

UNSUNG HEROES

David Campbell

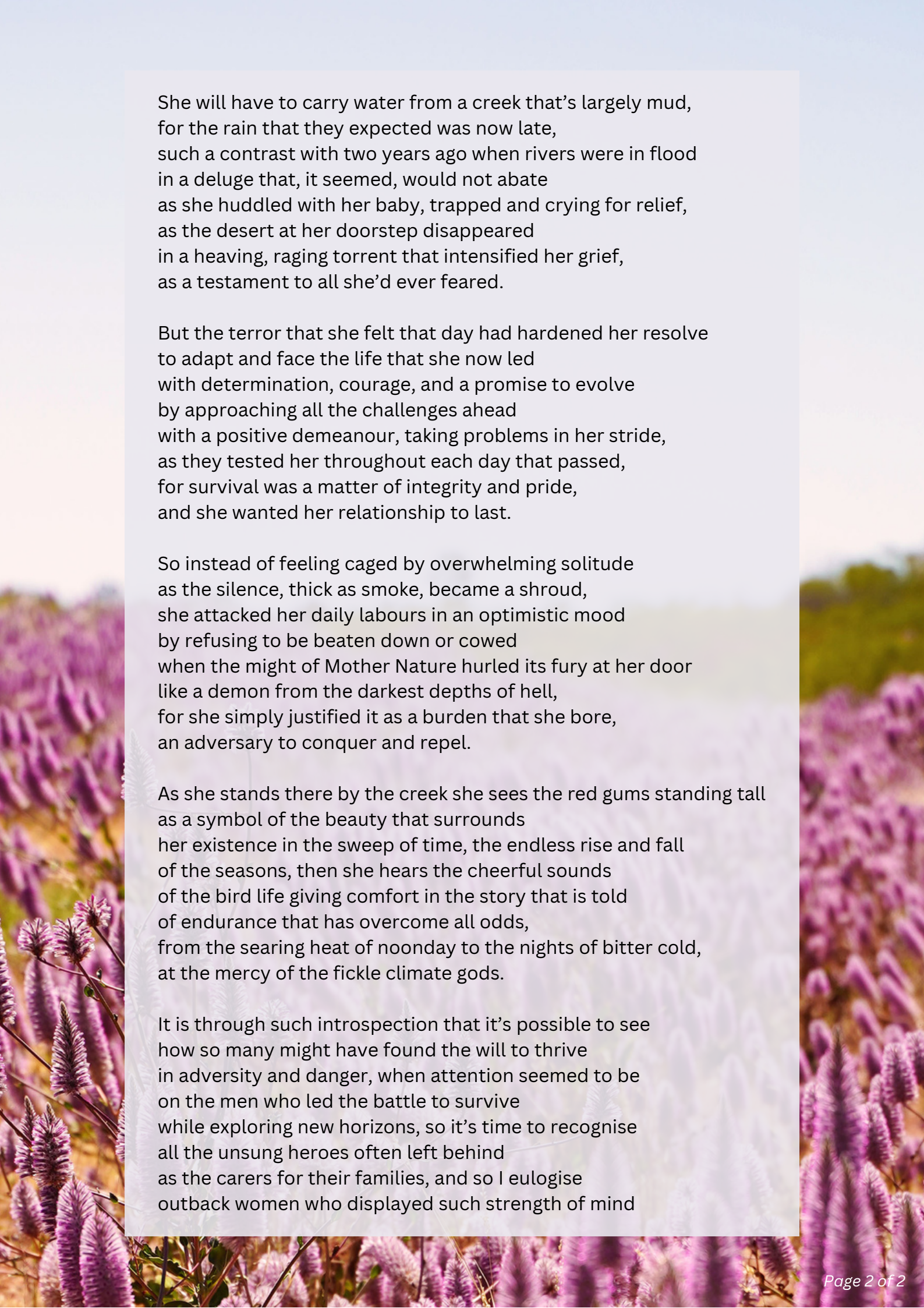
When we talk about the outback all the names that we know best
are explorers who blazed trails across the land
on a pioneering odyssey, a sometimes fatal quest,
in a world of gidgee scrub and shifting sand,
to discover what lay further out, perhaps an inland sea
or a reef of gold beyond their wildest dreams,
or some waterholes that offered just a chance that there might be
a new stock route in a landscape of extremes.

For the vast Australian outback has a language all its own,
one that speaks of awesome beauty mixed with fear
as it challenges the character of anyone who's known
what it's like to face the perils that appear
in a moment, from the dust clouds that obliterate the sky
to the monsoon storms that flood the red dirt plains,
causing utter desolation, leaving people asking why
they are bound by nature's unforgiving chains.

In that context I have chosen as a focus for this verse
a community that tends to slip from view,
namely all those outback women, who, "for better or for worse",
took their vows and headed out to start anew
in a strange and hostile country where they found, as seasons turned,
how to make their way and open new frontiers
with a boldness forged by hardship and the lessons that they learned
from a history of sixty thousand years.

So my hero is a woman, but a woman with no name,
much like Henry Lawson's stoic drover's wife,
who defended her four children from a snake and thus became
quite symbolic of the solitary life
that so many women suffered when the colony was young
and their husbands often spent long hours away,
so it's time to take a moment for their praises to be sung,
and to illustrate the price they had to pay.

Just imagine a young mother in a rough-hewn timber shack,
far away from all her family and friends,
as her man becomes a shimmer in the distance on the track,
with the morning heat a furnace that transcends
any nightmare of existence that she ever thought could be
a reality that she would have to face,
yet she knows that it's her life now, there is nowhere she can flee
in that threatening expanse of boundless space.

The background of the page is a photograph of a field of purple flowers, likely lavender, in bloom. The flowers are in sharp focus in the foreground and become more blurred towards the background. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing the text. The text is in a black, sans-serif font.

She will have to carry water from a creek that's largely mud,
for the rain that they expected was now late,
such a contrast with two years ago when rivers were in flood
in a deluge that, it seemed, would not abate
as she huddled with her baby, trapped and crying for relief,
as the desert at her doorstep disappeared
in a heaving, raging torrent that intensified her grief,
as a testament to all she'd ever feared.

But the terror that she felt that day had hardened her resolve
to adapt and face the life that she now led
with determination, courage, and a promise to evolve
by approaching all the challenges ahead
with a positive demeanour, taking problems in her stride,
as they tested her throughout each day that passed,
for survival was a matter of integrity and pride,
and she wanted her relationship to last.

So instead of feeling caged by overwhelming solitude
as the silence, thick as smoke, became a shroud,
she attacked her daily labours in an optimistic mood
by refusing to be beaten down or cowed
when the might of Mother Nature hurled its fury at her door
like a demon from the darkest depths of hell,
for she simply justified it as a burden that she bore,
an adversary to conquer and repel.

As she stands there by the creek she sees the red gums standing tall
as a symbol of the beauty that surrounds
her existence in the sweep of time, the endless rise and fall
of the seasons, then she hears the cheerful sounds
of the bird life giving comfort in the story that is told
of endurance that has overcome all odds,
from the searing heat of noonday to the nights of bitter cold,
at the mercy of the fickle climate gods.

It is through such introspection that it's possible to see
how so many might have found the will to thrive
in adversity and danger, when attention seemed to be
on the men who led the battle to survive
while exploring new horizons, so it's time to recognise
all the unsung heroes often left behind
as the carers for their families, and so I eulogise
outback women who displayed such strength of mind