A Frog in The Throat

"'What can be described can happen too'
Said Wittgenstein, who had not dreamed of you."

As the fables say, there was once a frog.
Naturally, he was called Fred — like his father and his father's father
and before him, even unto the umpteenth generation.
He lived down by the edge of the Lake.
For years now, household wastes and pesticides had been seeping into the
Lake.
When the local cemetery was flooded, the remains of some of the dearly
beloved were also washed down.
Pollution threatened the frog colony.
But their enemies, water-birds, water-rats, red fin, yellow-belly and
Murray cod continued to flourish.
The number of frogs was greatly reduced.
French migrants and medical students became concerned.
The frogs who were best adapted survived.
Frogs with the smoothest (or least abrasive) croaks had the throats and
stomachs best able to cope with the ingestion of so much muck and waste.
Perhaps random mutation also helped, for Fred was particularly well
adapted. His croak had a sweet, almost tenor-like quality, relative to that of
the other frogs.
His fellows down among the rushes gave flattering burps of admiration
whenever he croaked.
Fred began to fancy himself as a singer.
Hanging around the drains on the slopes at week-ends, he was drawn to the
noises emanating from the transistors of picnickers.
A lot of it was pretty basic, even barbaric.
Ker-razy Ken, for example, grunting-screaming amid an explosion of sound.
"Uh-huh huh ..
Hotcha ..
Uh-huh huh ...
Watcha."
Or words to that effect.
Any frog could do that — and hop better too. But sometimes Fred caught echoes of more harmonious melodies — the music of the spheres.

And, at night, arias from grand opera began drifting faintly across the fields from the fibro hut on top of the hill.

The frog-vine had it that a cranky old man, one Bradshaw, lived there alone.

Fred wanted to sing like the tenors Bradshaw played so obsessively. Fred Senior was dismissive about his son's ambition.

"Whereof one cannot speak," he grunted, "thereof one must be silent."

Fred's mother, Frederica, was at first more encouraging.

"The world is everything that is the case," she smiled.

But, of course, no-one was going to try to teach a frog how to sing. Fred had to teach himself. He could learn only by emulating the masters.

So, every night, he hopped across the fields to Bradshaw's back-yard — to lurk behind a collection of empties.

Every night, Bradshaw played his opera records into the small hours.

He loved Mozart and the Italian masters, especially Verdi and Donizetti.

It was from behind a pile of stubbies that Fred first came to hear Caruso, Gigli, Tito Schipa and Pavarotti.

His own problem, as he saw it, was not with the lower, but with the higher, notes.

How he envied Pavarotti those octaves above Middle C! Others were now less enthusiastic about Fred's efforts.

Croaking with the boys down by the swampy reeds was one thing but big-noting himself was another.

Frieda, a malicious neighbour, complained that Fred's vocal efforts might charitably be ascribed to a logger who had swallowed a chain-saw.

Even bag-pipes were not so...

But, as the Dr Johnson of the community observed, the wonder was, not that Fred sang badly, but that he sang at all.

Still hoping to capture those elusive high notes, Fred took to staying out later and later.

"You’re just like a fly buzzing in a bottle," his father said.


"Fair go, Mum!" The youthful Fred expostulated. "Boys are in bed. The snakes are hibernating. And I don't have to cross roads."

"It's time you did something healthy," Fred Senior rumbled. "Sport — swimming, jumping."

"It's time you had a family," Frederica grumbled.

But nothing could stop Fred going across to Bradshaw's back-yard.

He concentrated on every note — trying to repeat what he heard.

If only he could reach those higher registers!

Sometimes he tried too hard — and Bradshaw, long night-cap trailing like a wind sock, lips parted in a dentured grin, would fling open a window and shout obscenities.
Once the old fellow came back with a boy's shanghai and fired stones at the bottles sheltering Fred.
When this didn't stop Fred, he produced a shot-gun and indiscriminately peppered the yard.
Still Fred persevered.
Destiny was preserving him.
"Burp — Borp — Boop," he croaked.
If only he could Beep!
Coming back the long mile from Bradshaw's hut in the early morning light, he sustained himself with day-dreams.
"Sogno soave e casto," in the words of the aria of Don Pasquale.
He imagined his voice soaring ... soaring in the higher reaches ... as he stood there on the podium in the open-air auditorium by the willows ... the moon-beams silverying the surface on the Lake on a warm Spring night.
The splendour of it — like at the Baths at Caracalla or the Arena in Verona!
The romance!
The sense of spiritual awe!
The crusty old toad critics would be sitting in the front — and behind them, row after row of frogs, a thousand frogs, come from near and far, all wearing spectacles, all clutching programmes, the males in dinner-suits and the females in model evening gowns like in a Daumier political cartoon.
All waiting to erupt in wild applause!
Burp! Burp!
Encore! Encore!
He imagined the beating hearts, the excited Pavlovian twitches, the rising crescendo of croaks ...
And the swooning frogettes waiting to waylay him afterwards.
He suddenly propped.
Something was rustling in the grass ahead ... a noise like pages being turned ... what was it? ... there, again ... Great Frog In The Sky, there, two metres in front of him, a king cobra reared.
Don't ask me what a king cobra was doing out for a wriggle so early in the morning in winter — and in Australia of all places!
Perhaps it had escaped from a zoo or a private collection or the Indian Embassy.
Perhaps it was feeling particularly spry — or very hungry.
Anyway, you don't ask questions when a king cobra rears more than a metre high, right there in front of you.
Fred was cold enough at the best of times but now he froze.
Rising from about four metres of neat coils, the cobra undulated in a light breeze as if performing for a snake-charmer. Its flat hooded head swayed almost drowsily as if to a secret tune.
Fred felt that his belly was going to burst, his eyes pop.
The dry grass quivered.
The cobra's eyes were cold and uncomprehending.
Its tongue flicked in and out, and its gaping mouth assumed a faintly amused expression.
Amused but sinister!
As Fred stared, the cobra’s eyes grew larger and brighter, shining like the lake waters in the rising sun.
Fred felt their hypnotic force.
Just looking at those glittering eyes made him feel as if he were guilty of some offence.
He involuntarily hopped one step closer, then another, steps closer to certain doom.
Wait!
It was the thought of the snake-charmer that suggested a way out to Fred.
If only he could sing long enough, well enough, he could perhaps induce a kind of tantric daze in the cobra and escape through the long grass to the left and down the grated drain that led to the Lake.
If only ...
If only he had taken his father’s advice and practised jumping — the long jump, the standing jump, any kind of jump.
All the same, he hoped he wasn’t for “the long jump.”
His ambition was to go up a ladder, not down a snake.
By all the Sacred Toad-stones, how would Placido Domingo like to perform in front of a rearing cobra?
Or Ker-razy Ken, for that matter?
Fred shifted his feet and clasped his hands in front of his palpitating chest.
He bowed.
“S.. S.. S.. Spler.. Spler..”
The king cobra was trying to speak.
“Yes, Your Majesty?” Fred quavered.
“Before you begin,” the Cobra smirked, winking or just blinking. “A little riddle. Riddle-riddle-Maree, why did the opera singer suddenly croak?”
“Cr-Cr-Croak, Your Majesty?”
“Yes, Prince Charming, croak.”
“Did he?” Fred was bewildered.
“Because he had a frog in his throat.”
The cobra’s mouth widened enigmatically, sardonically.
“Ha Ha,” Fred teetered. “Very good, Your Majesty.”
Fred didn’t know whether the king cobra just happened to have a comy sense of humour or whether it was playing some dirty language game of its own, with an ominous sub-text.
“You may be interested to know that the Almighty Snake Above graciously permits us to have a frog in the throat,” the cobra added in an icy drawl.
It rocked back and forth in silent laughter.
Was it mad, bad — or just dangerous to know?
It was certainly more than enough to put anyone off.
A bad singer might expect a raspberry, or rotten eggs at worst — but Fred faced the prospect of disappearing down a king cobra’s gullet.

“Sing, lickspittle, sing,” the cobra hissed.

Fred inhaled.

“Burp-a-burp. borp-a-borpity-borp.”

It was one of his better efforts, but it must have sounded like Ker-razy Ken to the king cobra.

As if enraged, it reared higher and higher, two metres up, straight as a candlestick, eyes burning, mouth split in a terrible grin.

Fred tried to move but it was as if lumps of cement were tied to his feet.


He could manage no more than a squeak now.

“S.. s.. s.. s.. s”

Fred thought for a moment that the king cobra was trying to whistle, but it was only hissing, preparatory to ...

STRIKING diagonally down like a bolt of blue light.

As his world exploded, Fred emitted that elusive high note, the legendary high F, for the first and last time in his life.