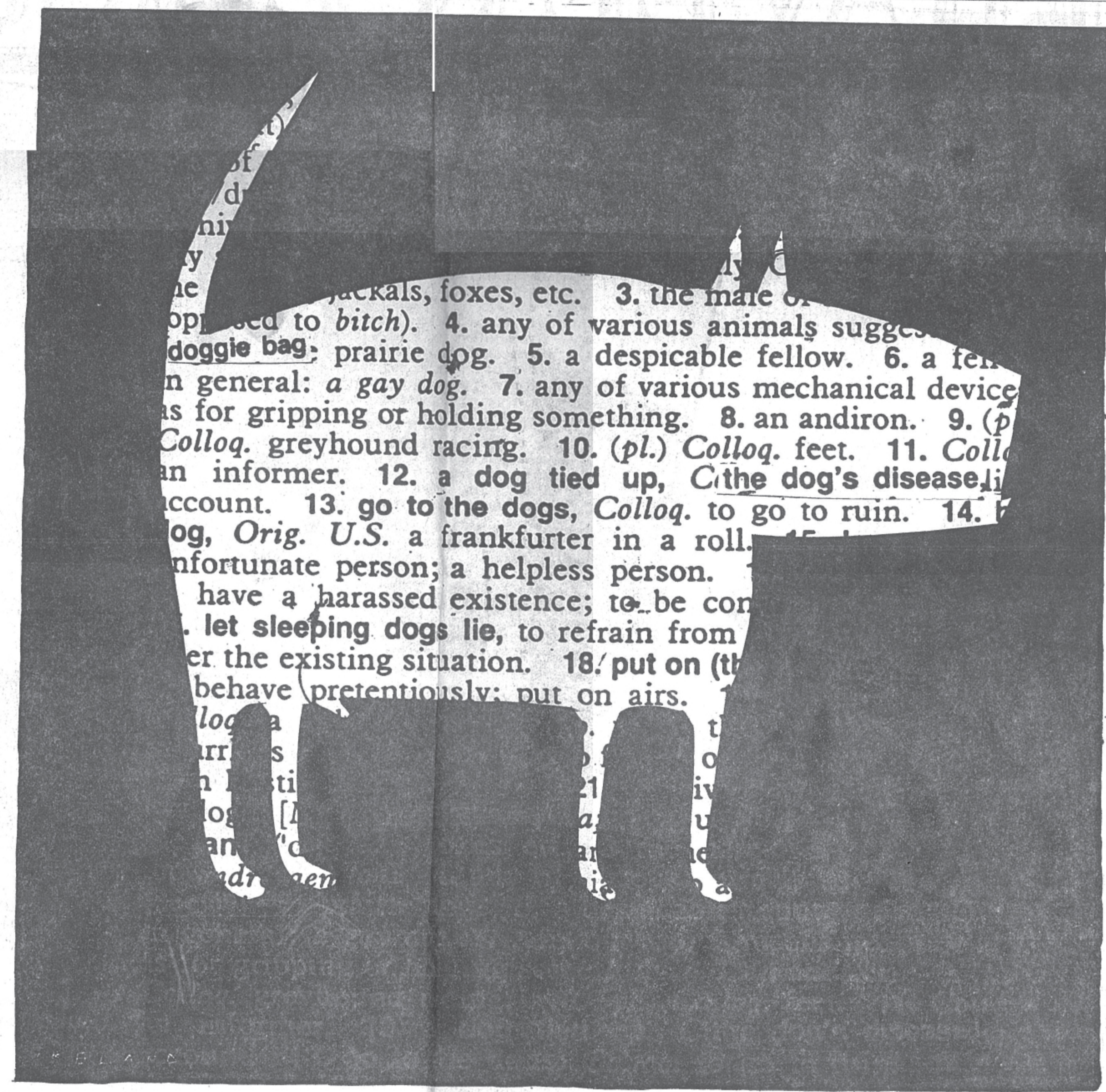


Illustration by ANDREW IRELAND

economy measures. They would have to tighten their belts, cut back on cocktails, cancel freebies to Frankfurt, and publish fewer books in smaller type on ever faster disintegrating paper.

In fact the mood of the office was reptilean as Jane walked through the door. She hadn't seen them for five years, but their faces fell as if it were only yesterday. "What have you got for us? Another sturdy Hardacre special? It looks thinner. It is thinner. What? You weren't serious about writing that serious novel? Now? At a time when we've been asked to concentrate on the coffee table?"

"We thought you were joking when you said 'something serious.' But it's bound to be competent. We have great confidence in our authors. Not that we 'do' much serious writing these days. We're tightening our belts, doing a lot

of 'how to' books for the gardener and home renovator. The romance list is flourishing.

"If it were only feminist, but I can tell at a glance it's not that. Never mind. I'm sure it's going to be marvellous. Everyone has at least one good book in them, and who's to say yours won't be serious. We'll have to send it out, of course, to as many readers as our budget will bear. You don't like that word, budget, do you Jane? Nobody does these days. I know five readers will be expensive and time-wasting, but they are such a valuable cross-section of public taste. There is nothing like a committee decision to achieve excellence. As Rowena well knows, there are no egos in this office, no stars. Take away the capital and you could call us a co-operative. Women are much less power-crazed than men. You should

understand that, Jane, locked away in your little attic, typing vigilantly like a medieval artisan. It must make you feel tremendously satisfied at the end of the day to know you're not chasing the dollar like everyone else. I envy my writers their innocence. I suppose I sound patronising? Rowena is always accusing me of being patronising. She keeps me honest. Would you like a coffee? We can't send you back to, where is it? Malabar, without a cup of coffee.

"Whatever you do, don't worry about the book. We'll get it back to you as soon as we can. Six months at the outside. I say that to cover us. More than likely we can give you an answer in three. What do I need to tell you these things for, anyway? You know the ropes. You're not some pock-faced little idealist bringing in a first novel. I

thank God for writers who know the ropes."

Jane left feeling homicidal. If she hadn't known the ropes, she might've left feeling suicidal. She began to plan ways of doing her enemy in. D-day. "Pock-faced little idealists" would be grateful; so, too, the dusky Rowena waiting to step into the D-day stilettos.

What end would be best? Feeding her to a book-pulping truck? Draining out the brake fluid to make sure. Binding her into the binding of *Prometheus Unbound*. Taking her out to meet Val and Dan's muggers at Liverpool. Giving her a Gatsby send-off on an air bed. Wiring up her electric blanket to Wallerawang substation? Hacking into her computer and commanding as many "turkeys" as possible to reprint? The possibilities were endless.

"How will I ever be able to write full time?" Hardacre groaned. "I know my country needs the blood of its authors, but even the regular army allows blood to be shed full time. Perhaps I should go back to the typing pool. That's if they'll employ someone greying, fraying, widening and moulting.

"How could she qualify to grovel to fat cats in the second division?" they'd say. "How many sprays of duco will it take? She looks like a marlinless frump. An absolute cert for repetitive strain injury. Two months and compensation is in her eyes. Rowena's had more typing hours behind her than she can take."

Hardacre winced. Perhaps she should see a mortician before the interview. Even Italian shoes might not save her from unemployment. What was she going to do to keep herself out of debt?

There was always jackarooing in the gulf country, selling her body in some villainous country town where men smelt of cow and talked bull. Perhaps she could hide in a horse float heading up north — a photo-finish to see who looked more amenable at the end of it all.

There, in the deep-fried golden country, she might buy a fishing line to fish off the Great Barrier Reef, enclosing the odd blue ringer in a padded post bag for Delph. She could give herself over to the simple pleasures of beachcombing, wending her way from one Japanese resort to the next, picking up bits of dead reef and giving them the kiss of life.

The kiss of life was what she needed, now dead and defeated on the 399 bus home. How would drivers cope with someone dying on the bus? Would they wait until the end of their shift before taking the corpse back to the depot?

Fortunately for her driver there were atavistic spasms left in her demoralised frame. Hardacre experienced the immense fatigue that went with rejection, the boredom of battle in a world without prizes.

Caught up in the tumbleweed of her own despair, Hardacre failed to notice a marlin gazing in her direction. The gorgeous creature was wearing an Italian jumper and designer jeans. He exhibited concentrated interest. No doubt there was something nubile behind her, some piece of porn from a private girls' school. Hardacre looked cautiously into the reflection in front to see who was sitting behind her. Gadzooks, there was an empty row.

The marlin began to circle. Quelle chance. You like fraying, greying, dracos. Correction. You adore Hardacre — successful novelist, wit and raconteur. You've read one of my books? Recognise my face from that outrageously flattering jacket photo? Oh, er, you like *The Artemis of Anchovy Beach*? Forgiven. Yes, all is forgiven. What a spunk. I could lay down my life for you. Am I free? Always. Is this lack of oxygen I feel altitude sickness? Not The Regent. It's far too expensive! What kind of job do you have that you can afford The Regent? Oh... you're in publishing.

So much for being rescued from misery. Hardacre watched her rejected marlin swim out to sea. It was not in her nature to woo the camp commandant. Had that beautiful creature been in any other walk of life, all would've been well, but there were times when beggars had to be choosers.

*The Day My Publisher Turned Into A Dog*, published by Frances Allen, is available in hardback now for \$24.95.