

2nd place: Yvonne Saw (TAS)

Going with the Flow

I have always lived amongst the trees and I am surrounded by shades of green. The old cherry tree has finished flowering and forms a dense, green umbrella. The snowball tree has wept a million pure white tears, and they lie on the ground like snow. I sit there when the breeze is blowing and imagine it is snowing all around me. The whiteness on the tree and the ground gives the air an incredible brightness.

The blackbird sings all day, on and off. He sits in the cherry tree and begins his song in the morning when it's still dark. In the evening it's the last thing I hear. He is marking the days for me just now, beginning and ending them. It's as if he sings only for me, and not for his territory, or his mate, or the young birds in the nest. I need his song now when I am in my struggle time. The depression and anxiety are closing around me like dark dragons. Fear accompanies the physical symptoms and I am even afraid of the fear itself.

Time slows down and the days take forever to pass. The mornings are the worst. Waking up and getting out of bed is like stepping into the unknown. How will it be today? Will the anxiety and panic envelop me or will I cope? I wonder about depression. Sometimes I think there is a purpose in it. It's a kind of burn-out. Some say it saves you from madness by shutting down the mind and body until healing takes place. It forces me to take stock and see what I have been doing to cause it. Mostly, negative thinking is the culprit. My mind goes round and round and spirals down, taking me with it. When I look back over the past few weeks I can see the signs, but only retrospectively. At the time I don't see it coming. It's the same when I'm in the dark cloud. The biggest problem is seeing a way out. I know by now that there is a path and that I will find it, but believing it is another matter.

Depression first hit me when I retired from work. At first I thought it was some terrible illness and it took many months and several doctors before panic attacks and depression were found to be the problem. Although retirement was the catalyst, looking back I can see the signs. I shut my feelings away. Because I didn't tell anyone my problems, they grew and overwhelmed me. At first I hoped to defeat depression, and be the way I was before, but now I have come to realise that this is unlikely. I aim to learn to live with it, accept the bad times, and enjoy the good times when the shine is back on the world. Sometimes I take tablets, but they don't help very much. I still have to face life when I go off them. I have been to a psychologist and this helped, but it is hugely expensive and I just can't afford to keep going. I live in the country, and when depressed find it very difficult to drive myself an hour and a half each way for appointments. I have read many books, each claiming to know the cause and the cure. Often I think the author is right and that it's just a matter of doing some little thing differently and I will be cured. But by now I know there is no easy answer. The experts have many different suggestions, so perhaps they don't really know either. Maybe there are different reasons, different solutions. Maybe there is no solution.

I try to do the things which I know from experience will help me. Each day I do several short relaxations and I walk and eat as well as I can. I keep busy. I go out and connect with others. I talk when the words seem frozen within me. I smile on the outside. Creative activities really help; drawing, music and writing. I keep a journal and record my progress and the day's activities. It's my dialogue with myself. I try to answer my own questions. Writing these words helps me most. Somehow words form a river.

Yes, the river. Once a day I go down the hill, threading through the Melaleucas, scuttling the stones and skidding on the steep path. The sound of the rushing water grows louder and stronger. I break out into the open. The restless grey water hurls itself over the top and smashes down to the bottom of the weir. This is

what it's like inside me – this greyness, this meaningless force, taking me who knows where.

Yet it's going somewhere, that river. It never gives up. It is forced to keep moving to the sea by the weight of the water still coming from somewhere up in the mountain, by its own self. And it tells me something. It tells me I will keep going, even when I see no reason. Although I think I have stopped, withdrawn from life, I am still moving. I think about going with the flow, keeping my head above water and reaching the peace and expansiveness of the open sea. Out there the greyness is gone. The water is pale green and translucent. The bay is fringed by Casuarinas waving their branches in the gentle breeze. The sky above is sunny and tranquil and stretches on forever. I'll get there. It will happen. I know: I've been there before.