

Old Comrade, interviewed

in memory of wharfie Walter Stubbings 1913–2014

'My first memory', Wal tells me, 'is of my father with his axe crossing the freezing King River to fell Huon pines. Come night-time, with them Roaring Forties outside, he crooned songs to us kids by lamplight. Never saw him cry til the day he broke the news there'd be no more school for me. I'd turned fourteen was dux of Strahan but times were tough. There were seven to feed.'

By sixteen, Wal could fell a giant upon a slope tattoo it with the family mark and launch it down the river to the mill. Married dark-eyed Ada; in '34 a son was born. 'Worked hard. Jesus, I worked hard. Made a camp out bush. Built a bridge by hand. A mate and I supplied timber to Queenstown copper mine. That's where we were when a policeman drove out to say my poor father had gone n cut his own throat.'

The Stubbings family moved to Hobart in '39 and Wal started over on the waterfront. Cargo was loaded by hand. 'Loaded on your back, more like it.' Work was scarce and men were treated – 'Like dogs. The humiliation never left me.' He read *The Socialist Sixth of the World* and learnt of a nation of workers who'd overthrown Capital. 'And it all made sense.'

The next move was to Brisbane to aid the war industry. After victory, he returned to the waterfront. A Commie now, he organised strikes. 'Gave them ASIO spooks plenty to worry about. *Stubbings has sent his son off to Berlin to a youth festival. Stubbings is friends with Aboriginal people ... drives them round in his car. That American Commie singer Paul Robeson went to see him on his Australian tour.'*

In '63 he did The Trip. 'May Day in Red Square
ballet at the Bolshoi, Lenin in the mausoleum.
Yuri Gagarin popped by to say hello, a lovely man.'
From the Caspian Sea, he wrote home
Ada, the sunrise here's a sight.

At ninety (and alone), he lives near water; always has.
Sometimes in the night, his mind goes vivid.
He wakes up in Tasmania to hear his father sing into the wind.
Sees the man who loved him
enter the swirling river with his horse-team and his axe
bound for a stand of pine.
A fresh he wonders, Will he make it?
Will he make it over?