

# Lexcursions

THE ADVENTURES OF ANTHONY JUCHA



## Turkey business

Last Christmas, I was poisoned by my mother in law. It was nothing personal. She poisoned her heavily pregnant daughter as well.

“Urgh!” announced my better half from the bathroom. “That’s the first spew of my pregnancy.”

“I blame the turkey,” I said pushing past for a turn at the bowl.

“But you didn’t even eat the turkey.”

“Exactly,” I said with a splatter. “That’s how bad it was.”

But I had no idea how bad it was until, this silly season, I went to see some turkeys.

“There must be quite a build up of stock for Christmas,” I said to my animal liberationist guide, Emma, as she drove me to see turkey production sites in the Southern Highlands.

“Not really,” she said. “They’ll keep turkeys frozen for up to three years.”

We stopped at a turkey shed. It stunk. Walking the hundred yards alongside, we peered in at the birds. They peered out at us.

“See how they haven’t grown any snoods,” said Emma. “They’re just babies. They’ll live for about ten weeks. A natural turkey can live for up to ten years.”

We followed the feathers to the processing plant. It had its own DFO, with “bargain pet food” for sale, a mug on the counter collecting for the RSPCA, a WIRES poster on the wall and a picture of a cute little lamb, on a freezer, imploring us to “eat turkey”.

Outside the hatchery gates, Emma explained how turkey breeding works.

“They’re bred so big, the males can’t lift themselves up to mount the hens. So, instead, they’re masturbated by hand.”

A week later, still trying to get the image out of my head, I made a trip to Canberra, to visit “A Poultry Place” – a sanctuary where a few lucky turkeys get to live out the rest of their days in peace, without interference.

The owner of the sanctuary, Bede, welcomed me at the gate. I was not surprised to see a slogan on his t-shirt, but didn’t expect: “Bucks Fizz”.

“Bucks Fizz?”

“It’s not just me,” he said. “The turkeys are fans.”

And sure enough, there were about a dozen gobbling away ‘making their

minds up’ to the music out the back. They reminded me of playschool sheep: like cotton wool balls bouncing on matchstick legs.

Bede showed me around, and once we’d seen the geese, chickens and ducks we settled back to the turkeys. I squatted down and, stroking a snood, tried to come to terms with the place.

“This place is hard to get my head around,” I said. “You look after these animals. But you don’t produce anything, or get anything back. They just ... live here with you.”

“They’ve saved me,” said Bede. “I used to go out every night. Now, I’m lucky to find time to have a glass of wine with the turkeys in the evening.”

I guess the animals could be regarded as pets, and Bede some soft of mad cat lady, but I found it hard to see the ‘farm animals’ and their keeper that way. The

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place was so orderly, just like a farm, with animals separated and fenced to stop them from killing each other.

“Death must be a constant here?”

“Of course, especially for the turkeys. Their hearts can’t keep up with their oversized bodies, so they usually die of heart failure in under a year.”

“But you’d also see the circle of life.”

“Not for the turkeys. This breed would go extinct, without human intervention.”

“You mean ... ?”

“I think you know what I mean.”

I went home. I looked up the law. Section 530 of the *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) states that cruelty to animals is permitted “in the course of ... routine ... animal husbandry”, so to the extent that masturbating (and doing much else to) turkeys is “routine”, it’s in the clear. But I do wonder whether those who do the handiwork ever get nervous about s.79 of the *Crimes Act*: “Any person who commits an act of bestiality with any animal shall be liable to imprisonment for fourteen years.” It’s a wonder people don’t talk more about this fascinating topic. I certainly can’t wait to bring it up with my mother in law over Christmas lunch. □

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