



THE PENGGULING EGG

Words & linocut illustrations by Michelle Collier



At deepest dusk, and I mid-sleep,
three shadows creep cross umber earth
Nocturnal beasts together meet
at centre of the forest deep
to herald in primeval birth.

The first, a gem-faced musky thing,
sups nectar from a flower's crown
The second, nose like leaf and winged,
swoops low towards a scaly friend—
the third—and plucks grubs from the ground.

They whisper news from overseas—
a faceless hunter on the prowl,
And speak of the elysian egg,
which to the world a powder keg,
bestowed to them from unknown fowl.

What phantoms face this band of three,
the civet, bat and pangolin?
Unbind them from their precious sleep
to twine their fates with you and me
and this new world we enter in.



When all at once, their quiet gloom
by some great axe is cleft in twain
The great oak of their meeting room,
which once was as a mother's womb,
becomes a bloody battlefield.

Asleep were we as chaos hit,
though toddy cat was here before
Has past not made us wise to it?
No great plans carried, lain or writ
to ferry us to safer shores.

Said Civet: *"Summon all your might
that in this task you might prevail
For I am made of fur too light
And Bat cannot take eggs in flight
But Manis, you have shield of scale."*

With one last look upon her 'stead
and sweet farewell, for now, to friends,
our Manis left the warmth of bed
for unknown worlds that lay ahead,
no wit of where gnarled paths might end.



Oh how the first world shook and raved
like lungs made breathless from thick smoke
What ghastly fears the doctors braved
to tend their wards whose souls escaped
the hunter and his deadly yoke.

The second world was made of ice,
the ground all flesh, the wood all bones
And empty houses there sufficed
the slain, a ghostly paradise
where sentinels protect the grounds.

“*What have we done?*” dear Manis dredged
her heart and howled with saddest shame
Remembering the egg at breast,
she saw a bird at bone wood edge—
a phoenix rose from ash and flames.

At her approach, the bird now changed
and spoke a long-drawn wheezing sigh
The hoodwink bird had phoenix feigned!
Said, “*I was stitched by nurse-like things,
but that egg’s mother is not I.*”



Now at the edge of those first worlds,
agin the odds had they survived
So Manis turned her thoughts towards
the path, and moved with egg forwards
where hoodwink pointed fairer climes.

And there from ebbing smoke and fog,
espied a village green emerge
From whence there raved a demagogue
And eels brewed wine and wheaty grog
and glistened from their grassy verge.

Beyond the rabble of the square
were workshops, house and garden green
A mother lulled her baby there
And dads baked pies from locks of hair
And meditating monk was seen.

Then feathers weft of blue and grey
swooped down from off a craggy ledge,
and Kookaburra laughed to say,
“*Though I am here to wake the day
I’m not the cook to break your egg.*”



The bird left Manis to her track,
ne'er one for valedictories
As all about the earth pushed back,
sent springlings up from driest cracks
pursuant of new histories.

For while man slept, the earth had grown
and birds had swarmed the waning skies
Their chorus, wild, descended down
like rain upon a weathered crown—
“*Rebirth!*” in stead of earth’s demise.

So lay she down upon the grass
to soak up song from balconies
of twig, of reed, of sassafras
And saw the world through looking glass
to Ibis, with his colonies.

Now to her palm flew couriers—
a raven, mudlark, tern and dove
And perched these erstwhile messengers
upon tellurian shoulders
to murmur where she next must rove.



To wetlands, then, was Manis borne,
where edge of land meets edge of sea
That place of man’s original dawn,
the sea clay whence all life was born,
and all gods now take up their seat.

Before her rose a mighty oak,
a table laid with wine and bread
And at its head the first god spoke,
for with it her presence invoked
Him motherless, with Ibis head.

“*This egg is mine,*” great Thoth proclaimed,
“*and yours, and theirs and pengguling’s.*”
The hunter also lays his claim,
for he is but the winds of change
from which sprig pain and all great things.”

And as he spoke, new worlds were writ—
the sun, the moon, the sacred texts—
for egg had broke and from within,
a tiny hatchling terrapin
upon whose shell our world now rests.