

Introduction

This is my third book of librettos and once again I have taken a different approach to the form. Similarities to my earlier efforts will also be obvious – a willingness to locate opera well away from great theatres, a certain irreverence, an avoidance of the tragedies and horrors of the European genre, et cetera. The main consistency in my approach lies in my belief that different times and places call for different operas. This idea is taken a little further in the present collection.

Each of these librettos refers to a particular place, and is meant to be performed there, although there is no reason why people elsewhere shouldn't borrow it if they so desire. This idea is a little more radical than it sounds. The events of most of the great European operas have a location – Nuremberg (Wagner's *Meistersingers*), Rome (Puccini's *Tosca*), or, let us say, Seville (Rossini's *Barber*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*). Et cetera. How important these places, these settings, were to the composers, I cannot say. Audiences, I am inclined to think, rarely locate the famous operas in actual places; they all occur in the spaces of the imagination, that is to say inside the minds of those who watch them. Once this relationship between the events being staged and the minds of the listeners, the viewers, has been established, the opera is secure because it no longer needs location. It wanders the firmament as freely as Goldilocks or Macbeth (can you tell me where Dunsinane is? Yes, it's in Scotland, but *where?*)

So each of the librettos refers to a particular place: how innovative is this, if at all? How important?

To the librettist, very. I wish to give the places of my country a voice. This means the people too. In writing these librettos I have imagined them being performed in front of visitors to the opera's region, people who, I hope, will feel that they are being both accepted and to some degree inducted by watching a performance. If libretto, music and performance are good, then there is an assertion and acceptance of local pride. Nations need to be built on pride or prides, silly as some of them may be.

To the composer in the act of deciding whether or not they want to set a particular libretto, not important at all. They will judge what they read by whether or not it gives them expressive opportunities within their scope. If they decide to compose, however, the spirit of the chosen place will enter them to some degree. They will be setting events, and dialogue, yes, but also something more, flowing in from outside the particulars on the page.

To the audiences, if I may look that far ahead, both yes and no. They will want a good show, or they'll be bored, or stay away. If the performance is successful, however, they should feel that they've encountered something which is not theirs, but which they can have access to while they are in the region that gave rise to it. I see these librettos as a means whereby local lore, legend and atmosphere can be displayed with pride and accepted with respect. In that sense, then, each of these librettos is the beginning of a dialogue between those who know something and those who are curious to find out.

The librettos in this collection, or rather the events they depict, are a somewhat scattered collection of things that entertain, interest or amuse one particular writer, which means, obviously enough, that they are limited by their creator's mind. I will be pleased if this project succeeds, but much more pleased if what I offer here gives rise, eventually, to a new tradition in which the contents of this book are not the quirky offerings of one writer, but a tiny part of a much greater practice which has subsumed its beginning.

I put them before you in hopes of your enjoyment, amusement, or what you will. I think acceptance would be enough.

C.A.E.

Central Station Sydney

We are in Central Station, Sydney; a clock high above reads 1915. An amplified voice sounds over all.

Voice North, south, west. We can't take you east because it's under water. (pause) Trains arriving soon from Brisbane, Melbourne, Bourke. And a few other places. You'll love the names. Narrabri! Not bad, is it! Narrabri! Out there in the bush, they're keen to get to town, God bless'em. There's people here wanting to go bush, God bless'em too.

A man steps out of the office and comes to the centre of the public space. We'll call him Information, Info for short. He's left his amplification behind.

Info Welcome to the people from Perth! (He looks around, and there aren't any.) Have I got that wrong? (He looks at the clock.) Didn't we have a line in 1915? They might've got stuck on the Nullus - arbor. Not a tree in sight! Wouldn't want to go there, would you. Yes ma'am?

Molly I'm looking for love, for me and my child. (She has a son.)

Info Which direction are you thinking of?

Molly Wherever I can find what I want.

Info Aha! (A large group of men are marching under the station's cavernous roof.) This is the mob from

Narrabri, that I was going to tell you about. They're heading off to war. Volunteers! What do they say? Those that God wants to destroy, he first makes mad. True enough? (to the would-be soldiers) You're in the wrong place, boys. Oh we can put you on a local, I suppose. There's a boat down at the water, waiting for you, and all the rest, when they arrive. Plenty of places to fill, from what I hear.

He turns his attention back to Mollie.

Follow those men. You'll get one of them to love you. Take the boy. It makes them go soft all the more quickly ...

Mollie takes her boy and joins the departing men.

... in the head!

The clock changes to 1918 amid a booming of bells, and surges of cheers. The city outside is going wild but the men who return to the central space look lost, confused, quite unsure.

Frank I never thought I'd be coming back.

Mollie I'll look after you darling.

Frank (rubbing the boy's head) I'm sorry, I've forgotten his name.

Mollie Frank, same as yours.

Frank Two francs. Wouldn't buy you much in Villers Bretonneux.

Mollie Was it bad?
 Frank Only when they shelled us darling. (He laughs.)
 Twenty four hours a day!
 Mollie Got to start again now Frank.
 Frank What's it like out there, Mollie?
 Mollie Tough, darling. Reckon you're up to it?
 Frank No, but we've got to try. It can't be any worse than
 what I've been through, can it?
 Mollie I think it can be, Frank, and I think we're going to
 see.
 Frank Which platform, darling? Lead me to my future.

Frank, Mollie and the boy Frank go off.

Info The boy came back in nineteen forty, but we never
 saw him after that. Balik Papan, I think it was.
 There's a world full of names out there. (The clock
 turns to 1932 and some awfully dressed men come
 on.) Oh God, drifters. (He studies them as they go
 past.) There ought to be a station called Hope. On
 your way, boys. For Christ's sake get in a carriage.
 Don't try and hang on underneath. It can't be done.

Luke, one of the unemployed men comes over to Info.

Luke I want to see the water.
 Info (pointing towards Circular Quay) Catch the ferry to
 Manly.
 Luke Will it take me out to sea?
 Info You'll see the sea. That's when you make your
 choice.

Luke Is that your job? Giving people choice?
 Info My friend, I'm no more than the hand that points.
 Luke When are we going to have good times again?
 Info We're told they're just around the corner.
 Luke Which corner, mate?
 Info I wish I knew.
 Luke I've come down from the bush to find a job.
 Info Half the city's going bush for the same reason.
 Luke Stupid.
 Info They're taking your jobs and you're after theirs.
 Luke What jobs? There aren't any.
 Info Here's a man might have something to say.

Kenneth Slessor comes on, neat, dapper, smart.

Info Got a song for us, Sless?
 Slessor The girl that you kissed at Calais,
 Or pledged at Beersheba with beer,
 Or danced with all night at a Palais,
 Or lied to all night on a pier,
 Is older and staidier and fatter,
 She's vanished with vanishing cream -
 But those were the days, those miraculous days,
 And what does it matter,
 You've still got your dream!
 Info This is Mollie, Sless; she's looking for guidance.
 Mollie (to the poet) Frank's gone in the head. He doesn't
 know me any more.
 Slessor He knows just enough to know that he used to be bet-
 ter.

Mollie He keeps asking, where did I meet you, and I tell him it was here.

Info Bring him down on the train; see if he knows where he is.

Mollie He'd be lost as ever. It's in his head.

Slessor leads her to a mirror and places her before it.

Slessor Pause, child, and stare me in the face
Before you dare to pass –
Forget the falling shoulder-lace,
And hear me in the glass!
My pretty mouth you surely know;
It shouldn't cause dismay –
I am Yourself two lives ago
Ten thousand miles away.

Mollie When he was on the other side of the world, I believed in something. I knew he was coming back.

Slessor We'd see the lights of morning break
And candles burn the wick,
While still a fist was left awake
To shake a fiddlestick;
And, oh, the fiddle and the bow,
They didn't beg for pay –
But that was ninety years ago,
Ten thousand miles away.

He brings Mollie forward.

And is your heart as light, as light
As mine was happy then,
Before the gossip learned to write
With such a spiteful pen,
Before the bitters learned to flow,
The saxophone to play –
As mine was ninety years ago,
Ten thousand miles away?

Mollie Great-grandmother, there's no defence
For half the things I do,
But (pardon the impertinence)
You weren't so dusty, too;
It's just as well for all, you know,
The papers never say
What happened ninety years ago,
Ten thousand miles away!

Slessor (as Mollie goes off) She's my type, you know. She needs to be looked after.

He follows Mollie. Info watches him go, then looks up at the clock, which changes to 2006.

Info (pessimistically) Modern times. See what you make of this.

A rock band starts up, lights swirl in many colours as if Central Station was a concert venue, and a band of raunchy teenagers dance in the middle of the space, shaking their thighs until they bump against the penisoid guitars. Info stands watching. Maddy, the

most noticeable of the girls, slides a leg over the guitar of Jeff, and moves up the guitar until, her lips kissing his, she's silenced him. Paris, the second girl, silences Wolf in the same way. That leaves Marty, Bryn and Cole, the drummer, still trying to keep the music going, but each is silenced in much the same way by Celia, Clarke, and Greta.

Info (when there's silence at last) I sometimes think this building's the only thing in town that still feels shame. Look at them! They're going to have it off in public. Not while I'm in charge!

He waves, and the lights go out. Almost at once a bright torch is seen coming, and a spotlight picks up Bonny, the usherette holding the torch. From somewhere at the side of the great space we hear Slessor's voice.

Slessor I've fallen in love with a firefly,
Two legs and a flambeau complete,
A heavenly smile as she runs down the aisle,
And a laugh as she bangs down the seat.

Then Bonny the usherette takes over.

Bonny Don't tell me she lives at Clovelly,
Don't say that she catches a tram,
Or dotes on "Vendetta" by Marie Corelli,
And loves to eat pickles and ham.
She comes as a comet to Halley,
Assisting a duke to his place -
A cloud of gold fire, like a star in the valley,

Slessor Two legs and a dim little face.
He woos the usherette in an old-fashioned way.

Slessor I don't adore Mae or Dolores,
Or give Greta Garbo my heart,
Nor yet the particular glories
American pictures impart.
The statues can rust in a thicket,
The Wurlitzer gives me a pain;
If it wasn't a firefly who gazed on my ticket (stage
business here)
I wouldn't have come here again.

Both And I know when I go to Saint Peter,
He'll call out his staff with a grin -
A Devil no doubt, to show the Way Out,
But a firefly to light the Way In!

Bonny leads Slessor off with her torch, and the lights come up slowly. The five musos and their women are pulling clothes back on.

Greta (referring to Bonny & Sless) Maybe noone ever told them how to do it.

Cole Some people enjoy restraint, I think. Not me.

Greta Head on, full on, nonstop, that's the way to live.

Cole You don't know what it is till you let it have its head.

Maddy Who's to stop us? Old pricks who had a rotten time when they were young?

Jeff Trouble is, when you get older, you don't know where you are.

Paris Where you are is something you make happen.
 Cole But the thing that happens has to be new, and we run
 out.
 Maddy We take what you give us, and we make something
 new.
 Bryn That's the end of us.
 Celia We turn you into dads.
 Marty What a fate! Start up again boys!
 Clarke (looking up) Here?
 Wolf It's a space we can fill.
 Info It's bigger than you think.
 Wolf Doesn't look all that big to me.
 Info Listen, mate, listen to the silence.

We hear a music of distance and paradoxically of silence. The five musicians and their women listen and feel compelled, at first sarcastically, to whisper the names coming out of the night.

Voices Wyalong. Forbes. Condobolin.
 Bryn Wagga Wagga wagga wagga wogga wogga wogga
 wogga wogga wogga wogga wogga woow woow
 woow wagga wagga woow woow woow ... (His
 voice becomes a sort of didgeridoo.)
 Celia Uranquinty ...
 Jeff The Rock!
 Maddy The Cock!
 Bryn The Rock!
 Maddy The Cock!
 Cole Condobolin.

Clarke Jerilderie.
 Marty Carathool.
 Paris Deniliquin, Denny to you, Moulamein. Nevertire.
 Wolf Matakana, Menindie, Broken Hill.
 Paris Broken Hill.
 All voices Broken Hill, Broken Hill.
 Celia Gosford, Wyong, Kurri Kurri. Nevertire.
 Marty Gerringong, Dapto, Bulli, Sydney Central ...
 Bryn Sydney Central ...
 All voices Nevertire.
 Jeff Lord luv-a-duck!
 Maddy Stuff me dead!
 Cole Yes please!
 Maddy Not you!
 All voices Sydney Central.
 Info Here!
 All voices Here. (They seem surprised at what they've been
 forced to recognise.)
 Maddy Can't get away from it, can you?
 Info Catch a train!
 Voices Armidale. Cobar. Byron Bay.
 Voices Wollongong, Gunnedah, Gilgandra ...
 Voices Katoomba ...
 Marty ... away in the west ...
 Clarke ... the blue mountains ...
 Paris ... in the morning ...
 Cole ... always there ...

Paris ... in the night ...
 Cole ... and the bloody hot days ...
 Wolf ... in winter and fire...
 Greta ... far away and near ...
 Celia ... out of sight, out of mind ...
 Maddy ... never, unfortunately ...
 Wolf ... or fortunately ...
 Info (back in his office: amplified) Announcement, announcement. The track between Narromine and Nyngan is under repair. Passengers will transfer to a bus at Narromine. Normal service will resume at Nyngan. Overnight passengers will have to sit up a little longer. Sorreeeeeeee!
 Jeff Bastards! Why can't they do it in the daytime?
 Maddy Why don't we?
 Jeff This place is taking the sex out of me.
 Maddy You mean it's making us wait.
 Info (still in his office) We pull lovers apart, we bring them back, in time.
 Wolf The world's a small place.
 Paris Until you start to travel.
 Celia Then you know how big it is ...
 Marty ... how far away ...
 Clarke ... like the night, it's a mystery every time ...
 Bryn ... you can go to the end of the line ...
 Greta ... but you can't escape ...
 Cole ... all you can do is look around, and then come back ...

All voices ... here.
 Info (amplified) Sydney Central Station. The Trans-Continental from Perth is running forty minutes late. The Trans-Continental from Perth is running forty minutes late.
 Maddy Who gives a shit?
 Jeff I'm not on it.
 Clarke You might be next time ...
 Jeff ... then it won't be late!
 Wolf Could be, mate.
 Jeff Not if I'm on board.
 Marty Trains are no respecter of persons. They don't give any guarantee.
 Info (still amplified) Oh yes they do!
 Voices What?
 Info (stepping out among them) We bring you here, we take you back. What more do you ask?
 Voices Good question. Listen to the night.
 Each of the ten young people takes him/herself to a gateway to one of the tracks, and they call, one after the other, as they disappear.
 Cole Uranquinty ...
 Greta Forbes, The Rock!
 Bryn Condobolin ...
 Clarke Matakana, Menindie, Broken Hill. Broken Hill ...
 Marty Kurri Kurri ...
 Celia Gerringong ...
 Wolf Dapto, Bulli, Byron Bay ... Nevertire ...

Bryn	Wagga Wagga, wogga wogga woow woow ... (He continues to the end, improvising, until his voice is like a didgeridoo underlying all the other names.)
Paris	Armadale, Jerilderie ...
Greta	Gunnedah, Gilgandra ...
Maddy	Narrabri, The Rock, bugger it! Narrabri, The Rock!
Info	(alone in the middle of the space) Sydney Central, wishing you all good travel, and good night. (OR, for a daytime performance) Sydney Central, wishing you all good travel and safe return.

Verses sung by 'Slessor' ('Mademoiselle from Everywhere', 'Great-grandmother speaks', and 'Firefly') are by Kenneth Slessor and were published in *Smith's Weekly* between 1928 and 1933, and collected in *Backless Betty from Bondi*, Angus & Robertson Publishers, Australia, 1983. I would also like to acknowledge the Macfarlan family, formerly of Point Piper, Sydney, whose invitations to stay with them first brought me to see, and grow fond of, Sydney's Central Station.

Undula the wave

The opera starts by the water in far north Queensland.

Yarraba Gooday, missus.
Viola Good morning.
Yarraba You getting ready for swim?
Viola No.
Yarraba Too far?
Viola Far too far.
Yarraba Islands out there, not too far. Got a boat here.
Viola Will you bring me back?
Yarraba Ver' reliable. Get you there and back.
Viola What will I see?
Yarraba Show you an island for sale. You got nine quid?
Viola Nine pounds?
Yarraba I see you got that.
Viola Yes, I've got that ...
Yarraba Maybe you buy. Have a look.
Viola At an island?
Yarraba Had nine quid I'd buy it meself.
Viola You've been there, then?
Yarraba Born there.
Viola You were born there?
Yarraba Great place.
Viola Why don't you buy it then?
Yarraba Question make me sad. You let me visit, that make me happy.

Viola Nine pounds?
Yarraba Nine. (He holds up nine fingers.)
Viola I want to see it. If I like it, I'll ring my sister.
Yarraba She good lookin woman like you?
Viola Better.
Yarraba Don't believe it.

After a brief pause, Sam, Viola's sister, walks on.

Sam Where is it?
Viola Boat, darling, boat.
Yarraba All aboard!

They mime getting into a boat, and travelling across water. Viola points at three islands.

Viola The little one. That's going to be ours.
Sam But darling, what are we going to live on?
Viola (vaguely) Fish ...
Sam ... air ...
Viola ... sky ...
Sam ... clouds ...
Viola ... and water, coral, the bluest sea on earth ...
Sam We said we'd live for beauty. Now we're going to eat it!
Viola Step ashore, darling, and give me your arm. We're doing this together ...
Sam ... as long as we shall live!

They look around, and at each other in amazement.

Sam (smitten by what they're doing) What does it mean, to be on an island?

Viola It means to be separate. Cut off. Alone ...

Sam ... surrounded by water, and nothing else ...

Viola ... unless someone buys those islands ...

Sam They're far enough away.

Viola Where will we start, darling?

Sam We've started. We're here!

Viola Shall we give thanks?

Sam Who to?

Viola To daddy?

Sam He gave me nine pounds. And a train ticket.

Viola Daddy!

Sam (noticing) Tents?

Viola Yes. But we'll get a bigger one. Better.

Sam Cooking pots?

Viola Don't be domestic.

Sam Let's explore!

The young women disappear, though we hear their voices from time to time,. Meanwhile we hear other voices from the boat that brought them, and from nearby Dunk and Bedarra islands.

Yarraba They got a lot to learn.

Noel (on Bedarra) You say they're painters?

Yarraba Pictures, yeah.

Brian (on Dunk) Two women? What'll they do all day?

Chris (also on Dunk) It's what they do at night that interests me.

Brian We've got to get to know them.

Yarraba They might disappear ... leave their body and travel, over the sea by night ...

Chris Sounds good to me!

Noel They'll need people after a while. Not at first.

Sam (somewhere in the scrub) I thought I saw something move!

Viola It was my hat!

Sam No it wasn't, silly! Do you think we're the first who've ever been here?

Noel Silly, silly.

Viola The black man was born here. He said they used to visit ...

Sam Ooohh ...

Viola What's wrong?

Sam I wanted to be first ...

Noel But you're still alone ...

Brian ... need a boat to get to shore ...

Chris You can have company whenever you want ...

Brian, Chris, and Noel disappear, and the young women come back.

Viola We're out of time, darling. In a space of our own.

Sam Suspended.

Viola We'll paint ...

Sam ... and tell each other stories ...

Viola Let's start. We'll each do a painting, and we'll each tell a story!

Yarraba, remaining at his boat, starts to tell a story too.

Yarraba Cockatoo come across the land one day, get to the water. They're land birds, don't like the water. They think maybe somewhere good to live out there, so they fly a bit, then they get scared. Reckon if they get tired, they fall in the water. Then they see dolphin in the water, and a shark. One sits on the dolphin's back. Take me somewhere good. Second one, same with shark. Third one says no, I'm gunna keep going by myself. He flies off, they never see him again. Musta got tired, though. Fall, somewhere. Shark swallows second one, but it makes him sick. Cockatoo no good for his belly. Maybe doesn't like feathers, they tickle him or something. Urrrh! (vomiting sound) Dolphin swim a while, but he says it's too slow. Wants to go under, swim faster, down he goes. Third cockatoo clings with his claws, real hard. He drowns. Floats to the surface. Turns into your island, ladies! Used to be mine too, once. He's lonely, as an island, and he goes squark squark until his mates come back to him. Three islands now. Man on that one (Bedarra), people on that one (Dunk), now people here. Good thing.

Viola comes back to the beach.

Viola This is my story, Yarraba. Our father took Sam and I around the world. Twice. We visited all the great cities. London, Paris, New York. Moscow, Rome, Florence, Madrid. We saw all the great galleries, heard the great orchestras, met fine and famous people. We dined in the best restaurants, wore the finest clothes. We stayed in great hotels and travelled on stylish trains. Cars took us into the countryside. We tasted all the wines. Father said, This is the world, and now you've seen it all, don't accept anything but the best.

Yarraba What you doing here?

Viola You know what we're doing here. We lived in quality. Now we've found perfection ...

Yarraba Plenty of fish, if you know how to catch'em.

Viola You'll have to teach us. I'm sure we're ready to learn ...

Enter Sam, accompanied arm-in-arm by Noel, who's come across from his island.

Sam (introducing) My sister, Viola, my other half. Darling, this is Noel.

Noel I'll keep my island, but I'll come across whenever I see smoke.

Sam (triumphantly) We'll be cooking every day!

Yarraba Gotta catch'em first!

Viola We've got a lot to learn, and a lot to un-learn.

Sam And we're going to do it here. Darling, you've got to

	get yourself a man.	Sam	... I want to visit all those stars, and claim them, every one ...
Noel	You'll find you'll have plenty of suitors ...	Yarraba	Place is getting to ya. Thought it would.
Viola	... in a hurry to get their pants off ...	Viola	(to Sam) I need a man, you say?
Noel	They'll envy your perfection and want it for themselves.	Sam	It's the biggest thing we do.
Sam	(clinging to him) I found mine on the very first day.	Viola	Will I wait for him to come, or will I fly away to find him?
Noel	My love. I was happy, or so I told myself, painting, but I was lonely.	Yarraba	Easy by night. Mind can travel to the stars.
Viola	We're painters too.	Noel	(pointing up) Look!
Sam	Am I going to paint the island, the water, or the moods of love?	V & S	Aaaaaaaaahhh ...
Yarraba	Put'em all together. That's the best way.	Noel	(beneath them) Aaaaaaaaahhh ...
Sam	I'll need years of experience to do that ...	Yarraba	Never been any different. You're finding it, that's all ...
Noel	Every day, pick one moment, and paint it. That way, perfection goes on forever.	Viola	... in ourselves ...
Viola	Won't we have black days, black moods, moments of despair?	Sam	... on an island ...
Noel	That's when you let visitors tell you how lucky you are.	Noel	... pulling me in, lifting me up ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...
Viola	Let's get started then. (Sam and Noel start to laugh.)	V & S	... aaaaaaaaahhh ...
	It looks like it's up to me.	Chris	(on Dunk) They're going crazy over there!
Yarraba	Whatcha gonna do?	Brian	(also on Dunk) You'd love to be with'em, though, wouldn't you!
Viola	I'm going to wave my hands. Look, the sun's going down.	Chris	Mmmmmmmmm.
Sam	Night ...	Yarraba	I can feel a message. Someone calling you ladies.
Noel	It opens up a world ...	Viola	I thought I heard something too.
Viola	... of blackness, keen as day ...	Yarraba	(quite definite) Man's voice, calling. Reckon he know where you are ...
		Sam	It's Father, then.
		Viola	(after listening) He's sick, he's dying ...

Sam I can hear him too ...

Yarraba Not much pain. Leaving his body now.

Viola We'll have to leave you, Noel. We've got something to do for him, far away.

Sam Put him to rest ...

Noel Come back when you've done it. Don't leave me here alone!

Yarraba Get in the boat, I take you to land. They take you home in the big white bird.

Viola (correcting) To our father. This is home for us, now.

Sam I'm torn in two, darling ...

Viola Cling to what we've found. Be strong.

Noel Take a look at the stars before you go, and swear you're coming back.

Sam I swear ...

Noel You swear ...

Sam ... that I'll be coming back.

Viola That's clear, then; we're coming back.

Sam (reassuring Noel) I have to go for daddy's sake. I'm not giving up the paradise I've found.

Yarrabah Nobody got anything forever. All aboard, those that's going.

Viola and Sam get in his boat. It chugs off to land, out of sight. After a few moments, our ears are caught by radio messages emanating from Dunk.

Radio The American fleet at Pearl Harbour has been destroyed. Japanese bombers based on aircraft carri-

ers and Japanese submarines have struck the Pacific fleet. The devastation is covered by a dense cloud of smoke. The United States has declared war!

Brian Invaders! They'll be down this way pretty soon!

Chris They'll have ships along our coast.

Radio A Japanese fleet is rounding the corner of New Guinea! An American fleet is preparing to engage.

We hear rumbles of distant gunfire, and flashes as shells explode. This continues, intermittently, for the next minute or so. We hear, too, the rumbling of a train, and the chugging of Yarraba's boat. Noel comes out to meet them, and is introduced.

Viola Noel, this is Norm.

Noel Welcome Norm. Not a good time to be here.

Sam Better than anywhere else.

Norm The world's gone mad. We have to stay sane.

Viola If we can.

Noel The best way to keep your sanity is to be in love.

Norm (laughing) One madness to keep you safe from another!

Viola We can all be mad together!

Sam Fishing every day ...

Noel Every two weeks, supplies ...

Viola Yarraba and his boat ...

Norm Do we get letters?

Sam If somebody writes.

Viola (laughing) Trouble is, nobody writes ...

Sam Except daddy ...

Viola ... and he's gone ...
 Sam ... to be a bird ...
 Viola ... a star ...
 Sam ... but he's alive when we talk about him ...
 Viola ... so we never let him die ...
 Yarraba Ya startin to get the right idea ...
 Norm What about, Yarraba?
 Yarraba The sky, things comin' and goin'.
 Noel Are you a religious man, Yarraba?
 Yarraba Plenty of fish in the sea. They not miss one if we pull him out. Sea go on, fish go on. Plenty more tomorrow.
 Sam And the one that got eaten? What about him?
 Yarraba If you loved that fish, very sad.

There is more gunfire in the distance, and flashes.

Norm I want my country to survive. We've got to win!
 Viola We're separate from all that.
 Norm It's just over the horizon.
 Radio (on Dunk) The Japanese fleet has suffered heavy losses. The aircraft carrier Shokaku is limping back to the Philipines.
 N & N (roaring with joy) Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!
 Sam (cautiously) They never tell us bad news, in case we get downhearted.
 Viola I'm terrified, yet I think we're safe ...
 Radio The Japanese fleet that was heading for Port Moresby is turning back. They've given up!

Norm For now! For now ...
 Noel I'm starting a new picture tomorrow.
 Viola Called?
 Norm Tropical night. It'll have those gun flashes on the horizon. Evil creeping close.
 Sam Don't do that, Norm. Paint fish, and palms, birds, and cloud ...
 Norm Unreality!
 Sam Our reality!
 Viola We're island people. We've seen the world, and we've stepped apart ...
 Yarraba Everything connected, ya know, even here. Even on an island, ya can't forget ... (He waves a hand at the world beyond them.)
 Viola Oh yes I can! I'm here, and I'm never going to go away!
 Yarraba Wet season make a mess of ya. Might rip up that tent.
 Viola I hadn't thought of that.
 Sam (laughing) All it can do is make us wet!

Yarraba makes a wordless reply by waving his arms to indicate a mighty wind lifting their tent and blowing it into the sea.

Norm That's when we head south, I think.
 Noel I go in to Cairns.
 Sam Is it just as good when you come back?
 Noel I appreciate it even more.
 Sam Then that's what we'll do. Darling, you agree?

Viola	Night follows day follows night. We'll go south to escape the wet, then we'll come again.	Norm	My love's sending us out on a learning curve ...
Sam	Let's make a rule. Never to paint the same thing twice.	Viola	We'll go to the end of the universe, and come back, knowing a little more ...
Viola	What if we do it badly the first time?	Sam	Don't talk about the end. It makes me frightened.
Sam	Paint something else.	Viola	We need to be uneasy. It's what keeps our minds alive ...
Viola	No. There's some things we'll only understand slowly. We're surrounded by perfection, but that doesn't make us perfect.	Noel	... otherwise we sit in our tent, cursing the same old food ...
Norm	We've made our lives perfect by being here.	Norm	... wishing we were somewhere else ...
Noel	No. You have to work on it.	Sam	... making ourselves miserable, and wanting to get away ...
Viola	If you think you're perfect, you're not.	Viola	So we'll stay on this tiny island, increasing the empires of our mind ...
Sam	Don't start making things hard. We left all our problems on the shore.	Yarraba	Payin me to bring the things you need ...
Viola	All the other problems. This one's different.	Sam	... and the letters no one's going to write ...
Norm	Tell me what you're thinking of, my love?	Viola	... because we won't be writing any letters ourselves ...
Viola	We've got something wonderful. We have to take it further every day.	Noel	You'll find you don't want to, and if you do write, nobody knows what you're talking about, because ...
Noel	Painting ...	Norm	... they can't imagine what it's like ...
Sam	Living ...	All four	... to be here! Aaaaaaaahhh ... Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Viola	I know nothing. I can't tell you which star will be first at night, or where it will appear. The first bird in the morning, where did it come from? Did it sleep the night with us, or did it fly in, before we got up? Why do they wake in the dark? What's going on in the night, that they want to know?	Yarraba	If you're gunna sing all night, I better get supplies. You got that list, missus?
Noel	I've been here two years, and I haven't got a clue.	Viola points vaguely to their tent; Yarraba dashes in and comes out with a list.	
		Yarraba	Matches, candles, kerosene. Fish hooks, huh! You

crossed out writing pad, missus. (Viola nods, smiling.) Peas? Ya can't make'em grow, out here on the sand. Lotsa things. Canvas. Nother tent, oh. (He means the two couples want to be separate, at night at least.) Ya gotta lot of books here, ya gonna read?

Norm Stories, stories ...

Viola Something for our minds ...

Yarraba Ya minds?

They all laugh; he gets in his boat and heads off for shore, and the four remaining sing in ecstasy.

All four Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Viola Night ...

Sam Day ...

Norm Night ...

Noel Day ...

All four Undulating ... flowing ... endlessly ... replacing us, when it's time, replacing all ... day ... night ... day ... night ... undulating, undula the wave, waving goodbye to time ... letting everything flow ... wash over us ... turning us into birds, and waves, clouds and sky and light ... lost ...

Viola ... in finding ourselves ...

All four ... disappearing out of time, washing against these shores ... joining with whatever brought us here ...

Viola What was it, darling? Why did we come?

Sam I don't remember what brought us. Don't you know?

All four (softly) Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

As their voices soften, they sit on the sand.

My thanks to Julius and Cathy Stocky, of Kew, Victoria for first making me aware of artists Valerie Albiston and Yvonne Cohen, who owned and visited Tamana Island, far north Queensland, for over thirty years.

Kelly Country

A man is looking at a paddock, in the north-east of Victoria. In the distance, there is a rather wretched cottage of considerable age.

Max Gotta start somewhere, but what a start! (loudly)
Where are you, Ned? (Crows cark. Cockatoos squawk. Max laughs.) Been a lifetime since anyone so much as whispered here. Righto Ned, I'm coming to have a look. (He starts to walk, and the cottage comes closer.) Rabbit trap. I haven't seen that sort before ... were the rabbits around in Ned's time? Hell, that's something I don't know. This is going to be beyond me unless I get a bit of help. (loudly) Come on Ned, I'm relying on you! (He gets close to the cottage.) Poor as church mice! Milk for the babies, meat for the men! And the women? Sorrow and disappointment, that was all. They left a land of poverty, and what did they come to? This!

A powerful wind ripples the grass, and the leaves of the trees, few as they are.

Max Well, show yourselves, if you want to be understood!

He opens the door of the cottage, and we hear two voices inside.

Bridie No more of these walks you say you're going on. He's too old for you.

Meg How old were you when you had me?
Bridie You were the pride of my birthday when I turned fifteen.

Meg You started when you were fourteen, same as me.
Bridie I didn't let your father touch me till he said he'd marry me.

Meg If!
Bridie What are you saying, child?

Meg If people saw you were getting big!
Bridie I was proud to have a man who'd never let go of my hand!

Meg So there were others, were there?

Bridie Only one or two, in a lonely place like this.

Meg I want to live in a big town, with people coming and going ...

Bridie You'd go for your walks with men, and you'd find they'd never come back.

Meg (confidently) Oh yes they would!

Bridie Don't be a slut, girl! I didn't bring you into the world for this!

Max (closing the door) A bit more than we bargained for. Where are you, Ned?

Norm (strolling on) He's in jail in Beechworth. Hop in and I'll show you the town.

The cottage becomes the entrance to Beechworth courthouse.

Max They made the law imposing ...
 Norm ... to remind the lower orders of their place.

Max opens the door and we hear a stern voice.

Judge Three months. Hard labor. And when you get out, lad, make sure you don't come back. We'll make an old man of you before we let you out, next time.

Max (closing the door) That was when he went to Pentridge, as I recall.

At this point a young woman puts a death mask on a pedestal, and we hear a powerful voice from somewhere out of sight.

Ned When they let me out, I swore they'd never get me again.

Max That was Ned!

Norm He's everywhere, in these parts. Anywhere you go, you'll hear his voice, see where they camped ...

Max I want to find out what he means ...

Ned (offstage) You'll find nothing unless you've got justice in your heart!

Max So where do I start? Inside myself?

He realises that this is so, and sits down to think. Norm disappears. Four policemen lead Harry Power across, and the bushranger is waving and bowing as if he's had a victory of sorts.

Power They've caught old Harry at last. I don't mind jail. I'll have good company. What annoys me is the newspapers pretending to be superior. I'm willing

to bet the fifteen pounds the police took out of my pocket, and let the ladies of Beechworth decide, that Harry Power's a better-looking man than any of the reporters here today!

He goes off with the police.

Max Cocky old bastard! Quite a role model, eh. You never had a chance, Ned!

The cottage we visited before reappears to one side, and we hear its voice.

Bridie He was a boy to be proud of! And those that locked him up were rotten! Megan! For the sake of the Lord's kindness, feed that screamin' child!

Meg (angry, overburdened already) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Max waves a hand at the cottage, and it falls silent.

Max Into the mountains for me.

Range after range appears, one behind the other, then four police officers, keeping well away from each other. Each one introduces another.

Hare That's Nicolson. Mean little skinflint. No bloody use at all.

Sadleir That's Hare. Big fellow, isn't he. Well, he was in his own opinion.

Standish (pointing) Sadleir. Liked to sit and think. Thought if he smoked his pipe, Ned might walk in to be captured.

Nicolson (pointing) Standish. Someone must have told him Ned was drinking at the Melbourne Club. It's the only place he looked.

Max (his hand on the death mask, quoting Ned) What about it boys? Are you with me, Joe?

Nicolson (quoting Joe) A short life and a merry one!

Max (proudly, quoting Ned) My brother Dan.

Sadleir Steve Hart. It was a while before we knew.

Max A sergeant and three constables

Set out from Mansfield town

Near the end of last October

For to hunt the Kellys down.

So they travelled to the Wombat,

And they thought it quite a lark,

And they camped upon the borders of

A creek called Stringybark!

As Max sings, four troopers can be seen among the hills, rifles at the ready. Then there are shots, and groans. Max rushes to see the action, but the bush presses round him, and he seems lost.

Max The police got very close to the hut where the boys were hiding, but of course they didn't know. They weren't as good in the bush as the Kellys.

There is a last shot, very loud.

Max Sergeant Kennedy. Ned had to finish him off.

Ned (out of sight, but voice booming forward) I put his cloak over him and left him as honourable as I could,

and if they were my own brothers I could not be more sorry for them.

Standish Outrage! Nicolson! Get up there at once. Anything you want, any expense, but get those men.

Ned (still out of sight; as he rages, Max takes a step back from the death mask on its pedestal, and considers it) Certainly their wives and children are to be pitied but they must remember those men came into the bush with the intention of scattering pieces of me and my brother all over the bush and yet they know and acknowledge I have been wronged ...

Max puts a white cloth over the death mask and Ned's voice dies away.

Max They were out to get you, Ned, no doubt about that. What a pity you weren't there when they charged the Rats' Castle!

Standish, Nicolson and a bunch of troopers come on, brandishing guns.

Wild Wright (a voice in the distance) Dogs! Curs! Cowards! Follow me if you want to catch the Kellys. I'm going out to join them. Come a little way and I'll shoot the lot of you!

The police follow him through the ranges, then they come to a point where they stop, because they can see a cottage in the distance, in among some trees. They hesitate. Figures come on, nailing notices on trees.

Max Outlawed! Outlawed! To be taken dead or alive.
Reward of two hundred pounds!

Standish (to his uncertain troopers) Five hundred pounds!
Five hundred pounds! Dead or alive!

Troopers (pointing) You reckon they're there?

Standish Charge men, charge!

He blows a whistle. The men charge to the darkened hut and scramble inside. Other troopers, urged on by Standish, rush in after them. From inside the hut there are shots and shouts.

Troopers (realising the hut is empty) Nobody here. Who fired those shots, then? I thought ... Nobody here. Where's the door? Captain Standish! Get us out!

Max (to Standish) The Charge of Sebastopol? The Fiasco of Rats' Castle? How do you want it called?

Standish Nicolson, take charge. I'm going back to the Club!

As Standish leaves, a jaunty young bushman (Aaron Sherritt) comes on. The two men look at each other with interest, then Standish leaves, and Aaron approaches Nicolson.

Aaron They're too good for you in the bush. You don't know where to look.

Max Aaron was the traitor. The middle man who thought he could be smarter than either side. He paid for it with his life.

Aaron There's a cave where you can watch Mrs Byrne. Joe visits at night.

The police follow Aaron into a mountain cave, above the cottage which is now Mrs Byrne's. Hare, the tall police officer, takes over the watch. Darkness falls.

Max The gang went down to Euroa, held up a sheep station, robbed a bank. They cut telegraph lines so no messages got out. (standing near the mask) Ned wrote a letter. It was years before the world knew.

He takes the wrap from the death mask.

Ned (voice from offstage) I am astonished to see members of the Legislative Assembly led astray by such articles as the police, for while an outlaw reigns their pockets swell: 'Tis double pay and country girls'. By concluding, as I have no more paper unless I rob for it, if I get justice, I will cry a go. For I need no lead or powder to revenge my cause, and if words be louder, I will oppose your laws with no offence (remember your railroads), and a sweet goodbye from Edward Kelly, a forced outlaw.

The last words are very faint because Max has put the wrap back over the death mask.

Max He never had a hope. But he fought, and the boys had money for a while. They helped those they trusted.

We see a river, with redgums on either side.

Ned (still offstage) New South Wales!

Max They held up another town. Made a speech. And they had another letter, for all the world to read ...

Ned (offstage, as Max removes the wrap) I wish those men who joined the stock protection society to withdraw their money and give it and as much more to the widows and orphans and poor of Greta district where I spent and will again spend many a happy day fearless free and bold ...

Max (putting the wrap on Ned's death mask once again) If you want to know the rest of it you'll have to read my book!

Ned Can't I be left in peace?

Max Good question. Why am I doing this?

He sits to think. As he does so, we see a modern street scene, anywhere in the north-east of Victoria, the 'Kelly country' of old. Traffic surges through the street, fast, shiny, modern. The scene shows us how much has changed since Ned's day. Max stands restlessly, trying to get on top of his feelings, trying also to get his thoughts in order.

Max What did he achieve? They caught him in the end, and hanged him. And all the talk about a republic of north-east Victoria ... the idea died with Ned. Those men hanging around, for Ned to smash the train at Glenrowan ... they vanished. The next day, or the day after, they were gone. Their talk was only piss and wind. (He takes the wrap off the death mask.) Don't say anything Ned. You were a man of words, but a man of action too.

He stands at a verandah post, watching the modern street. After a moment we become aware of clangorous sounds as ploughshears are beaten into armour. This takes some time, and we hear the outlaws' voices as the armour's made, and tested.

Joe I'll take out Aaron.

Steve Ned and I will look after Glenrowan.

Ned Rip up the rails!

Dan The bastards guarding Aaron will call up a train ...

Ned It'll run off the track while it's rounding the bend ...

Joe And when they crawl out of the wreck ...

We hear many shots, pinging off the armour that they're testing.

Max They were desperate by this stage. They'd had a long winter, and they couldn't see an end.

Ned We decided to bring it to an end!

Steve A short life and a merry one!

Max It wasn't very merry by then.

The modern street dissolves and once again we are looking at a humble wooden cottage. There's a light in its only window, and night surrounds it, outside.

Anton Help! Where am I?

He knocks on the cottage wall. Aaron opens the door.

Ellen No, Aaron. Stay inside. Let me go.

Aaron (putting his wife aside) Who is it?

Anton Anton Veeks. I'm lost.

Aaron You're drunk, Anton. Why don't you take your grog to your tent so you can pass out at home?

Joe (coming forward) It's the end of the road, Aaron, for you.

Aaron We were always friends ...

Joe Not any more.

He fires, Aaron falls, the light in the cottage goes out as the door is slammed. Ellen Sherritt screams and the four policemen inside growl with fear.

Voices Rrrrrrrr ...

Joe Who's in there? Out the lot of you!

Ellen Aaaaaaaahhh!

Joe Out! (He fires.)

Voices Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Joe Ellen, come out! Mrs Barry, come out!

Women Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Police Aaaaaaaahhh!!!

Joe Let the women go! If you're men, you'll defend yourselves!

There's a terrible silence.

Max They wouldn't let the women go. The last thing they wanted was a fight.

Dan Set fire to it. We'll get'em out that way. Shoot'em as they come.

He and Joe drag handfuls of grass against the cottage, but wind blows out their matches.

Joe It's not working.

He fires a couple of shots into the cottage.

Voices (very quietly: in terror) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Dan Not too low. They'll be under the beds, hanging onto the women.

Joe We'll leave Aaron to the crows ...

Dan ... and let them raise the alarm ...

Joe ... we've got a long ride ...

Dan ... to be there before the train.

Anton (as Joe and Dan disappear) I never thought I'd see such a thing.

Ellen (shrilly) Get help, Anton, get help!

Anton (feebly) I'm going to my tent to sleep!

Max The rest is well known. The police stayed in the hut all night. Holding the women. In the morning, they told a Chinaman to take a message, but he was scared. They asked a teacher to take a message, but his wife wouldn't let him go. The Kellys had friends all over the place. It wasn't safe. So Armstrong commandeered a horse. He got to Beechworth in the afternoon, and he told his tale to Superintendent Hare.

Hare, the big man, appears.

Hare We knew something big was going to happen. The Kellys had their spies, but so did we, and we knew that old Mrs Byrne was telling anybody who'd listen that the gang was about to do something that would astonish not only the colony, but the whole wide world.

Max And they did.
Hare They did. First exchange of shots, something got me
 in the arm ...
Sadleir (appearing) I thanked God for the opportunity to
 bring the matter to an end.
Hare I passed out. (He does so.)
Sadleir I got every policeman I could find at Benalla, and I
 hurried to the scene ...
Max ... to do buggerall till morning, and not much after
 that. The police were a shambles in those days. No
 discipline, no training. Uniforms, all pretence ...
Ned What have I been telling you, all this time?
Max Gently Ned. It's your story, but you've had to give it
 to us. Like your life ...

Four suits of armour appear before the audience; the voices of those
that wore them are only heard from offstage.

Joe I'll drink to the Kelly gang, then we'll see how close
 these bastards are!

A shot sounds, and his armour falls with a clang.

Dan Our time's run out ...
Steve We're never getting out of here ...
Dan Two shots'll do it ...
Steve We'll count, one, two, three ...
Dan I don't want anyone to hear ...
Steve Three heartbeats then, then fire ...
Dan Ready?

Steeve Ready.
There are three silent bars, then two shots, fired simultaneously.
Two more suits of armour fall.

Ned I'm alone in a world of anger and rage. I want to
 bring justice down from the skies. I want the earth
 made perfect, but everyone's up to tricks to get a bit
 for themselves ... no matter who they cheat to get it!
 I'm dying for justice because I couldn't find it in life!

He appears in his armour, police fire furiously but without stop-
ping him. Then one of them (Sergeant Steele) lowers his sights and
shoots at Ned's legs. Ned falls to the ground. Police rush in from
everywhere, but Sadleir intervenes.

Sadleir Take him to the station. There's a doctor over there.
Ned's carried to the Glenrowan station. We see him being offered
medical treatment, and a bottle of whisky, which interests him
more.

Sadleir The hotel. Yes Johnstone, do it now.
Johnstone rushes to the hotel under cover of police fire, and sets it
alight. The flames continue until almost the end of this piece.

Sadleir Cover every exit and be ready to fire.
The flames rise higher and higher.
Max Ned was going to do lots of things, but somewhere
 inside himself he was getting ready to die.
Ned Such is life ...

Max puts the wrap around the death mask.

Max We won't look at him any more. You'll only have my word for it now.

Ned (still rageing, though very quietly now, as if from a habit of despair) It will always pay a rich man to be liberal with the poor and make as little enemies as he can as he shall find if the poor is on his side he shall lose nothing by it ...

Max Peace, Ned. You must leave it to writers like me, and the memories of those who come after. Nobody lasts, except in stories ...

Ned Tell my tale. I ask you, do it fairly.

The young woman who put the death mask on its pedestal comes and takes it away.

Max I'm writing this for you, Ned. It's called 'Australian Son'.

Voices (wailing) Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Behind Max, standing at the pedestal with some notes for his book, we see, as at the beginning, a humble cottage in the distance. Enter Standish, Hare, Nicolson and Sadleir, who is carrying Ned's armour, which he puts on the ground with the other three suits.

Standish (whisky glass in hand) What the hell is that noise they're making?

Voices Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Hare (looking at the armour) I think I'll take one for a souvenir. (to Max) You say you're writing a book?

Max indicates the pages on the pedestal in front of him.

Hare Good thinking. I might do the same.

Nicolson (sarcastically) It's a way to set the record straight.

Sadleir Yes. (musing) 'Recollections of a Victorian Police Officer' ...

Hare (triumphantly, and picking up a suit of armour) 'The Last of the Bushrangers!' Heavy bloody thing!

Standish He's taking it to the Clarkes', at Sunbury. Well connected bastard. Oh well, I can't complain. We got them in the end ...

Sadleir (to Max) What did you say you're calling your book?

Max Australian Son.

Voices Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Standish I wish they'd shut up. I can hear them in the Club!

Sadleir The voices of our land. They'll be singing when we're forgotten.

Max bows, the policemen leave, he looks to the cottage in the paddock not so far away, and the voices fade.

For the ideas and impressions stitched together in this libretto I am indebted to all those who have written about the Kelly outbreak, including J.J. Keneally (*The Inner History of the Kelly Gang*), Police Superintendents Sadleir and Hare, and the Royal Commissioners of 1881, but above all to the late Max Brown, whose *Australian Son* affected me deeply long before I came to know Max as a friend.

The Omeo Road

Members of the audience are placed so that they feel they are inside a bus, looking towards the front. John (the driver) and Amy (tour guide) are talking as they climb aboard.

Amy I'm tired.
John We get a break at the end of this trip.
Amy Sometimes I don't know if I'm coming or going ...
John A few drinks when we finish, a good night's sleep ... you'll be fine.
Amy I certainly hope so.
John (to his passengers, including the audience and some of the singing characters) All aboard, ladies and gentlemen. Ready to go. Bringing you all the sights, the places and the history ...
J & A ... of the Omeo road!
Cherry (in the bus/audience) That's not the same as the Great Ocean Road?
John No, no. This is the Great Alpine Highway ...
Chris (also in the audience) The Omeo Road?
Amy Both names are correct. Has everyone got their guide books?
Tourists Yes. Open. Ready.
John Off we go, ladies and gentlemen. Take it away, Amy!

The bus sets off with a roar. John looks around, because he doesn't hear Amy giving her travelogue. In fact, she's looking blank, so he starts.

John That's the famous log jail I was telling you about, there on your right. And that's the Golden Age Hotel, destroyed in the thirty-nine fires, and rebuilt as good as ever. Finest hotel in country Victoria. We sometimes stay there with our tour parties, they've got a good table ...
Amy (to John's surprise) The first explorers came down from the north. We're heading back the opposite way, to discover where they came from.
John coughs, by way of signalling to Amy.
John That road there takes you out to Benambra. Small settlement, round about eighteen thirty seven. About as early as it gets, in this part of the world. (Charlie coughs, by way of signalling to John) For white fel-las, anyway.
Charlie (on the bus, but sitting in the audience) Johnny come lately. Huh.
Amy (pointing right) Princes Highway to Lakes Entrance, head off there. Now, a big climb to the Sandhill, you can turn off for Granite Rock; we go straight ahead. There's a divide between two rivers. Behind you,

water runs down to the Mitchell; ahead of you, it flows into the Nicholson. Both names are in your book.

Charlie Your names got no meaning.

Amy Oh yes they have. You listen and you'll find out.

John Ah, Amy ...

Amy John?

John (quietly) Why don't you have a lie down on the back seat. You're getting the passengers confused. They don't know which way we're going.

Amy Oh who cares! (but she does what he suggests, and lies there until late in the performance, making unexpected comments when she stirs.)

Charlie Tell'em 'bout this track, mister.

John The early settlers found the mountains pretty hard going. Naturally, they relied on black men to be their guides.

Charlie Black fellas took'em along the tracks they knew. Best way to get through.

Chris Pretty good road now, though?

Charlie Can't make good road unless you're in the right place. Somebody have to tell'em.

John And they had sense enough to listen. But not always. Sometimes, the tracks followed the mines ...

Amy Rose of Australia!

John What did you say, Amy?

Charlie (after a while) She's dreamin. Lost in long ago.

Amy White Sands ... the Duke of Cornwall mine ...

John The best mines were out to the right of us, a place called Cassilis, not much going on there now ...

Amy Porridge Flat ...

John Bullock waggons used to cut through the surface of the soil and turn it all to mud.

Amy The Jirn Kee ...

Charlie (laughing) Nobody know what that mean. Ever!

John (to his passengers) It was the name of a water race, that brought water from the mountains one side of the divide and took it to the other.

Chris Why?

John For a mine. They used to wash the gold out of the gravel they dug up ...

Charlie (laughing) Jirn Kee! Whitefella think him clever, don't know his own words.

John Giving us a challenge, are you Charlie? Okay, you're on! You ought to know this one. Black Camp Creek! (A sign appears through the window of the bus.)

Tourists (sitting among the audience, who should imagine themselves as being in the bus) Black Camp Creek!

Charlie Reckon you might hear voices if you camp there for the night.

Cherry Have you camped there Charlie?

Charlie Mmmhh! I'd be scared.

Cherry What're you scared of, Charlie?

Charlie Not my people. Jaithmatang. They belong up here, they sneak down to where we camp, kill our people, fight. We call'em Brajerak, men we fear.

Chris What part of the country d'you come from, Charlie?

Charlie Down where the lady was talkin about. You haven't been there yet.

Amy (on the back seat) All I can see is the roof of a bus, but I've got the road in my mind.

Charlie These people wanta know the country.

John And they will! Tongio Gap! (Another sign appears in front of the bus.) Charlie?

Charlie You tell'em. You're getting paid.

Chris It's not in the book.

John Oh yes it is.

Chris What's it mean then?

John This is the dividing range. We're passing through the gap!

Chris Tongio?

John I just forget. I've got my hands full at the wheel.

Chris Charlie?

Charlie Not my people. Other fella name this one.

Cherry It's a long run down ...

John It flattens out at the swamp.

Amy Aaaaaahhh!

Cherry You all right, love?

Amy It's where they killed the gold buyer, Green. Eighteen fifty-nine. Armstrong and Chamberlain were their

names. Poison to be with. On their way to Melbourne they spent the night at Lock-up Creek ...

The tourists look to the front for a sign.

John Not there yet. I'll show it to you when it comes. They were hanged weren't they Amy?

Amy Bloody good riddance!

John Got strong views, has Amy. Okay everyone, we're coming in to Swifts Creek. Swift was a prospector, there's not much we know about him. It's a town that's had rises and falls ...

Archie Mostly falls.

John Times can be hard in the bush. Ezards had big mills, as we'll see along here. An amazing amount of timber's gone out of here. Trouble is, once it's gone, it's gone.

Archie The bush never makes any money.

Ella It's only where the work gets done.

Archie The value's added in another place. Only the battlers stay here ...

Ella ... while they can ...

John ... and that's never long ...

Amy It's a great place to be poor.

Tourists (saddened) Oooooooooohhh ...

John But there's always someone starting something new.

Tourists Gold!

John There's still people prospecting today.

Amy They tell us stories and we pass'em on to you.

John We're not as hard up as that ...
Chris Anyone ever made any money through here?
John Not big money, but ... you know ...

A sign 'Ramrod Creek' appears at the front windows of the bus.

Cherry Ramrod? What's that mean?
John There's another with the same name, further on. This used to be one of the boggiest stretches. Bullocks could hardly pull through, the mud was so deep.
Tourists Boggy Creek!
John Not just yet. Up and down, now, to Ensay.

The sign 'Ensay' appears at the front window.

Amy They ought to call the pub George Washington's axe.
Chris Why's that?
Amy You're getting into history here.
Chris Tell us more.

Amy's silent, so John takes over.

John There was a shanty here in the eighteen forties, then a pub. It got burned down, not doing too well, that's when they have an accident, these bush pubs ...
Cherry (reading her guide book) Three or four pubs since then ...
John Nobody's very sure ...
Archie Nobody's ever sure!
Ella That's the beauty of it.
Archie If you can stand the doubt!

A sign appears, Little River Inn.

Ella (laughing) Little River! It's called little because it's little. (still laughing) It hasn't got much to say, has it!
Archie None of these places do. It's all one long struggle-town, the whole road ...
Amy (shrieking) ... from south to north!
John From north to south. Remember where we're going.
Chris Where are we going, John?
John On a long trip to see what can be seen!
Cherry Is there a prize?
John No, but there's an end. That's when we all escape.
Amy Ensay's an island, in the stormy seas off Scotland. Where so many of the first men came from. Macmillan, Arbuckle, McAlister, all the early names ...
Chris (looking around) Why did they give this the name of an island?
John (getting annoyed) Why did anybody name anything?
Cherry Well, yes, why?
John Are you asking me?
Cherry I'm wondering ...
John People have to name things, don't they? What are you going to call something if it doesn't have a name?
Archie You think that's why we have names?

Charlie Whitefella name things to get power. Blackfella names tell you how they felt when they were there. What they doin there.

Ella You think that's better?

Charlie Make up your own mind about that.

A new sign, The Devil's Backbone, appears at the front of the bus.

Tourists (almost chanting) The Devil's Backbone!

John A difficult stretch. Most of the bullockies went straight up the middle of the river. Easier that way.

The tourists look down into the valley of the river.

Tourists Hard days, hard lives ...

Amy ... impossible men. Liars one and all. When they weren't telling lies they were making up yarns ...

John (as another sign appears) Wattle Circle. No lies about that, there they are in flower. Wattles are forever in the bush. And there's a track in there ...

Another sign appears: Angora Range Road.

Amy Goats! See what I mean? Nanny goats and billy goats, bloody goats all the way up that range ...

John Steady on, Amy! They're not hurting you.

Cherry Oh my god, what's this?

John I'll stop and you can have a look.

He stops the bus where we can see a stump carved to resemble a man. The stump man is painted black and white.

Chris What's the catch? I'm not getting out.

John Nobody has to get out. It's a chance to have a look.

Chris What at?

John The stump man. There used to be quite a few of them, all over the bush. Now there's chainsaws, people knock'em off.

Archie This one's got a steel spike up the middle to stop men doing that.

Ella Men!

Archie All right, women have too much sense. You go mad in other ways.

Amy Listening to people, mainly!

John (as a few tourists get out of the bus to study, or photograph, the stump man) All right, I'm shutting up.

Amy gives a loud and protracted yawn.

John My throat's worn out. You take over, Amy.

Amy I'm going to sleep.

Those who've been outside the bus start to get back on, but there is a surprise; the stump man follows them on board.

Stump Off you go, driver. It's time I had a look around. Ah, the Haunted Stream!

Tourists The Haunted Stream!

Stump There was a murder up there, but so what? There's been murders enough along this track ...

Charlie You tell'em, Collingwood! (The stump is black and white.)

Stump Ballarat Harry disappeared, and his horse and dog turned up in Omeo with another man. What do you make of that? But it's fear that gave birth to the name. Miners heard screams in the night and they couldn't sleep. Only owls, but conscience makes a powerful dream. Further in, there's Nightmare Creek and Witch Creek. The contents of the human mind!

Ella What do you call yourself? What are you?

Stump Memory. It's all I've got. I've been sitting there for years, watching you go up and down. You ought to take a look at yourselves. You might get a shock.

Cherry (nervously) You think we're not very nice?

Another sign, The Snakes Back, appears at the front of the bus.

Charlie What about this one, Collie?

The stump man merely laughs, and another sign appears almost at once: Lock-up Creek.

Stump (deeply satisfied) Aaahh. The natural state of man.

Ella Freedom!

Archie Disgrace.

Cheery Shame.

Chris Wondering what the hell's going on.

Stump All of the above, and more. When cops were taking men to face trial, they had to stop, sometimes, so they chained'em up. They chained'em to a log. Men will get away if you give them half a chance.

Amy (still lying on the back seat) Freedom!

Stump The freedom of a germ. A parasite that gets under the skin and eats the body alive.

Ella You're a hard ... whatever you are.

Stump Hybrid. I've got a mind like yours, but I'm not alive. I form judgements that I can't make anyone accept.

A new sign appears: Tuckerbox Point.

Tourists Tuckerbox Point!

Archie Not much harm in this one.

Chris (with his guide book open) It says here that miners picked up their supplies after the coach went through.

Charlie They only tell you what they want you to know. Ah!

This is a comment on the next name appearing, or rather two, because Tambo Crossing appears at the front of the bus, to be replaced by Neoyang, and the two names alternate.

Cherry (guide book open too) Another murder story! (to the stump man) You're right about that!

Stump It took him three weeks to die. In a room at the Walter Scott Hotel.

Ella Sir Walter Scott! Make him respectable!

Stump You needed a front to feel good about yourself, up here.

Amy (from her back seat) Who said it's only up here?

Charlie Neoyang. One of our words. Means a conger eel. Good eating, not easy to catch. (to the stump man) What's your tucker, mate?

Stump I live on air, and stories. They keep me going.
 Cherry It doesn't seem enough.
 Stump I'm the spirit of the place. I never forget a thing.
 Archie That's a bit frightening ...
 Ella How can you keep it all in your head?
 Cherry How can you want to?
 Chris Another one, Collie, is that your name? Why're you getting around in footy gear? Trees don't play footy, that I ever heard of.

Stump Trees talk to ourselves. We whisper in the wind, till it gets wild, and whips us into madness. Then it lashes us with storms. It sends sunlight to calm us, and make us reach for the light. It sends fire to make us panic, and smoke to stifle us. We forget everything in panic, but when it's quiet, our memory comes back. We remember your people Charlie. You looked after us pretty well. We miss you sometimes, but I don't think we'll see you back ...

Charlie We're recovering, you wait a while ...

More signs appear at the front of the bus: Saint Patricks Creek, Thousand Pound Bend, Wild Dog Creek, Bullocky Creek, Double Bridges.

Tourists Wild Dog Creek! Thousand Pound Bend. Bullocky Creek.

John Half an hour to Bruthen! (to the stump man) Do you want to go into town, mate? Or do you want to be dropped off somewhere?

Stump I'll go back pretty soon.
 John Let me know when you want to stop.
 Stump I don't want to stop. I go on with the trees. They've flourished for thousands of years. Fire encourages them. It frightens you, but it gives life to the bush.

The last batch of signs keep appearing at the front of the bus, and the travellers sing their names.

Tourists Double Bridges. Thousand Pound Bend.
 Chris (reading with some amusement) Claude Pendergast collided with two policemen on a motor bike and sidecar. One of the cops was injured. He sued in the Supreme Court and was awarded a thousand pounds!

The busload of passengers is amused. They get up in their seats to have a look. Stump man chooses this moment to disappear.

John Where is he?
 Amy I felt him flying overhead.
 Archie He's gone!
 Ella He's taken me too, a part of me's gone.
 Cherry Check yourselves. Is everyone okay?
 Chris Funny, I feel good.
 John Yes, check yourselves. Is anything missing?
 Amy I don't know where I am, now. I'm all confused.

More names appear at the front of the bus: Walsh's Cutting. Pheasant's Nest. The Ash Range.

John A bloke wrote a great big poem about Gippsland.
And he gave it that very name!

Tourists The Ash Range!

Amy He means the trees. Not the ash you get after a fire.

Cherry Why did the Colliwobble man talk about fire?

Chris He wasn't scared of it. He should be, he's made of
wood.

Archie That's a good question. What was he made of?

Chris Meaning what?

Archie I don't know. He came in from outside my mind. He
told me things I couldn't know.

Chris (waving his guide book) You've got this to go on.

Archie And it's not enough. I think we've all found this.

Another sign appears: Ramrod Creek.

Tourists Ramrod Creek!

Charlie Boung-war!

John What was that, Charlie?

Charlie Boung-war! Meaning spear.

Chris (reading) A hunter was loading his muzzle-loader
with his ramrod when a kangaroo appeared, where-
upon he discharged his weapon without removing
his ramrod. Well, that's what it says.

Charlie Sort of spear, if you think about it. Whitefella name
quite good!

John We'll be arriving in Bruthen in a minute, then lunch
in Bairnsdale.

Amy gets up from the back seat, looks around, and regathers herself
after the confusion of her trip.

Amy Bernisdale, from the family home of Archibald
MacLeod, on the Isle of Sky. Scotland. That's where
so many of them came from, and left their marks
along the way.

Cherry It says here, MacLeod came back and found lots of
newborn children, so he called it ...

Tourists (bleating) Bairns-dale!

John Hang on, we're not there yet!

Charlie Nillung, Narrt-Yarrung, Plundar-wadda-da,
Bankalunka, (then vehemently) Bequa, (solemnly)
Bruthenmunjie.

Amy Come again, Charlie?

Charlie Nillung. Narrt-yarrung. Plundar-wadda-da.
Bankalunka. (again with great power) Bequa. (qui-
etly) Bruthenmunjie. Close your book now. Got no
more to tell you. Next time you travel, keep your
book closed. Listen for the voices in the wind.

John What about Colliwobbles, Charlie? Is he one of your
mob, or one of ours? Does he know what he's talking
about?

Charlie (amused) Colliwobbles half and half. Black and
white. Got a bit going for him.

John Which half's working, Charlie?

Charlie (not biting) Find that hard to say!

John Bairnsdale, ladies and gentlemen. I'll stop beside our hotel. Half an hour to look about, then lunch.

Amy (more or less back to normal) Thank you for your interest as we drove along. (She's amazed to see that the stump man is back among them as they all get off.) Heavens above!

John Turns up wherever he likes!

Stump (shaking 'hands' as the passengers get off) Remember where you saw me. Think of every place. It's a part of me that you need to own.

Amy And you, Colliwobble, what about you?

Stump It's burned in me now that I need to share. Come back before long. Don't forget. The bush lasts forever and you, my friends, are like a fire that flames, then dies ...

Charlie stands beside the stump man, then John and Amy put themselves on either side, and the passengers (both singers and audience) get off the bus.

This libretto is based on Peter Gardner's *Names of the Great Alpine Road between Bairnsdale and Omeo*, Ngarak Press, Ensay 1997, which was, I think, the first of what is now a series of seven books devoted to the meanings and origins of place names in Eastern Victoria. The work Peter is doing possesses rare value in an age of globalisation.

Bush Telegraph

A room at the Alice Springs telegraph station, circa 1896. Equipment of the period is making sounds: dots and dashes. Frank Gillen puts a chair in the doorway and lights a pipe. The patrician, albeit friendly, voice of Baldwin Spencer sounds, far away. Gillen, we notice is well attuned to the professor's line of thought.

Spencer We haven't got to the bottom of this yet ...

Gillen A little more work and we'll have the problem solved. There's tucker in it for the blacks, without any risk ...

Constable Ernest Cowle enters, with a scornful look on his face.

Gillen You're off, Cowle? I'm sorry to see you go.

Cowle I'll come back when I hear the corks popping. When one of your wretched mines comes good ...

Gillen Don't wait that long my boy. Riches are only good if you've got something to waste them on.

Amelia Gillen enters.

Amelia Waste! That's the theme, when you two get together.

Cowle I'm not wasting my life up here. I'm where I want to be.

Amelia Is emptiness the only meaning, then, Ernest Cowle? What do you say to that?

Cowle The same as your husband. It looks empty when you arrive, and then you learn to see.

Amelia looks at Gillen.

Gillen He's a wretch, my love. He knows I think the same.

Amelia (scornfully) Emptiness! Who wants to be away from their people? I know, the two of you are made that way.

She leaves. Cowle and Gillen shake hands.

Cowle Let me know if you hear anything from the Prof. I look forward to showing him around ...

Gillen Strange how we miss him. Without him, this place wouldn't be worth living in.

Cowle leaves. Gillen sits again, with his pipe. We hear, again, the sound of the telegraph, and then, very faintly at first, the distant sounds, sometimes chanting, sometimes conversation, of people speaking in the Arrernte language. Gillen, who understands the language, attends keenly, nodding and commenting occasionally.

Gillen (suddenly alarmed) One of their elders? Betty!

A black woman comes in, and not far behind her, Amelia Gillen.

Gillen Man been killed for showing us ... things. (It's a question.)

Betty Old men say he done wrong.

Amelia What did he do, Betty?

Betty Show Mister Cowle what only proper men allowed to see.

Gillen Tjuringa ...

Betty flinches. Amelia takes her by the hand.

Amelia Sorry. We won't say that again.

Betty (wanting to go) I know nuthin about it.

Gillen Okay Betty, sorry to upset you. (Betty goes, and he speaks to his wife.) They are so different, and every time we try to find out, we clash with their laws.

Amelia Wait until they tell you something. They've got all the time in the world, you've noticed that.

Gillen They made the Prof and I wait for hours before they took us to their camp.

Amelia That might have been an honour, Frank.

Gillen They're so poor and yet so rich. They've got endless space and time.

The voices are talking again, in a different language this time.

Gillen Kaititja. Nothing stirring them, I hope.

Then it's the turn of the telegraph to make sounds, and Gillen and his wife watch and listen.

Gillen The government's talking to London. As usual, and all the time. You'd think we knew our own minds by now.

Amelia (with gentle sarcasm) Ask the Prof.

She leaves, and Gillen picks up his pen, and writes.

Gillen This killing upsets me terribly. I would not have had it happen for a hundred pounds, and I am going to

write to Cowle, there must be no more robberies. I can only say that I accepted when in ignorance of what they meant to the natives. To realise this one needs to go as I did a few weeks ago with bush natives and watch them reverently handling their treasures. It impressed me far more than anything else I have witnessed.

Spencer There's no compromise available. They control knowledge every step along the way. We say a thing's not known until it's in the open. How does anyone get around that? (He looks about him.) Frank? Paddo? Cowle?

Cowle (out of sight) Who cares? If it's us or them, it's us!

Paddo You've got me in a box there, Professor.

Gillen I wish I knew ...

Amelia (at the door) If the Prof can't solve the problem, how can you? Frank? It's the problem that comes from living here.

Gillen You love it as much as I do.

Amelia And yet I love other things more ...

Gillen You'll never admit that this (sweeping gesture of the hands) is normal.

Amelia It used to be for the black people. We should have left them as they were.

The sound of aboriginal voices, chanting, talking, arguing, fills the Gillens' home and there is also the clap-clap-clap of sticks. As it dies away, the sounds of the telegraph take over again, relentlessly,

though quietly too. Then there is silence, and we see Cowle and a blacktracker; Cowle has a rifle. They are following tracks through rocky ground. This involves frequent stops, with the tracker, Tommy, moving in wide circles to pick up the tracks again. The two men move silently, communicating for the most part only by simple gestures. There is the continuing background sound of aboriginal voices, sometimes many, sometimes only two. There is also a plodding measure to indicate the relentlessly determined nature of Cowle's enterprise. He is respectful of Tommy for his skills but maintains his superiority as the white police officer.

Cowle (of the tracks) How old?

Tommy Yesty. This time.

Cowle points to a cleft in the range, to one side of them.

Tommy They take a rest.

Cowle After six days on the run, yes.

Tommy (also pointing) Sleep away a bit.

Cowle Where? That's the question.

Tommy Where they see us coming ...

Cowle Friday, he's the one I want. (He proposes an idea.) You come this way, I go around the back. They see you, they sneak behind that range, they find me. (He pats the gun over his shoulder.) You bring up the chains.

Tommy (not liking this idea) I stay with you.

Cowle (looking up) No moon.

Tommy Come up tomorrow, when they sleep.

Cowle That's our moment. For now, we sleep too.

Tommy (watching Cowle) One blanket man.

Cowle You can't catch bad blackfellas unless you're as good in the bush as they are.

Tommy These fellas not much good. Too cocky. Think they got rid of us.

Cowle I mightn't have much to live for but I can track a man ...

He takes the rifle off his shoulder and points it with considerable intensity.

Tommy They be silly if they run away.

Cowle It would be simple if they did. We wouldn't have to drag them in to the Alice. What a lot of bother.

He lies down on the bare ground and Tommy does the same. The aboriginal voices give way to night noises, and the ticking of time, then the moon rises. Cowle and Tommy get up, and disappear. The Alice Springs telegraph station reappears, and Gillen takes up his position near the door, writing, and smoking, but we hear Cowle talking to the blacks he's captured.

Cowle What's your name?

Voice Warlpiril.

Cowle I'm calling you Thursday. Friday, get over there. (angrily) You want a bullet? Get over there. Go ahead Tommy. (The click of handcuffs, the clatter of a chain.) Now the other fellow. (The same sounds.) Big walk ahead of us boys. The Alice. It would have been easier if you hadn't run.

We see Cowle, Tommy the tracker and two prisoners advancing on a building at the telegraph station. Gillen's waiting for them.

Gillen (of Friday) This man's the smartest of his tribe.

Cowle Nobody's all that smart with a gun pointed at them.

Gillen The case'll only take a minute. After that, I've got hundreds of things to ask him.

Cowle Poor bastard. He's looking forward to jail, and he's getting you.

Gillen Shut up Cowle. You brought him in. Now it's up to me. You listening Friday? You kill cattle belong Tempe Downs. Yes or no?

Friday Fockin lubra bin make me kill cattle.

Gillen You can't blame your lubra. You get six months in jail.

Friday (cheerfully) Port Augusta?

Gillen That's right. Port Augusta jail.

Friday They feed me three time a day!

Cowle Cheeky bastard's right. We should chain'em to a log.

Gillen Quiet please. (to Friday) Before we send you to jail, you have to answer questions. (He pulls out a clip of papers.)

Cowle Oh Christ, Frank!

Gillen I'm in charge here, Mounted Constable Cowle. If you don't want to listen, go and ask Amelia for a cup of tea.

Cowle A good offer, but I'll listen.

Gillen Okay Friday, tell me the name of your father.

Friday (being smart) Tuesdi.

Gillen (grinning) Loritja name.

Friday Blackfella business. Not allowed to say.

Gillen Bullshit! I've got the name here. And your grandfather's name. I want to check the names of all your kin. I'm going to read'em out. You tell me if I've got'em right. Okay? Here we go ...

He starts to read a list of names, but Friday faints, reeling against blacktracker Tommy, who's attached by a chain to Friday. Tommy eases Friday to the ground.

Gillen Sal volatile! Quickly, love! The bugger's fainted!

Amelia brings in a bottle and Gillen tries to pour some of its contents down Friday's neck. Cowle is hugely amused.

Cowle The Centre's holy terror! The terror's holy centre! Gillen, Francis James!

Gillen Shut up, Cowle, bugger you. Get a bucket and pour it on him if you want to be useful.

Cowle I don't. I want to be a useless prick!

Gillen That's exactly what you are, unless you've got a black woman in your camp.

Cowle I haven't.

Gillen That's what you always say.

Cowle Then it's always sacred true.

Gillen Sacred! What's that mean? I wish the Prof was here.

Cowle	(pointing at Friday) This fella's as sacred as the Prof. And bloody smart! He fainted when he saw those questions!	Gillen	Stretched out on the floor.
Gillen	(calling) Darling? Make us a cup of tea?	Cowle	If there's an inquest, Frank, I will prove to the magistrate's satisfaction that I got him here with a tummy full of breakfast. The prisoner was delivered in first class condition!
Amelia	(from nearby) Won't be long Frank. You keep Ernest talking ...	Gillen	(as Amelia enters with a tray) Thank you darling.
Gillen	(disgusted, powerless) Nobody ever stopped him, as far as I know ...	Amelia	(looking at Friday) Aren't you going to do anything?
Cowle	Good job I live at Illamurta, don't you think, Frank? You wouldn't want me in here.	Cowle	It's already been done. Undoing it is quite a problem.
Gillen	What am I going to tell the Prof? I've made a bloody mess. (He looks at the body of Friday, lying on the ground.) Cowle?	Amelia	I never know what you're talking about, Ernest.
Cowle	(taunting) Whatever you say, I'll tell him something different.	Gillen	Neither does he.
Gillen	There's always two sides ... or four or five ...	Cowle	(in good humour) Ask the Prof ...
Cowle	Everything's relative, you like to think. But what about right and wrong?	Gillen	(almost supplicatory) My dear Spencer ...
Gillen	(sullenly) What about them?	Spencer	(far away, but curious) They seem not to have had mental disorders. Freud would hardly have landed a blow on them. This must mean that behaviours we don't allow were somehow incorporated in their systems. Our minds cling to what's lawful and try to hold other things at bay. They're more accepting ...
Cowle	(pointing to Friday) You couldn't frighten him with Port Augusta. But when you started to probe him for who he was, he had the sense to pass out straight away.	Gillen	... because they've got things worked out so finely ...
Gillen	You don't think he's faking?	Spencer	They give themselves time to think.
Cowle	You wake him up if you can. He's not faking. He didn't like it, Frank. You want to know things you're not supposed to know. Who knows what is very important to these people.	Cowle	They govern themselves, instead of experts governing fools.
		Gillen	And yet they're only stone age people ...
		Spencer	We believe in evolution, Frank: it may be a clever way of deceiving ourselves.

Cowle You don't have to be clever to do that. I've got friends who do it all the time.

Gillen (to Amelia) Lock the door next time you see him coming, would you darling?

Amelia He's the half of your own mind that you don't like to hear.

Cowle I don't like to hear it myself. We're a little island of fools, telling ourselves we're clever. Ah, Friday! Welcome back to the world.

Friday (grunting) Ugh! (to Cowle) You taking me down to Port Augusta?

Cowle Port Augusta is too civilised for the likes of me. We'll keep you here until we've got a few men for jail, then we'll send a couple of troopers. Oodnadatta, then the train.

Friday What about my mate?

Cowle He'll stay here for a week, on rations, then we'll let him go. We don't have a case against him. (laughing) Bring him back something nice.

Friday My people reckon I'm boss cocky when I get out of jail.

Gillen Have a cup of tea, Friday. (then, hastily) Drink it out of the cup.

Friday slurps some tea in ghastly fashion.

Cowle There's room for a finishing school, up here. Manners, deportment, keeping your daughters nice!

He leaves, signalling to Friday that he's to follow. Friday looks scornfully on the Gillens, and he goes.

Spencer The study of mankind is endless. But accepting what we see ... that's another matter.

His last words are overtaken by another burst of language – one of the central Australian languages spoken quietly but insistently, from both close and far away, and then, much closer, the sounds of the telegraph sending messages to London and back. After a time a new element is added to the 'background' noises – a list of things the 1901-1902 expedition will need to take with them. The list is read and/or added to in the voices of Gillen, Amelia, Spencer, Harry Chance, and two black men, Purunda and Erlikialika, with Spencer first, then the others in quick rotation.

List Camp oven, one. Enamel mugs, four. Billy cans, assorted, three. Enamel dining plates, six. Ditto, small, six. Butchers knives two. One steel. Two tin openers. Quart pots, with strainers, three. One grid iron. One short handle shovel. Tomahawk, one. Six assorted bits for brace. Assorted bolts, three pounds. One screw wrench. One hand saw. Knives, forks and spoons ...

Spencer This may be the last opportunity to discover how the black man lived before the white man interrupted his traditional way of life. Already the incursions of station properties have changed traditional practice in so many ways. Take fire; it's easy to start with matches. Kerosene. But when the black people learn

from us, they lose something of their own.

List Twenty four pairs of hobbles. Twenty five spare hobble rings. Two side lines, two belts. Straps for same. (after a brief pause) Double barrelled gun, twelve bore. One hundred and fifty cartridges for Chance's rifle ...

Amelia So many guns?

Gillen There's fishing line and traps on the list for the same reason. We have to be able to get fresh food.

Amelia You could hunt like the natives ...

Gillen We're doing that, in a modern sort of way.

There is the sound of a shot, and the excited yells of Purunda and Erlikialka as a bird is brought down.

Purunda Pluck him! Put'im on the fire. I dig a hole!

Spencer Good one, Harry! Well done.

Purunda 'fessa man, you shoot another. One each plenty good tucker!

Spencer I'm too slow. They don't wait around for me.

Purunda Erlikialka hide in swamp, shoot birds quick fire, you give him gun.

Gillen Spencer, tell Harry to give him the gun, unless he's prepared to hide in the swamp himself.

Chance No fear! Too many mozzies. Here y'are Likialka, you shoot'em duck.

Amelia Boys, boys ... what makes boy children men?

Spencer Science, Mrs Gillen, that's what does the trick. Without it we'd be lost.

Amelia So what are you going out to find?

Spencer The ways of a vanishing people; that's the simple answer.

Amelia And what else have you in that lofty mind?

Spencer I'm not lofty Amelia. We live in one of the hardest countries on earth. The black people did it so simply, they put us to shame. They needed so little, yet their adjustment was fine. We want to know how they did it. It wasn't only water and food, though they were masters there. It's in the spirit, and their stories, that you learn what they are.

Amelia Do you go to study, Professor Spencer, or to learn?

Spencer I tell the university I'm going to study, and they give me leave. I tell Frank I'm here to learn, and you know, I think, I learn more from him than I do from anyone else.

Amelia He loves you for that, Professor. He needs the black people. He talks as if he's looking down, but he's looking out. They're the horizon for him, and the ground at his feet. They're here and now, and they're beyond.

There's the sound of another shot, and Gillen's voice, calling.

Gillen Another one, Harry?

Chance That wasn't us, Frank. It was at a waterhole, the other side of the range.

Gillen Those bloody cattle men, taking water for their animals ...

Spencer Do you need to stay a few days, Frank? We can always delay our start ...

Gillen (miserably) No. Let's go ahead. (reading again from their list) Half a dozen yards of towelling for the cook. (The other voices join him, or they alternate, as the litany struggles on.) One five gallon keg. Three enamel pie dishes. Leather for washers. Three leather punches. Frying pans, two. One long iron fork ...

Spencer (joyfully) Toasting!

List (continuing) Six water bags. One small steel bar, three feet long. One shoeing hammer. Chance to take his own brace, pincers, pliers and rifle. Point 45 Colt revolver. Two hundred cartridges for same.

Amelia Guns! All these guns and bullets!

Gillen We have to hunt. There's got to be fresh food!

There is another shot, and this time the aboriginal voices which have been lurking around this final scene become troubled, wailing, full of grief, and they continue in this way until the end.

Amelia Travel well, my love. Travel well, professor. Harry, boys, God keep you in his care! (She watches for a while, then disappears.)

Spencer Gillen has been out this afternoon getting photos of scenery that I want, and is at present trying to recover from the exertion of having climbed a hill. Of course a blackfellow carried his camera but Frank is cross with him because he took him up a rather steep way ...

Gillen Cowle arrived in the evening, looking more like a Greek bandit than a police officer. His belt is laden with cartridges, revolver and handcuffs and altogether he looked formidable. He is disgusted to find that the expedition does not keep a supply of whisky on hand, and indulges in scathing remarks about our parsimony. A very pleasant evening spent in reminiscing and telling yarns ...

Spencer Today has been rather an exciting one and we have been kept on the go all the time. First of all we called in the assistance of one of the few women who were not under the ban of silence and we had a long tussle with her as to the different names she gives to different members of the tribe. It was a severe mental effort for her and I don't think we have got them all right yet but she is now resting after her work and we shall try and settle the matter tomorrow ...

Gillen The blacks say that in the Alcheringa, the far back time when people changed from animals or plants into men, two men of the Eaglehawk (Irritcha) totem killed and ate a number of men, women and children of the same totem, filling themselves very full until they became sick. The heap of stones now covered by twigs represents the vomit and from this an evil influence is thrown off. To prevent the evil magic, which is called Arungquiltha, from escaping, every passer-by, man, woman or child, must add a twig ...

Spencer Gillen and I have been practising rifle shooting with fair success for amateurs. Crocodiles upon the northern rivers will have to beware when we get near to them. Gillen promised the Moonta people to take them back one which he had shot. I fancy he will have to buy a stuffed one in Port Darwin and then shoot it on the quiet ...

Gillen We are now in the country of Walunkwa. (The aboriginal voices press closely on Gillen's words, almost bursting through.) The great hole at Wearminni was formed by him from here to his place of origin at Thapaurla. We follow his tracks. When within sight of the great waterhole the blacks warned us not to mention the snake's name otherwise it might become angry and issue forth and destroy us. We assured them we had the greatest respect for the snake and indeed we have and we were most careful not to disobey their injunction. We were most impressed by the reverence shown by the natives who accompanied us and I must confess that to a certain extent I shared in their feelings. Our visit to Thapaurla will live long in our memories. We have taken a number of pictures of the young men being rubbed with the sacred Irratitcha. 'Tis a glorious moonlight night and the surrounding crags are lit up by the blacks' fire. Our visit to Thapaurla and various places en route has been most interesting and profitable. We should much like to see more of the wildly picturesque

Murchison Ranges but time is fleeting and even a day cannot be spared to mere sightseeing ...

Gillen's voice is rich in happiness and fulfilment but the cost of this happiness should be evident in the voices of the black people which are the background of the thoughts he's expressing.

In writing this libretto I have drawn heavily on *My Dear Spencer: the letters of F.J.Gillen to Baldwin Spencer* by John Mulvaney, Howard Morphy and Alison Petch, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1997, and *From the frontier: outback letters to Baldwin Spencer*, by the same authors, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000. Another influence in the development of my sense of aboriginal languages surrounding white settlers was Barry Hill's *Broken Song: T.G.H.Strehlow and aboriginal possession*, Knopf/Random House Australia, Sydney, 2002. Thanks are due also to my daughter, Miriam Eagle, who took me to the Centre, including the Alice Springs telegraph station, in 2001.

The Nut

Petra is standing a little way from a farmhouse which she is renting for a few weeks. Some distance behind her is a long, high basalt rock known locally (Stanley, NW Tasmania) as 'The Nut'.

Petra (thinking of her husband and children) They'll be in the air, in sight of the mainland by now, and I've put myself here, in sight of the rock. (She turns to look at it.) The Nut. You need to be nutty to live here, they say, because they're proud. The nuts are those who don't cling to it as they do. I'll paint it, and once I've gripped its secret, I'll go.

The Nut is suddenly almost on top of us, and Petra's setting up an easel and a piece of board.

Petra I'll steal it from itself, and when people want to know what it's like, they won't need to come here, they can look at my picture. (laughing) Isn't that so, my nut?

A fisherman heading for the boats at the jetty stops for a look.

Peter What's that you're doing?

Petra You know very well.

Peter Made a good start.

Petra Come back when you've caught some fish and you can tell me how well I've done.

Peter You've got skill. We rely on luck.

Petra Rubbish. You know where to fish.

Peter (laughing) But we never know if they're there or not!

Petra So why don't you go anywhere the winds take you?

Peter Might be a good idea, but we're stuck in the mud.

Petra You need to escape.

Peter Maybe, but there's no way to do it ... that I know of.

Petra I'll show you how to paint.

Peter What good would that do me? I'm only a fisherman ...

Petra Never say you're only anything. If we put limits on ourselves, we're tying ourselves down.

Peter You might have something there, but I'm late. Seeya in a couple of days!

Petra Here!

Peter Anywhere ya like! Wherever ya paintbrush takes ya!

He's gone, and Petra is left comparing The Nut with what she's made of it.

Petra Only a likeness, nothing more. I haven't got it yet! Back to the farm, and back again tomorrow.

She disappears, and The Nut remains. For a few bars, the music describes the place by night, burdened by itself and beset by wind. There is a tidal movement, too, and when Petra returns, the tide is out, the water she's looking at is shallow, and the waves have given way to ripples through which she can see the sand.

Petra It's changing all the time. That's how it stays the same. (She takes up her brushes.) All right, my Nut, how are you today?

Peter (returning) Talking to yourself!

Petra There was nōone else.

Peter I was here all the time. Where you're standing, that's a part of me.

Petra Shall I move?

Peter No, I like you being there.

Petra You know why I'm here?

Peter No, but I'm pleased.

Petra Good!

Peter (altering) A man feels challenged when a woman puts herself in his place.

Petra This place is a mystery to me, and I need to be at the heart.

Peter (a little uncertainly, and with some aggression) So you're standing in my spot.

Petra (cheekily, boldly) I've taken possession.

Peter I might have to take possession of you.

Petra (appraising him for what he's proposing) You're very confident. You've never faced your own limitations.

Peter I never thought I had any ...

Petra ... until?

Peter ... I saw you.

Petra What did you see?

Peter Someone who wanted to see into me in a way I'd never seen myself.

Petra And that made you curious?

Peter (stepping closer) I am.

Petra The tide's out. It's a moment when the world feels weak.

Peter I'm going to my wife, now. She'll have seen the boat get in.

Petra You're married?

Peter You've got a family. I saw them, before they went away.

Petra (considering him) You knew I was on my own.

Peter I had to get on my own to be with you.

Petra You're not there yet, if you're going to your wife ...

Peter I'll be back tonight. Don't you let me down.

Petra (folding her easel) I'm going now.

Peter Tonight!

Petra I'll paint you, and tonight I'll show you what you are.

Peter (going) In the dark?

Petra That's when we know each other best.

Both leave. The day stretches out, the tide comes in, the sky darkens, and the music considers the rock, again. Eventually Petra returns, and sits on the rock she associates with the man she's agreed to meet. She has with her a board which she's painted during the day.

Petra (of her painting) It's too dark to see. He won't know what I've done with him.

Peter (coming on) She thinks I'm drinking. That's all right. She'll find out in a while.

Petra She only exists if she joins us here. Lie beside me.
Peter I've wanted this all my life.
Petra What, exactly, do you want?
Peter To be inside myself and outside myself at one and the same time.

As Petra answers him, The Nut moves further away until we see it as we did at the beginning, from a couple of kilometres distance; the two voices, though, are still close to us.

Petra See how I painted you.
Peter The rock's got my face.
Petra You've become the rock.
Peter I want to go away with you and lead another life.
Petra Something you cannot do.
Peter Then you can live inside the rock, the spirit that emerges, the fairy that hovers, and people will imagine they've seen you, but only I can touch ...
Petra Hold me now.
Peter This will change us.
Petra Then let it happen. I want to be inside you. I've always lived on the outside, looking in, and I want to be within, within, within ...
Peter Together with me, our boundaries gone ...
Petra Waves, winds, falling rain, sunrise, clouds, boats drifting past, fishermen coming home, lamps and torches, stories, boasts and lies
Peter ... and the truth of entering each other ...
Petra ... to find out what we are!

Their loving preoccupies them for a time.

Peter The rich man doesn't know what it is to be rich until he's given it all away.
Petra A woman doesn't know what a man is until she's held his life in her hands.
Peter Let me live. I want to be with you.
Petra Pin me to the rock. Don't let me fly away.
Peter I'll be at sea tomorrow night.
Petra I'll be here when you come home.
Peter We'll have an audience if we do this by day.
Petra Then come to my farmhouse and we'll be alone.
Peter We'll come here at night ...
Petra ... leaving crushed grass in the morning ...
Peter We wouldn't be the first to do that, you can take it from me.
Petra Nor the last, I dare say ...
Peter It'll go on ...
Petra ... so it's what we make of it that matters. I'll paint you again, tomorrow, Peter, while you're getting ready for the sea ...
Peter ... and when I come back, you'll show me what I am.
Petra You're trembling ...
Peter I'm afraid ...
Petra What's your wife's name?
Peter Julie ...
Petra You're thinking of her now.

Peter She's close to us. I can tell.

Julie appears, climbing up the side of The Nut.

Julie (claiming her husband) Peter.

Peter says nothing.

Petra His silence tells you he's not yours.

Julie Peter. Come home with me now. She doesn't belong.

Peter That's why I want to stay.

Julie Then find your own way home. There may be nothing there.

Julie leaves.

Peter (desperately) It doesn't sound much of a threat to you. But it's the ultimate, believe you me.

Petra So what are you going to do?

Peter I'll take every risk I can, and I'll find out what my fate's to be.

He leaves, and after some ominous rock-music, Petra leaves too, while The Nut continues its brooding on the foolishness of humanity, clustered about it on its away-from-the-sea side.

Julia (in one of the houses of the town) The boat got in an hour ago. The men are finishing at the pub.

The Nut (a bass voice) They're pressing me, they're murmuring, and filling the air with sighs.

Julia He was like that with me. For a while. She's a tough-nut to crack. She knows more than he does.

The Nut She wants to take him away.

Julia ... and he's afraid. That's where I've got him. But if I hold him, and she goes, what's left for him? She'll have emptied him, and sucked him dry.

The Nut He's scared. I can feel his fear.

Julia He knows she's draining him, and he's giving himself away. He thinks if he gives her everything, she won't keep asking for more. Fool.

The Nut Humanity. Is lost when it tries to go away. You must cling to what you know.

Julia He knows nothing but you ... and me.

The Nut (musing humorously) An empty horizon, then, it seems.

Julia disappears, darkness takes over, then the sky of late afternoon, at the top of The Nut. Petra's there, with her easel and a painting, and Peter's lying on the grass.

Petra I won't know until I show it to friends who've never been here.

Peter I want you to leave it with me.

Petra Your wife would throw it in the fire.

Peter I'd keep it on the boat.

Petra It'd never have a home.

Peter It'd be like us, then.

Petra We have a home, Peter. It's in creation every picture I paint ... every time we merge our minds ...

Peter Lie beside me love. You woman with my name!

Petra (Getting on the grass with him) You're another form of me. You're the rest I never knew until you gave me my completion. Finding you is being allowed to love myself.

Peter We had a storm last night. Robbo said, we'll ride it out here. The wind's in the wrong quarter to head for the Nut. So we headed into the wind, which is the roughest way to survive, and half a dozen times we were swallowed up in water and I thought we wouldn't get out ...

Petra Could you feel me close to you? I knew you were in trouble ...

Peter I thought, even if the boat goes down, I'll grab a mast and stick to it until I see the land, and then I'll swim! You know what? Never for one moment did I feel weak. What they say about faith is true. I felt invincible because I had you. I was there, on the ocean's terms, and I had something pulling me through. I had you, my love, your love, your belief in me, your strength, your arms, your desire, the power of your will, pulling me home.

Petra I suppose, if you think about it, fish don't have a home, except the whole wide sea.

Peter Humans do, because we belong on land, and there's some part of the land that's where we belong ...

The music overwhelms their voices for a short time, reminding them and us of the ambivalence of their situation: The Nut is the

home of their love, and yet it is also the embodiment of the town's identity, and Peter is a part of the town, with a tiny house and a wife who shares it with him. There are also the fishermen he works with who can, perhaps, imagine themselves 'having a fling' as they would call it, but would never leave to be with an outsider. Some lights go on in the town, and a couple of cars move about, headlights flickering between the buildings.

Peter What's going on down there?

Petra (joking) Julie's sending out a search party?

Peter She knows where I am.

Petra They might be going to my house.

Peter They know where you are too.

Petra Should we feel scared?

Peter The forces haven't gathered, yet, to strike us down. They will, but tonight we're safe.

Petra Lie in my arms, then, and give me the skies above ...

Peter ... the water that nearly drowned me, the earth that makes us safe ...

Petra It's the combination, isn't it ...

Peter ... nothing pushed out of sight ...

Petra ... nothing denied ...

Peter There's a price to be paid for everything ...

Petra ... but ...

Peter ... if we pay it, and we're prepared to, then ...

P & P ... we can make the whole world shake with love!

They love, and the music tells us that the sea is swirling, the stars are blazing, and the earth where they are loving, the big basalt Nut,

is trembling with and for them. The lights continue to move below them for a time, and then they go out, leaving the scene in darkness. Then dawn breaks, we're on a jetty, and Peter is with three fishermen: Robbo, John, and Nick.

Robbo Get any sleep?
Peter None of your business mate.
Robbo I can't put you at the wheel if you're going to nod off.

Peter Nodding off's the last thing I've been doing lately.
John Makes it all the more likely, then.
Robbo You're a fool, Peter, a fuckin fool.
Peter Whatever you say.
Robbo You've got everything you want. Lead a normal life, that's all you need to do.

Peter You have got no idea of what's driving me.
R,J & N No. No.
Peter (feeling desperate) If you want to throw me overboard, wait till we're too far out to swim.

Robbo We've been together for years. Good times and bad. We've lost you, and we don't like what's happening. Julie's one of us.

Peter She's a part of me. I can't break away ...
Nick (sarcastically) ... no matter how hard you try!
Peter I'd like to flatten you for that!
Nick I don't mind if you have a go!
Robbo Calm down you bastards. When we get out to sea, Peter, you've got to tell us what you're feeling. As often as you like, and we'll stop if we can, to listen.

Peter I must owe you something, but you won't like what you hear.

It's the middle of the same day, and Petra is painting in her rented farm house. The Nut can be seen in the distance, and again on the board she's working on.

Petra Painting is a prelude to loving, and a memory that lingers after. My life's got a centre now and I'm mining it for all it's worth. His wife says I'm selfish; well, what's wrong with that? We have to live by the truest thing that's in us, and that's what I'm doing now. He's got to see this. Peter!

He's there, unexpectedly. He's wild, desperate, confused.

Peter Let me go! Let me go, for God's sake!
Petra Who have you had in your ear?
Peter I've been on that boat for years. They know me like the back of their own hands.

Petra They hate me, because I've broken in. You're mine, now, Peter. We've got the same name, did you notice?

Peter Let me go. Stop hanging onto me. Let me be as I was.

Petra You're changed, my love. You've looked into my soul, it was a mirror, and you saw yourself, properly, the very first time.

Peter Give me back to myself!
Petra (passionately) If I give you back, I destroy myself!

Peter Then die, if you love me, and let me live!
Petra (shocked) Die?
Peter Go away. You've got a family. Find them, follow them.
Petra No!
Peter Then let's die here, both of us, this very day. I've got a gun.
Petra No!
Peter Then what ... I've got a question in my mind so big, it's not in my power to say!
Petra Then talk about something else.
Peter What else is there?
Petra (firmly) There's always love.

This drives him mad. He puts his hand to his empty, wordless head, and he slumps on a sofa, a bed, or even the floor.

Petra Peter. Why have we got the same name?
Peter (limply) We were made for each other.
Petra I want to have your child.
Peter What does it matter, when we're lost?
Petra The child won't be lost. The child will find itself, when it comes here. A man with your name or a woman with mine, will see this rock – our rock, Peter – and know that she, that woman, or he, that man, was brought into being here. The rock will last forever, and he, that man, or she, that woman, will find itself in him.

Peter It's only a bloody dead rock! What good can it do for us?
Petra We've brought it to life, Peter, and it will live in our child. Is it unsafe to go there tonight?
Peter Yes. That's why I'm here.
Petra Tell me how much you love me.
Peter To the point where I wish I was dead. I'm as silly as that.
Petra You think you're mad, but your madness has made you sane.

She leads him into the room where she sleeps, and after they've gone the music ponders what they're doing; in particular, Petra's fancy – or is it more realistic than that? – that their lives and the resolution of their situation, is somehow a function of the rock where they've loved on many nights before. When the darkness lightens, we are again on the jetty, near the fishing boats. Robbo, John and Nick are there, with Peter; they are about to go to sea.

Robbo Your lady's gone. (Peter is silent.) Or didn't you know?
Peter How would I know what's going on? My life's been taken over.
John She was seen at Devonport. They reckon she flew out a couple of hours later.
Nick Bloody good riddance.
Peter Gone?
Nick (vehemently) Gone!
Peter Gone?

Nick Gone!

Peter Gone?

R, J & N Gone. Gone mate, gone.

Peter If she'd taken me with her ...

Robbo What then, mate? What then?

Peter I'd be dead.

Nick But she didn't take you ...

Peter So I'm dead then, aren't I? Dead.

John (exasperated) Tip yourself over and have a look, willya? Scratch yourself and see how you sound!

Peter I can't sing.

Robbo Who gives a fuck? Here's Julie.

Enter Julie.

Julie Pete?

Peter No.

Julie Pete?

Peter No.

Julie (tenderly) We're both still here, Pete.

Peter Something's been stolen.

John Everything looks the same to me.

Peter Everything's been changed.

Robbo Julie? See if you can bring him back the way he was.

Julie Pete? What's happened, darling? What's she taken away?

Peter A child.

There is a long silence between the five of them, with a sombre orchestral musing.

Peter (to Julie) I can't face you after what I've done.

John None of us can face each other.

Robbo We've got a boat to get into the water. We've got a load of fish to catch.

Nick (glaring at Peter) And we're a man short! A fuckin screw loose, you might as well admit!

Julie I've worked on boats. I'm coming with you.

Nick And leaving him behind, is that the plan?

Robbo I don't think that's what she meant, mate ...

Julie Pete's coming with me. When he sees me working he'll remember what to do.

Robbo Come on then. It's the only thing to do. (reminding a helpless Peter) Waterproof, mate. Boots. All aboard. Thanks Julie. Let's see how we go today.

They get on the boat, and it heads out to sea. High above, in a plane, Petra looks down on the water.

Petra They closed their ranks. They knew they could shut me out. Make it impossible for Peter, make it impossible for me. I withdraw. There's no winner for now. But in twenty years this little one will go back, enquiring, looking for herself. What will she decide? To live there, or to fly away? I'll be a hollowed-out rock, by then, as her father is now, and she'll be firm. Her identity will need her to be hard. To be hard, we need to be soft and to be soft we have to be hard. How impossible we are, but do you hear me Peter? Are you listening, Peter, on the water down there? I'm

proud of what I've done. I'm proud of what I made you do. And when our little one comes to find her father, and meets a hollowed out man with the leathery skin of sailors, you'll be proud, too, of our passion and what it's bringing into the world. Goodbye Peter, for now.

The plane and the boat on the ocean fade from sight, there is a brief glimpse of The Nut, and then there is nothing but the expectation aroused by Petra's final prophecy.

Cup Day

The first Tuesday in November is getting close. The action begins so early in the morning that we can hardly see, although we can hear the hooves of horses galloping past a couple of men.

Kim (an ex-jockey) Three in thirty nine.
Bart Pretty ordinary.
Kim Gunna scratch him?
Bart Too much money on him. Gotta make him go better.
Kim If ya put something in his feed they'll test him, for sure.
Bart I often think it's a good job horses can't understand us. They wouldn't bloody run if they knew what we were saying about'em.
Kim The day you don't let me come out on the track with ya I know I'm finished.
Bart The day I can't produce a few winners, I'm finished too.
Kim Only as good as our horses, eh Bart?
Bart Too true. Oh oh. The media's arrived.

We see the lights of a car, and a man gets out.

Harvey How's she going, Bart?
Bart You know I don't talk at this time of day.

He disappears.

Harvey Who's Bart working on this morning?

Kim Fool's Gold. The name could be truer than we'd like.
Harvey Bonanza! That's the one to be on.
Kim (scornful) Couldn't win on a bloody skateboard!
Harvey What're you putting your money on?
Kim Haven't decided yet.
Harvey Not backing Bart's horses! That's ominous.
Kim I haven't decided yet. Don't jump to conclusions!
Harvey I'm not jumping, mate. Your mind is an open book.
Kim If only the future was the same ...
Harvey ... we'd all be rich!

They disappear into the darkness. McNogle, a bookie, comes to the front.

McNogle Speaking of which, have you worked out your winners yet? There's nine races on the program, you can have a flutter on the cup, but make your big money on the others. (A phone rings.) McNogle. Whereya ringing from? Darwin! Ya got any good info up there? The forecast? Bureau says there's a change going through a couple of days beforehand but it could be delayed ... you know what that means. Prince Latham? No, I don't understand the name, I never do. Ten thousand Ozzie dollars at ... (he looks at his board) ... thirteen to one. Ya got thirteen thousand dollars there, if he wins. Thanks mate.

Kim comes back.

Kim (also looking at the board) Trying to cover yourself, every which-way.

McNogle That's the name of the game.

Kim I often wonder about that.

McNogle What do you wonder about, mate?

Kim Why we get so caught up in it?

McNogle That's easy. People are bored shitless, they make up excitement. It keeps you and I employed, so who are we to grumble?

Kim Funny thing, Bart says the same.

McNogle He's got to go along with things, no matter how silly they are. He's number one! (His phone rings again.) What? You're in Warrnambool and there's a storm? Coming through a bit early. Could be a dry track. It's gonna be a good year for the people who rent marquees ...

He and Kim are soon out of sight because three or four marquees are being put up. These need be no more than sails of canvas that can be swirled forward or pulled back, so that areas can be hidden or revealed. A gossipy man called Lex is in charge.

Lex I often reckon if we really wanted to make money we'd rent out little ones, by the hour. Fifteen minutes'd be enough for some people. Others'd go to sleep afterwards, and when they woke up, the Cup'd be over. Pity about that, but they had their fun ... Good morning, Bart!

Bart (slipping between the canvases) G'day Lex. Any scandals this year?

Lex If we didn't have a scandal, we'd invent it.

Bart Humans have more fun than horses. We tell'em who their partners are going to be. Not much in it for them.

Lex (as Bart goes) Not much in it for me either. I only hire out these things. Nobody asks me to join them.

Enter Crocus, a flamboyant spreader of social chit-chat.

Crocus That's because you won't dress up, my dear. People don't find overalls any fun!

Lex They're quick to get off ...

Crocus If anyone wants them off, that's my point!

Lex (humbly) I could do with a bit of assistance, there ...

Crocus Darling, when it comes to love, every player has to gamble. If you haven't got more on the affair than you can afford to lose, you shouldn't be playing! Fact number one!

Eight women of various ages come on in underwear, their cup-day garments on their arm. They help each other to dress, they study each other with admiration, envy, or scorn. Each is aware that Crocus will be writing about them, and will have photographers at her bidding.

Adele (holding up something aqua) I didn't want something that would show my undies if it got wet.

Crocus You'll never get a broly to match that!

Bobby I'm doing without. If the heavens tip a bucket, so be it.

Desiree I want all the men to know my eyes are fixed on them.

Crocus There's more than one way to play that game, darling.

Desiree Not in my mind there isn't. I want to feel their eyes caressing ...

Fantome Are the race books ready yet? I need to have something in my hand.

Petit Champagne, darling?

Fantome Don't mind if I do.

Lex goes around the women with glasses and a bottle, pouring. They look on him with a certain degree of contempt.

Susannah I've got an old iron I was going to throw out. I could give it to you.

Lex Me, luv?

Susannah You. The thing you're wearing ...

Tracey I'm wearing every cent I've got.

Lex Then you'll have to put your dress on a horse. Who're you gonna back?

Zara We don't have our books yet, here's the man who'll tell us.

She means McNogle, who appears among the women as they slip into their dresses.

McNogle Archer, Carbine, Phar Lap, Peter Pan ... sorry, they're all past winners. Great names there! We'll never see their like again. (putting up his betting chart) Here we are. The field! Two to one at the top, hundred to one the bottom. Consolation Prize. He's the favorite! Consolation. What's in a name? Number two, Ziggurat ...

Zara That's the one for me. ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

McNogle What're you putting on it, lady?

Zara All I've got!

McNogle Which is?

Zara The clothes I'm wearing.

McNogle I'll put you down for twenty-five bucks, but when the race is over, if Ziggurat doesn't win, you and I will have to come to an accommodation ...

Crocus Do you mean shared accommodation, Mr ...?

McNogle I do, unless you other ladies want to put up the dollars for this one ... (They don't. He returns to his list.) Casta Diva. Dunno what that means.

Susannah It means us, darling. Us.

McNogle (not grasping) Yes, hmm. Dewars. After the whiskey. Lightly weighted. A really good prospect, drawn on the inside. A second to none chance. (looking at his list again) Lonely Road, and Lover's Lane. What a combination! Think of them coming in one and two. All the unhappy people backing Lonely Road and the lovers backing The Lane.

Desiree Lovers sometimes take a lonely road. It fills them with desire when their moment comes to hand.

Lex Oh! (He's almost overcome with desire for her, but she ignores him.)

Crocus (calling) Where are you Rodney? (Her cameraman rushes up.) Is everyone ready? Check yourselves, please.

McNogle (still reading from a list, but he's back on the wrong one by now) Rain Lover. Man O' War. Comic Court ... sorry, how'd I get back onto them? (returning to his chart of this year's runners) Quintessence. Radial Tyre. That's a funny one, makes you wonder, doesn't it. Saddam ...

Adele He ought to be rubbed out.

McNogle Don't back him if you don't like the name. Twin Towers, and September Twelve. That's a good one to back! Something positive. The day after, see what I mean?

Bobby That's the one for me.

McNogle What're you putting on him love?

Bobby Twenty thousand dollars. It's all I've got.

Crocus On a horse?

The other women are amazed at her boldness.

Adele Not that much, darling.

Tracey What'll you do if it doesn't win?

Bobby Put my head in an oven. Beauty doesn't last. Nothing lasts forever, didn't you know?

Petit I think we all know that.

McNogle You want to change your mind?

Bobby Twenty thousand dollars. This necklace and this ring. Only condition, I wear them on the day. You get them if I lose.

McNogle I'd put'em on Dewars if I was you.

Bobby But you're not. September Twelve!

McNogle You want a better world, don't you love?

Bobby That, or none at all.

Crocus Rodney, get that photo taken!

The women line up, and Rodney presses the release cord. A moment later a much-enlarged picture of the women is visible behind them, looking big and just a little bare.

Lex Flowers, that's what they need!

He signals, and over the next few minutes people put flowers into and on the arms of the women in the photo. The characters on stage drift away, one by one, talking momentarily, adjusting clothes, considering McNogle's betting table, and so on. Gardeners are preparing the course and they place, in front of the big photo of the women, tub after tub of flowers, chief among them being roses. As each new group of flowers is placed in position, we hear the thunder of hooves, as if a race is being run. Then two men, Andrew, the President of the Victoria Racing Club, and Garnet, the Chief of Stewards, come by to inspect the course.

Garnet Track's looking good. (He presses it with his hand.)

Andrew A few hours of sunshine and you'll never have seen it better. How's the betting, Mac?

McNogle Think of the best we've ever had, and add a couple of noughts.
Andrew Will you be able to pay if the wrong horse wins?
McNogle We spread the risk. We've been around a while.
Garnet There's not a horse in the race that hasn't got a chance.

We hear the thundering of hooves again, somewhere not far away.

Andrew The car park's filling up. The big parties are getting underway.
Lex (indicating a marquee) That's the one, ladies. Fridge for the drinks. Barbie for the food. All by courtesy of solar power. In you go, and see what you come out with ...

The women enter the tent over the next minute or so, this time with their men for the day.

Adele Who've we got in the next race, Derryn?
Derryn Bugged if I know love, who's your fancy?
Adele Upon Reflection. I like the name, don't you?
Derryn Give's a look. (He glances at the race book.) Impulsive. That's the one for my money.
Adele Are we backing it, then?
Derryn My oath we are. I'm backing Impulsive and you've got Upon Reflection. I'll get on before they start.

He goes. There is a rumble of horses' hooves, and a rising call from the crowd. Derryn returns, and he and Adele get excited as the race reaches its end.

Derryn Impulsive! No, he only got second! Your horse won, Adele, well, I'll be bugged ...

Adele Upon Reflection.

She looks smug. The others congratulate her.

Bobby Kiss me darling, I want some of your luck!

The two of them embrace.

Terry (who's with Bobby) What a waste. (He means beautiful women kissing each other.)

Bobby Tomorrow's out of my hands. So's today, come to think of it.

Susannah So's everything, unless we shape it in some way.

Phillip (Susannah's man) Men make decisions, and women shape them, afterwards, usually, sometimes before. Men talk about what they're going to do, and that's when women start to shape things.

Susannah ... but a race ...

Phillip A race looks like it's out of everyone's hands, once it starts, but ...

Petit ... a horse and a jockey, they're a couple ...

Grover (Petit's partner, known as Gros) ... so we never know who's in charge ...

Desiree ... and they don't know either ...

John F (known as Eff, Desiree's partner) ... so we have to wait and see what happens ...

Fantome ... and whoever wins, wins ...

Cirque (Fantome's partner) ... until the next race ...

Croque (who's arrived by now, in a flamboyant, radiant dress of gold) They're off!

We hear the sound of thundering hooves again, the cries of the crowd, rising to a climax as the horses reach the post.

Tracey That was my horse! Caress! Chris, get my money for me! Here's my ticket!

Chris How much did you have on?

Tracey Five dollars.

Chris Well you won't be shouting the bar tonight ...

Tracey ... unless I have another win!

Zara Pull out now, love. You're in front!

Tracey I'm going to get further in front! (loudly) I want to buy a house!

Chris (handing her a few dollars) Here's your doormat darling.

Tracey Don't be a bastard, Chris!

Chris It's just not very much!

Zara It's all about opportunities, isn't it. Harold?

Harold Got to take'em while they're there.

Zara Got to see them first. If you don't see them, they're not there ...

Croque What are you talking about, darlings?

Zara Opportunities ...

Croque Opportunities have to be made ...

John F Speaking of which ...

Desiree If we back the winner of the next race, we'll give ourselves a holiday ...

John F Starting today.

The thundering hooves start again, Desiree and John F scramble through the race book and he dashes off to put money on a horse. The sound rises in a crescendo and there are cheers, offstage, as the race is won. John F comes back very pleased.

John F Just got there in time!

Desiree How much did we win?

John F We won each other, darling. A big trip for life. There's an island that we own, now, in the north, and it's ours ...

Is this fantasy, a lie, sexual smooth talk, or what? Desiree's impressed.

Desiree Show me what we won.

They go into one of the nearby tents, and we hear amorous music, which stirs and unsettles the remainder of the group.

Bobby Everyone's winning except me.

Terry Your moment's coming darling. You'll know in a while ...

Bobby Terry?

Terry (suggesting that they too go to a tent) In the meanwhile ...

Bobby I'm too tense, Terry. It wouldn't be any good.

Terry It'd be the most beautiful event in my life, Bobby, you know that ...

Bobby If I win, Terry, if I win. I might be able to do it then, we'll see.

Crocus She's worth waiting for, darling.
Terry If her horse loses – what's its name? – I'll have lost her forever. September Twelve. It's got the hopes of the world in its name.

He breaks down and starts to cry.

Petit (looking at him) The hopes of the world. That means its fears. They go together. We want good things and we constantly get bad. Why can't we control ...

She breaks down too, despite the efforts of Gro to comfort her.

Gro Women cry more than men. Does that mean they're silly, or we are? I can never tell. What's the answer? Does anybody know?

The thundering of hooves begins again, the voices of the crowd rise with the racing horses, and again there is a roar of triumph as the horses pass the post.

Adele More winners.

Derryn More losers.

Susannah Get it right. One winner and a stack of losers, that's the way it is, every time.

Phillip I think you like it that way?

Susannah I do. If you're a winner, it shows you're smart.

Phillip Everyone's smart in some way. To be a winner, we have to use people's smartness against them. That's being really smart!

Tracey I haven't got it. I'm a loser.

Chris Darling ...

Tracey Well, I am darling. You're my ...

All Consolation Prize!

McNogle I better finish my call! Prince Latham, Fool's Gold

...

Kim Yeeeeeey!

McNogle Bonanza. Tidy Tundra. Necktie Noose ...

Crocus Please!

McNogle Brambles. Daiquiri. Microphone Cluster. Antarctic Tern.

Bobby My life's on September Twelve!

Terry If your life's on it, my life's on it too!

McNogle (near the bottom of his chart) Book of the Hours. Nightfall, and, at one hundred to one, Midnight Trots!

Zara That's vulgar! Harold! (warning him not to back it)

Harold A hundred to one, darling!

McNogle I'll give you two hundred. It hasn't got a snowball's chance in hell.

Harold Ooohh ...

Zara No!

Harold Ooohh ...

Zara No!

Harold Ooohh ...

Zara No! No, no, no!

McNogle Your moment's gone, mate, unless you want to put it on now. They're heading for the start!

A big screen shows the horses and their colourful jockeys passing down the track to the starting barrier, at the far end of the straight. Andrew gives the Clerk of Course a pat on the back and moves to a spot in front of the grandstand where he will preside over the presentation.

Caller (loud, but far away) They're moving into position now. Consolation Prize is first to go in, looking very calm. Then Ziggurat, Casta Diva, and Dewars ...

A phone rings.

McNogle You're in Charters Towers and you want to put your pub on Dewars? What's your pub worth? I'll take half that figure. Nine to two, thanks mate.

Caller Lonely Road, Lovers Lane. They've both got the same track in front of them today and it's looking immaculate. There's a huge crowd here, and half the country listening ...

McNogle A boatload of pearls? You're in Broome? I haven't seen those pearls mate, you've got to give me a figure. A million? You want to spread that a bit? Even out the risk? September Twelve? A million? I'm quoting you at thirteen to one. Righto, done!

Bobby (overhearing) A million! Someone's got more money than me, Terry.

Terry They haven't got the love that you inspire, darling.

Bobby Gently, Terry. You know what happens if I lose ...

Terry ... and I'm thinking if you win!

Caller Quintessence, Radial Tyre, and Saddam. Twin Towers, and ... September Twelve. (The last name is very faint.) Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, something happened to the microphone. (repeating) September Twelve.

A ripple runs through the crowd. Then McNogle's phone rings again.

McNogle A goldmine in Kalgoorlie? How am I supposed to know what that's worth? Ya gotta bet in liquid assets. We dispense the dreams down here. I'll put you down for a hundred thousand, no, not a dollar more.

Caller Prince Latham's moving in, Fool's Gold, Bonanza, next is Tidy Tundra and Kilcunda Cocktail. Only a few to go in now. Necktie Moose ...

Crocus That name appals me!

Caller Brambles, Daiquiri, Microphone Cluster, Antarctic Tern. The last three now. Book of the Hours, that's an ominous name, and so is Nightfall, and last to go in is Midnight Trots. Midnight? It's three twenty and everything's in readiness ...

All (fortissimo) They're off!

On a screen high above we see the horses. They speed up as they approach the judge's box for the first time, then slow down as they move away until for a time it seems as if they're hardly moving. Producers may wish to use footage from actual Melbourne Cups to show the race.

Susannah Only one can win!
 Phillip Who are we barracking for?
 Susannah I couldn't make up my mind!
 Bobby I could, and it's killing me. Where is he, darling?
 Terry I've lost him. Surely he hasn't run off the track?
 Bobby We'd have seen him if he had!
 Terry No, there he is. September Twelve! Go! Go! The whole world wants you! Go!
 Bobby (almost dead with fear and excitement) Go!
 Andrew (to the people with the cup, and microphones) Everything ready?

The horses come to the bend which delivers them into the straight, and they seem to speed up; at the same time the judge's box (the winning post) is brightly illuminated from within, and the volume of the horses' hooves is enormous.

Caller (who hasn't been heard since the race started) September Twelve! Lovers Lane! And Lonely Road, the three of them in a line. Dewars on the outside but he isn't making any ground! There's only three of them in it and none of them are tiring! September Twelve! Only a nose, but there's no doubt about it in my mind. September Twelve! What a run! He had'em where he wanted them at the turn of the straight and all he had to do was hang on. Not give in!
 Bobby (coming to the front of the stage) I'm still alive. Take me home, Terry.

Terry Aren't you going to come with me? We've got to collect our money. We won, darling! Buckets of cash!
 Bobby I don't think we won anything, darling, but the great thing was, we didn't lose! I'm alive, darling, I'm alive. There'll be a tomorrow and I'll be there ...
 Terry ... to see it! And to enjoy my love!
 Bobby (vaguely) What's that?
 Terry What's love? Why darling, you're made of it, it's everything about you ...
 Bobby I was all excitement, and now I'm almost dead ...

The big screen returns our attention to the presentation. Andrew is tapping the microphones. A voice booms over the course.

Voice Correct weight!
 Andrew The Governor General of Australia and Mrs X; the Governor of Victoria and Mrs Y; the Premier of Victoria and Mrs Z; ladies and gentlemen; at this point in another year's wonderful racing, it is my duty to call on the owners, the trainer and the jockey of September Twelve to come forward ...

The presentation continues on the big screen, but aurally we return to the group below.

Bobby Take me home.
 Crocus Are you all right, darling?
 Terry She wants to sleep.
 Crocus If you've got any ideas, young man, about sleeping with her, I think you should wait a while. She's not ready for you.

Terry She's stressed out. It's been too much for her.
Crocus Put her in her bed, and sleep in another room.
Terry I'll be doing that. You don't need to go on about it.
Bobby Did we win?
Crocus Yes darling. You put everything on it, didn't you, and you didn't lose. You won.
Terry Winning and losing, or not winning and not losing, they get mixed together ...
Bobby Take me home, darling. Put me in bed and kiss me goodnight. I'll be all right in a day or two.
Terry You'll be good tomorrow, darling. You'll be yourself again.
Bobby Do I want that, Terry, or do I want to be as I've been today?
Terry I can't answer that, darling. You'll have to tell me tomorrow.
Bobby We need to go mad, and when we do, we need someone who loves us to take care until we're normal.
C & T Normal ... normal ... normal ...
Bobby It must mean something, mustn't it? Take me home, darling, home. Home ...

Papunya 1

The administration office at Papunya, Northern Territory. McCaig, the administrator, and James, Senior Sergeant of Police, are talking about the settlement they control.

McCaig Don't fuckin tell me, I don't wanta hear about it! Night and fuckin day they're on the booze. They smash up their missus. When they're not fighting each other, they fight another mob. They leave their fuckin kids to fuckin starve half the time. I feel sorry for those kids but if we start feedin'em, mate, they'll be our responsibility ...

James Speaking of kids ...

McCaig What?

James Have you been watching that new teacher?

McCaig Ah, Jeezus, what about him?

James He's on their side.

McCaig Lot of teachers are. A few've got more sense.

James He doesn't know enough about the place to know what he's doing.

McCaig (warily) How do you mean?

James The kids're gonna paint the wall of the school ...

McCaig So?

James The men are talking about it. They want to do it.

McCaig At the school?

James The men want to take over.

McCaig I can hardly stop him letting the kids paint. What's the bugger's name?

James Bardon. Geoff.

McCaig Well, that's forgettable. He's on a one year contract, I think ...

James You can do a lot of harm in a year ...

McCaig He wouldn't say boo to a goose. He shits himself when I look at him.

James You keep your eyes open.

McCaig What'm I gonna see?

James He's got something about him, that kid. He's gonna cause us trouble.

McCaig More than we've got?

The men laugh, and leave. There is a pause, then we see Geoff Bardon at the door of his sparsely furnished flat.

GB Is there someone there?

Mick Talk with ya.

GB You can come in.

Mick C'm out here.

Bardon goes through the door. We can only just see the exchange he has with the men.

Mick Ya got the kids paintin the school ...

GB Yes. How do you think it's going?

Mick Pretty good, them kids.

GB I've told them no whitefella style. Do everything their own way.

Kaapa Our way.

GB I don't want them reproducing trash they get from comics.

Uta Kids don't know much, that the trouble.

GB You want to advise them?

Mick Advise ...

Kaapa Men advise kids?

Uta Ugh!

GB Sorry, is there something wrong?

Mick Kids watch, that way they learn.

GB I'm not running the settlement, you know. I'm not even running the school.

Kaapa That fella running the settlement, you get him to paint the wall.

GB I don't think McCaig would be interested. Not very good at it either ...

Kaapa Ya need the right fellas for the job, eh?

GB Ye-es. The right fellas ... (He realises that he's accepted their argument.) The right fellas for the job ...

Mick Few of us be over in the morning. Tell the kids they going to see something.

GB Right ... ye-es ... good night ... (He comes back in.) Good night? What sort of visit was that?

Another pause, then it's morning, outside the school. Geoff is there with the men who called on him, and half a dozen others.

GB You've got to measure it up, work out what you're going to put where.

Mick In our heads.

GB It's harder than you think. I've got a lot of boards for you, over there. You've got to learn to paint. Keep your brushes clean, that sort of stuff. You have to learn how long to wait before you paint on top of something, otherwise you get a mess. It's not hard but it takes getting used to.

Uta Big wall. Simple.

GB (a born teacher) Big idea, need big skill. I put a lot of paper in the shed over there. I want you to draw up what you want to do, and show me. We can't start until we work out we've got everything we need. Go on, I'll be with you in half an hour. Draw up what you want to do.

The men go, somewhat frustrated, but prepared to do it the whitefella's way, then McCaig and James appear.

McCaig What are they doing in the shed?

GB Working out what they're going to paint.

McCaig I thought the kids were supposed to do that.

GB They were, but the men see it as a chance to teach the kids traditional ways.

McCaig If you take any notice of that crap, you'll find yourself going round in circles.

James Until you find yourself advancing up your own orifice!

GB What?

James You're not here to listen to them. You're here to tell them. You need to get this clear, mate. They have got no fuckin idea. Never did have, never will. Totally fuckin clueless, that's what they are. Lettin'em tell you what they want to paint. Hah! (He shrieks with laughter.)

GB Oh, come on ...

McCaig Ifya want the kids to paint the school, get'em started. Where are they? Upstairs?

He looks and we can see that black children are looking down on the scene, working out what's going on.

GB I promised the men ... I think I'd better wait ...

McCaig Don't make any trouble, mate. It'll come back and grab you by the balls.

McCaig and James leave. Geoff goes inside. Our attention turns to the shed where the black men are looking at the boards and paper that Geoff has left them.

Kaapa Might be a chance.

Mick Paint'em stories.

Uta Kids learn, if we tell'em.

Kaapa Trouble is, we're mixed up people. Your stories not the same as mine.

Mick Maybe we connect. You tell your bit, I tell mine. Kids see we got everything connected in our mind.

Uta Fuck the kids. We do it for ourselves.

Mick That important too. But we gotta keep the teacher happy. Wall belong to him.

Kaapa Wall belong to McCaig. Him'n' James, they run this place.

Mick They run us. But we got a hold on them bastards. They need us to make themselves feel good. If we go back to the desert, they got nobody in their town.

Uta Back to the desert ...

Kaapa My missus want to go. I not so sure.

Mick Learnin to be slaves, that all we're doing here.

Uta Huh!

Kaapa Slaves gonna fight! (He slaps the paper.) What we gonna do?

They get to work on their design with energy and satisfaction bursting out of them in calls and cries. We see them painting the walls of the school, watched by teachers, children, their wives and other blacks from the settlement. McCaig and James are there too, watching. Near them is Fred, the head teacher; he goes to Geoff.

Fred It's a feather in your cap, Geoff, I have to say.

GB The kids are looking up to the men. Which is what they wanted.

Fred I have a feeling that something's been put to rights. That's to your credit, with me, anyhow ...

McCaig What's this about them wanting the shed?

GB (prevaricating) They've been using it as a base while they've been working on the school ...

McCaig No drinking in the shed, no kids in there, no women ...

GB That's not part of their plans ...

McCaig (peremptorily) You take the cork out of a bottle, you can't put the fizz back in again. You got a problem. Why? Because you let the demon out when you had him where you wanted him.

GB I don't think there's any demons in what I'm doing here.

McCaig You don't know anything about this place, boy. You haven't seen the downside of these people, not yet.

He moves away, leaving Geoff perplexed, and turning to Fred, his immediate superior.

Fred We're not in an easy position, Geoff. If he complains about us, we get transferred. No two ways about it.

GB What's he got to complain about? Tell me that?

Fred He doesn't like you lending your car. He reckons that when you give them a lift, they're bringing grog into the settlement ...

GB Oh rubbish!

Fred If he complains, you won't be there to pull his story down. He'll complain in Darwin, maybe it'll get to Canberra ...

GB If people in the cities knew what sort of artists these men are, they'd sweep men like McCaig aside. They wouldn't be listened to!

Fred That's not how things work. We're on the edge of a desert. Between us and the Indian Ocean, there's nothing else ...

GB That's Pintupi territory, and others further west!

Fred That nobody's ever heard of in Canberra. We're nothing, mate. We're clinging on here because nobody wants to come here. If you can do these people a good turn, do it for sure, but don't forget who runs the place because once you go too far, we're out, you and I, and I don't want to go. I'm as silly as you are and I want to do some good. Let's not wreck it, mate, by going too far.

Fred goes, Geoff goes, and we return to the shed where the black men do their painting.

Kaapa (to Mick, and everyone else) We all got stories. Stories run in every direction. Do what Geoff says, sit down and paint.

He sits in the middle of the space, with paints and a board, and turns off. Mick finds himself a spot near the door. Uta goes to one end, near a wall. Others grab brushes, paints, and bits of board, and sit or squat while they work. A wind rises, outside, and while the men paint we hear fragments of their thought blown over them by the wind. Their words are given to them, here, by name, but the men whose thoughts we hear do no more, to our eyes, than paint. Their thinking is voiced to us by others out of sight.

Kaapa Honey ants running through the grass ...

Uta Budgerigar got a problem. Not enough to drink till it rain ...

Mick Rainbow tell the people where the water gone ...

Other men come to look at what the painters are doing. The three who started the paintings indicate with eye movements that there are boards and brushes still unused. Two more men – Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Anatjari Tjakamarra – also sit down and paint. As they do so – as the men of central Australia reach into their minds for the things they want to express – we see pictures – perhaps only one picture – projected on the wall behind them. (See the ceremonial men getting ready for their ritual dance, p. 380 of *Papunya: a place made after the story, The beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement*, by Geoffrey and James Bardon, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2004.)

Tim How far back I go? Where'm I gonna look? My end, or my beginning?

Anatjari Mick's painting rainbow. I wanna paint lookin down, seein where the water go when it fall. Come to think of it, how it get back up again, eh? Bird fly, but water lift ... That not easy ... (He thinks.)

GB (appearing at the doorway) How's it going? (Mick nods to him, meaning, come and have a look. Geoff points to something.) Is that what you call a tjuringa?

Mick (cautiously) Tjuringa, yeah.

GB They're sacred, aren't they? Not everybody's allowed to see them?

Mick Only proper men. Been 'nitiated. Otherwise ... (He points a finger, meaning a bone, or death brought on by a kadaitcha man.)

GB I mustn't let you break your own rules. Leave out anything the women and kids're not allowed to see.

Mick Ugh!

(He starts to talk to the other men in their own language, or whichever language they use to communicate across tribal groups. This takes some time, before they reach agreement, and resume their painting. Geoff stands near the door, where he's joined by Fred, the senior teacher.

Fred You'll be ready for a show, pretty soon.

GB I'm taking a van load into the Alice next weekend.

Fred To sell?

GB There's a few in there interested. Pretty shonky, some of them, but you've got to make a start.

Fred Keep records for Christ's sake because there'll be arguments, later.

GB I'm photographing everything, measuring, writing artists' names on the back.

Fred Here's trouble. Scuse me.

McCaig appears as Fred goes.

McCaig Y're keepin'em busy, anyway. Never seen'em with their heads down before.

GB (proudly) They believe in what they're doing!

McCaig (conceding) That's true. But you're still creating a problem no one will be able to solve.

GB What's the problem you're talking about?
McCaig I'm not stupid mate. I see they can paint. But what're you gonna do with the pictures? Where do they all go? They feel good for a while, then down they come with a crash. These people've got no resilience. They can't sustain themselves. They're no good for the long term. If they've got grog, they drink it. If they've got tucker, they eat it. Tomorrow? Who gives a shit? The day after? They never heard of it. You cannot make them stick to a plan. For anything. How can you build on that? Tell me, Geoffrey Bardon. Tell me that!

GB You've never called me by my name before.
McCaig Take it as a compliment. Take it as a question too. They're digging in their past, and they're putting it down in paint. Good luck to'em. But where do they go next? This is only a rubbish dump, this settlement. There's no future for anybody here! You look at their situation, because it's yours. Mine too, I'm sorry to say. They've got a past. Pure rubbish and crap, to my mind. You think better of it, but then you have to. You're young, you're still telling yourself there's hope. Have a drink with me in a year or two, if you're still here, and I'll put you wise. They've got a past. They have no present. Understand that? They have no present. Future? It's only a dream. If it exists at all, it's a turnback, a twister, a whirlwind, carrying them back to a past that was nothing.

GB That's where they have got so much to teach us. We think we see a desert, they see ancestral tales ...

McCaig If there was anything there to see, I'd see it. I'm no fool, mate, and I've been right through the Pintupi lands, and the Arrernte lands, and all the rest of their bloody lands. It's got nothing and it gives you nothing. You can't live in those places, you can only starve and tell yourself you're eating.

James (entering) He's right lad. I've been listening and I have to say he's right in every way.

GB But they paint their stories and it gives them back their pride!

Some of the painters begin to prop their paintings against the wall and these are then shown, greatly enlarged, on the back wall of the space where the opera is being presented. One after the other we see works of the western desert painting movement, and see also the pride and mutual enjoyment among the painters who feel keenly that they are resurrecting the lives of their people, and it is their gifts which are making this return to life and achievement possible.

McCaig I've got to hand it to you, you've done something, but where does it go from here? There's no place to hang pictures in Pintupi country. Even the rabbits keep out of there!

He laughs, and leaves, James leaves too, and Geoff is left enjoying the warmth and excitement of his painting men, still putting their

pictures against the walls, where, by process of enlargement, they are shown to the listening audience. The voices of the painters whom we've seen over the last few minutes, and those other voices who sang and talked while the paintings were done, now merge in a sound that wavers, breaks, restarts, interrupts itself and then congratulates itself in floods of uproarious laughter. Geoff claps, the painters laugh even more loudly, Fred looks in with a smile, and behind him we see some other teachers and the aboriginal children, standing shyly near the door.

Papunya 2

We hear the sputtering of an aged Kombi van, then Geoff Bardon appears. He knocks on the door of the head teacher's residence and calls to the man he thinks is within.

GB How are you, Fred? It's Geoff! I'm back!
Jason (coming to the door) Not Fred. He got a transfer. I'm Jason. Geoff, I take it?
GB They transferred him? Where is he now?
Jason Couldn't tell you that. I've only been here a day myself.
GB They transferred him? That's a blow.
Jason I can run a school, mate, don't you worry about that!
GB It's me I'm worried about, not you.

James, the Senior Sergeant of Police, comes to join them.

James I thought I saw the van. You two've met, by now?
GB We've met.
James (sourly) You'll be doing quite a bit of that, as time goes on.
Jason (to ease the tension) I liked the paintings you did on the school.
GB The men did those. Are they around? (He means the men.)
James They're in that shed you got for them. Nobody's kicked them out yet.
GB Yet?

James It's under review. It's a matter of whether they give any trouble. That's about it, really ...
GB Trouble?
James You've been in the fleshpots of Sydney. You'd better get yourself up to date.
He leaves. Jason opens the door for Geoff.
Jason He's in charge, now. McCaig got transferred. Or he asked for it, I don't know. His replacement hasn't arrived, yet.
GB (sickened) James is in charge?
James Don't let it worry you. We've got a school to run.
GB (going inside) That's the easy part. I'm in the middle of things I can't control.

At once we're in the shed. Numerous new pictures are stacked here and there.

Kaapa Geoff back. Take our pictures in the van.
Mick We sell again.
Anatjari Gotta think. Need to stay here. Nuthin to paint on, in our homelands.
Tim Need to find our stories, though.
Kaapa Maybe use the whitefella town. Go out ... (he points to the desert) ... come back.
Mick Maybe ...

Uta No matter paint here, paint there. If we don't paint, it die. We keepin the whole thing alive.

Tim How long we do that?

Uta Long's we live!

Tim Not long then!

Mick No choice. Keep goin.

Kaapa Whitefella blind. Say there's nuthin to see. Fuckin fools. Call our country desert. Say there's nuthin there. They got a big desert between their ears. Nuthin grow.

Tim We all gonna die. Not long for us. So why we gonna paint?

Uta Huh!

Tim (insisting) Why?

Anatjari One day they want to know what they destroy.

Mick That no reason to paint. Stories keep us alive, that the reason to paint.

Kaapa Whole world alive. Whitefella make us forget. Learn their stories, forget our own. Kids not learnin any more.

Mick Make me tremble. We comin to our end.

Kaapa No we're not. Make everythin come back to life, here in this shed!

Anatjari Into Geoff's van ...

Uta Where they go from there?

Mick Whitefella buy'em in the Alice ...

Anatjari Whatsa whitefella do with'em?

Mick Get used to'em. Take a long while to understand.

Kaapa Shut up now. Paint!

Each goes to his part of the shed and they sit or squat and start to paint. Their concentration is strong. We sense it through the humming and then the roaring sound of the tjuringas (bullroarers) being whirled about, far out of sight. The occasional thoughts of the painters, set down below, are heard by listeners as if they are fragments of the humming sound that have been captured by our ears before they disappear in space. A visual dimension is added by groups of dancers moving among and through the painters, as if they are being called up by the stories being painted.

Anatjari Went through the stars, found a black spot, thought he'd hide for a while ...

Mick Followed the caterpillar, had to dig himself in the ground when it got hot ...

Uta Boys taken off by the men. Women visit their camp by night ...

We hear the screeching of cockatoos, and an answering, exultant, roar of men's voices, then an even bigger, sexual shout from the young men.

Uta Now learn! Who you be with, who not! Make mistake, you die!

Kaapa Nuthin to hunt, you die! Eyes open, everywhere, alla time, open. Watch! Look!

Tim You see nuthin, you get nuthin; you get nuthin, you die. Whole people die!

Kaapa (watching a group of men doing a grasshopper dance)
Not too many, you fella! Don't eat up everything!

Mick Nuthin much to eat, 'cept whitefella tucker.

Kaapa Fuck the whitefella! What they do for us?

GB (appearing at the door) Hi everybody, how's it going?

Mick You still got that Kombi?

GB Yeah!

Mick Bring'im round. We fill'im up.

GB Next Saturday I'll go into the Alice. Maybe Friday after work.

Kaapa Plenty picture by then. We all have money when you get back.

GB When they pay me, you mean. They don't always do it straight away.

Anatjari Where's their money come from? They got plenty, seems to me.

GB Where's the money come from? The government prints it. Nobody else is allowed. If you or I did it, we'd get slapped in jail.

Kaapa Three feeds a day, what I hear.

Tim We die in jail. Can't move about ...

Kaapa We die here. 'Keep off the grass!' (He laughs riotously and the others laugh too, at the stupidity of keeping off areas where precious little grass ever grows.)

Others Keep off the grass! (They shout it at Geoff, who laughs because he sees the stupidity of a whites in a desert trying to get grass to grow in selected spots.)

GB I'll come back when school's finished. Pick out the ones you want me to sell.

Mick I'm goin to paint a water story. You got no water you got nuthin.

Kaapa That story belong most of us.

They start to paint. Parts of their paintings are shown on the screen behind the men. There is a roll of thunder.

Anatjari I reckon that not far away.

Tim Travellin through. Some spots lucky, others miss out.

More thunder, and then heavy rain starts to fall, making huge volumes of sound as it beats on the corrugated iron shed. The men are exultant, and paint furiously, though with astonishing calm. On the screen behind the men we see two paintings by Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi; first, his 'Man's Water Dreaming at Night', then his 'Rain, Hail and Lightning Dreaming' (pages 174 & 175 of Papunya: a place made after the story). The men move out of sight during the exultant sounds of the storm, then the pictures fade, and we see Geoff beside his Kombi van, talking to Sergeant James.

GB Are you serious? I did this half a dozen times last year.

James They're Crown property. The only thing you own is canvas, and you haven't got any canvases in there.

GB They're just starting on the canvas.
James The moment you take those boards out of this settlement, you're in breach of the law.
GB (defiantly) And I'm on the road to sell them.
James You could be run off that road. Thought of that?
GB (scared) You wouldn't do that.
James (imagining) The deceased, Your Honour, was signalled to pull over, but chose to ignore my signs. He increased his speed, so I had no choice but to head him off. I managed to get in front of him and slow down, intending him to stop, but he chose to get around me on the left, and ran off the road ...
GB Bastard!
James There'd be no one to contradict me, except you ... if you were still alive.
GB I don't care! I'm going! I'm a man of my word.
James Let's see if you get back. (Geoff climbs into his van, with the paintings he's going to try to sell.) My car's a lot faster than yours!

James disappears, and Geoff, presumably driving to the Alice, is seated in his van.

GB He knows this road. He'll have picked a spot. If he doesn't get me today, he'll get me some other way. I'm not made for fighting. Why'm I the only one that sees what can be done?

To one side of the stage we see Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri sitting by a fire, which is protected from the winds by three sheets of corrugated iron, held upright by a few sticks and bars of steel.

Tim Geoff travellin for us. Left his camp and gone to the Alice. That van gonna make it, but James too cunning for Geoff. He twist the rules, Geoff play it straight. That mean he not gonna win. Geoff lose, we all lose. So what, we never had nuthin. Nuthin but ourselves. We always knew who we were. We thought we did. Hm! That what I gotta say!

He stands and finds a large, long piece of board. It has already been sealed with a dull brownish paint. Squatting, Tim starts to touch it here and there with the handle of a brush.

Tim Sun and moon here. Old man here. Yam! Boomerang, spear! (trembling) Spirit man! Geoff tell us not to paint secrets, but I gotta do that. Forbidden things the only things with power! Seems okay to me. We gonna get beaten, but we fly above them, changed, as they strike us down. Can't kill our enemies, that way they beat us because we're like them. Have to change the spirits of a place if you want to make it yours. Okay! Geoff driving to the Alice, and good luck! I'm stayin here, show him what to do!

He stands, and the painting board moves up until it rests against the big screen at the back. It merges into the screen, and from now until the end of the piece the painting, in various stages of its devel-

opment, is presented, briefly each time, while the action continues before it. An image of Senior Sergeant James appears on the screen, looking down on Tim as he paints.

Tim Fuck off! Not a thing in the world you can do to stop me!

The image of James moves until it is close behind Geoff, seated in the cabin of his van, driving with considerable fear.

J's voice Rocks on the left. You'd be a mess if you ran off here.

GB (looking in the mirror) Only my fears. But they're real. As he knows too well. I can't let them down. I'm their only connection with the outside world.

J's voice Life's a slender thread.

GB There's people who know these paintings for what they are. There's galleries and museums and wealthy, influential people who are really somebody ... and there's brutal swine who are the jailers of the finest people in the world. And there's poor Geoff Bardon in the middle, and nothing happens unless it passes through his hands ...

J's voice (still the picture speaking) Not worth the risk. Your life for a few bits of board.

Geoff stops his van, gets out and walks away a few metres, then sits on a rock, on the opposite side of the stage from Tim, squatting by his fire, and sheltered by the corrugated iron that keeps the wind out.

GB What do I do, Tim? I'm all on my own and I haven't got a story to help me.

Tim Don't interrupt me, Geoff. I gotta painting to finish. Biggest idea I ever had. I showya what I've done. (We see the painting in its incomplete form.) This the old man dreaming. Getting near the end of his life, probably. This the yam dreaming. Lotta things go on underground. Ya don't see but you know. Dig, and you were right!

GB Everything's complete, in your mind, and I'm only a mess.

Tim (tapping the painting on the screen with his brush) Spirit man gonna be here. Draw him last. He the one got most to say. He frighten me a bit. Gotta be strong when I paint him.

GB I wish you could paint me, and make me strong. That bastard's got me scared. He's going to do something and I don't know what.

Tim That's his power, see. If he make you afraid, you destroy yourself. That what fear does to us. Kadaitcha man don't kill, we kill ourselves, because we fear.

GB I should get back on the road.

Tim Sell them pictures in the Alice. Make the whole world see.

GB Make the whole world see!

Tim Tomorrow I gonna paint the sun and moon dreaming. Here. (He taps the screen again.) Sun and moon both look at our world, know it better than we know it. Need to see things their way. Not so much fear, then. You started yet?

GB No, Tim. I'm still scared.

Tim Once you get goin, things seem all right again.

Geoff moves to the driver's seat, and starts the Kombi. Tim huddles down behind his sheets of corrugated iron, the screen shows us Geoff's van threading its way through the West Macdonnell ranges, and then we see, one after the other on the screen, the paintings he has on board. They disappear, and we see a view of Sydney Harbour, with three people in front of it – Geoff's mother Nan, father Lenny, and brother James.

Lenny The silence worries me.

Nan What did he say, last time he wrote to you?

James He felt threatened, and he didn't see how he could finish the year.

Lenny When was that?

James Three weeks ago.

Nan (worried) Nothing since.

James Not a word. He hasn't written to you, dad, or rung?

Lenny (shaking his head) No.

Nan Not a word.

James It's the silence. If there was news, we'd deal with it, but he's off our radar and we give way to fear.

Lenny That's our weakness, isn't it? When we don't know.

Nan Let's go out and see for ourselves. See if he's all right.

Lenny Oh, mother ...

Nan What?

Lenny We can't all drop in, unannounced.

Nan James can. James! You go. If he's all right, get him to ring us. If there's something wrong, bring him home.

James I've got an idea I'll be bringing him home. There's something in the silence I can hear. The absence of that voice I know so well. If I could hear him I'd know he was afraid. When he's scared he hides to protect himself. Trouble is, he hides right out in the open where everything that wants him can see him ...

Nan Ah! That's enough! On the move, son!

Lenny Get him to hospital for a check-up. Bring him home if you think it's best.

Sydney fades, and the screen shows us, once again, Geoff at the door of his little apartment.

GB Fucking Jason keeps thinking of things I've got to do, so I can't get around to see the men. James wanted them split up, and he's had his way. Fortunately, he hasn't stopped them painting yet. That's next, I suppose.

He starts to walk. He passes groups of black people, who wave to him; he waves back, greets some of them by name. He gets to a stretch of grasses growing out of sand, and looks for, and finds, a shelter made of three sheets of corrugated iron.

GB Tim?

Tim (proudly) I show it to you! (On the screen behind them we see the large painting, 'Death Spirit Dreaming', that Tim has been working on.)

GB It's wonderful, Tim. It's the finest painting I've ever seen!

Tim (pointing to the undulations he's built into the picture) This a man's life. Begin here, end over here. This (tapping the surface where he's painted the death spirit) where he got to now. This the death spirit. Wasn't always. Started out as life spirit, but the journey goes on, he change. Gettin near his end.

GB (weakly) Getting near his end.

Tim Gettin near his end. Realise he gonna die. So he change. Sometimes he life spirit, he hunt and eat. Women give him tucker. Mostly death spirit, wondering where he gonna die. Two go together. When man become death spirit, someone born, maybe far away. Two go on forever. Every spirit become death spirit, every death spirit find new spirit jump up behind. Death spirit throw spear, maybe curses, he kill. Everything he strike down spring up again, somewhere behind, out of sight of death spirit. Can only look ahead for things to hunt.

GB That's very complete, Tim. It's marvellous.

Tim When I done this, I got nuthin left to say.

GB We don't need to paint, or talk, when we've said all we've got to say.

Tim You gonna leave Papunya, Geoff?

GB My brother's coming. He guessed that I've been sick.

Tim If he take you away, we carry on.

GB That's something I fear for.

Tim We know what we're doin now.

GB James'll try to stop you. He's finished me.

Tim Hard man to beat. Lot of people talkin about going back to their country ...

GB Leaving here. Like me.

Tim Can't win every fight. Gonna be long struggle.

GB The trouble is, I feel worn out.

Tim By the time anybody see this ... (His painting of the death spirit dreaming appears on the screen behind them, and stays there till the end.) ... I be worn out too. All your painters be worn out. Growin old. Tired because they struggle. Whitefella makin our kids change. My little boy count. I can't. I so silly that I dunno if a brush count as a finger or not. Ten or eleven, you say? (He laughs and Tim smiles feebly.) Who cares? I paint'im. That spirit man, he still walkin. Near the edge of the picture now. Getting ready to walk out of the picture and start again, nuther journey, nuther bit of country.

GB Do you want to start again, Tim? I do, but what can I do? This has been my big chance and I've been too weak to succeed.

Tim Who's to say? (He notices something.) This your brother?

A car pulls up at the edge of the stage, only just in sight, and James Bardon gets out.

JB Geoffrey, my brother! Are you well?

GB Very weak, James, weak.

JB If you're not strong enough to go on, I'm here, and ready, with a car.

GB How're things in Sydney?

JB Mum and dad are well ... and worried ...

GB ... about me?

JB They wondered if you were strong enough for what you're trying to do.

GB I'm not, but I've got to try.

JB What's keeping you here?

GB Look around you James, my brother. Tell me what you see.

JB A miserable bloody hole, if you want my opinion. I know you're fond of the people ...

Black people, men, women and children, appear behind the two brothers, and Tim, still squatting in his corrugated iron shelter. The black people stretch from one side of the stage to the other.

JB ... and I can see they're fond of you, but ...

BG But what?

JB If you want to live, you have to leave. Your work's been done. Someone else will have to carry on ... now ... (He opens the passenger side door of the car, and beckons.)

Tim (to the other black people) Geoff gotta leave us now. His people callin him home.

Onlookers Oooooooooohhh.

GB (to his brother) You're only a few steps away, but I don't think I can make it.

JB Take the first step. See how you feel.

Geoff takes a step, and then another.

GB You're closer now.

JB Mum and dad want you to survive. You'll kill yourself out here.

GB (taking a couple more steps) Or someone else will ...

JB Keep coming.

Onlookers Oooooooooohhh.

Tim Hey, you fella! Struggle belong all of us now. Geoff done all he can! Up to us, y'unnerstan?

GB (waving feebly) Thanks Tim.

JB Two more steps and you're there. Keep coming.

Geoff takes the steps and James guides him into the car's passenger seat. He closes the door, then goes to the other side, out of sight, and starts the engine. Geoff is staring straight ahead but we see James' hand turning him so that he is looking at Tim, and all the

other black people, stretched across the stage. James starts the engine and drives away.

Onlookers (one last, surging, soaring, descending sigh of loss and pain) Oooooooooohhh ...

These two librettos have been constructed from story and pictures in *Papunya, a place made after the story: the beginnings of the western desert painting movement*, by Geoffrey Bardon and James Bardon, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne 2004. Thanks are also due to those galleries that exhibit aboriginal paintings, notably the Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, in Flinders Lane, Melbourne, now operated by Samantha Pizzi, whose support for the painters of inland Australia is something our nation can reflect on with pride.

Temptation

The scene is the Ninety Mile Beach in eastern Victoria. The tide is getting ready to turn. The beach is deserted, then a young married couple, Rene and Hilde, walk on, carrying a food basket, and a small tape recorder of which Rene takes great care. He puts it down to gather wood for a fire. When he's got enough wood he turns on the tape.

Tape Fin ch'han dal vino ...
Hilde Oh, not now! It sounds silly, with nobody here!
Rene It always sounds good.
Hilde You and the Don. You'll meet a bad end if you imitate him.
Rene I don't want to imitate him. I've got you.
Hilde You'd like a mistress. Men can be sickening you know.
Rene (referring to his wife) We can all be difficult ...

On come Carlo and Lyn, a recently engaged couple.

Lyn Difficult? They're talking about you, Carlo.
Carlo (jokily) Difficult? They're not talking about me!
Rene We were talking about the whole wide world.
Lyn (looking at the sea) A lovely sunset. What a night it's going to be.
Carlo We don't know that yet.
Lyn I want things to happen the way they ought to be.
Hilde That would be great ... if we could.

Lyn (coming close to Hilde) Who says we can't?
Hilde (close to Lyn) Rene's got a thing about Don Giovanni. I can't stop him playing it.
Lyn Playing ... it's what they do, isn't it.
Hilde I often wonder if they know anything.
Rene (overhearing) Well, who found this place, and brought us here?
Hilde You, darling.
Rene Thank you, my love.
Carlo Here're the others.

Enter Janet and Roger, and Deanne and Graham, with drinks, food and rugs. They greet those who are already there, look at the sea and the darkening west, then pour themselves drinks.

Roger Cheers, everyone.
Janet A long and beautiful night.
Deanne It's night that everyone desires ...
Graham That's when you come alive.
Deanne (thoughtfully) I do. It's a wonder, isn't it ...
Hilde It's when we surprise ourselves ...
Janet ... because we've got things bottled up inside ...
Deanne ... that we don't even know about ...
Graham ... yet!
Roger Speaking of bottles ...

Rene plays his tape again.

Tape Fin ch'han dal vino/calda la testa/una gran festa/fa'
preparar!

Hilde turns it off, but Deanne is amused.

Deanne Don Giovanni! He might cause a bit of trouble if we
had him here!

Graham I might cause a bit of trouble myself! It's not a bad
night for it. (looking about)

Janet Why don't we go for a walk? Light that fire, Rene, so
we know where we are.

Rene lights the fire he's gathered, and seven of them start for their
walk. Carlo stays where he is.

Carlo I'll hold the fort!

Roger Don't you finish off the wine, Carlo.

Carlo You'd better hurry!

The walkers are soon out of sight, and Carlo is on his own by the
fire. He takes his glass of wine to the edge of the tea tree.

Carlo Who knows what's in there. It's getting dark.

He is startled when he hears a voice, quite close to him, but behind
him and out of sight.

Matilde (distantly; calling, a high, floating call) Carlo!

Carlo Hell! Who's that?

Matilde Carlo ...

Carlo It sounds familiar ...

Matilde Carlo ...

Carlo Ah ...

Tizzy (on the other side of him) Carlo ...

Carlo Two voices!

Judy (some way back) Carlo!

Carlo I know who that is!

Judy Carlo ...

Carlo I think I do!

Wilma (distant, and high) Carlo ...

Carlo What is this?

Wilma Carlo, Carlo ... cara cara Carlo ...

Carlo Stop it, you lot! Buzz off, go on, I'm having a family
night, I don't want you hanging around!

Matilde Carlo ...

All 4 (voices in the night) Carlo ... Carlo ... Carlo ...

Carlo Go away! Please! How much do I have to pay you
to make you go away?

All 4 Carlo, Carlo, Carlo ...

The voices fade and Carlo is left to himself.

Carlo Thank Christ for that! I'd better get out of here in
case they come back.

He ducks off into the night in the opposite direction to the other
seven, there are a few moments of quiet, then the main group
returns, talking volubly.

Rene Yes, of course I'm married, and I'm pleased to be that
way. But I am just putting a point of view ...

Deanne It's music, Hilde. It's a sort of moral tale.

Hilde Don't any of you know what it means to be married?

Rene repeats the offence which has got the conversation on this track by pressing a button on his tape player.

Tape Vieni, mio bel diletto!
 Mi fa pieta Masetto!

Rene (singing with the tape) Io cangiero tua sorte.

Deanne (ditto) Presto ... non son piu forte ...

R & D (singing along) Andiam, andiam, mio bene,
 a ristorar le pene
 d'un innocente amor!

Hilde (scorning them) Inn-o-cen-te! Look at you, wanting
 to go back into the night.

Roger Night gets to us, Hilde. It brings out things we can't
 always control.

Rene (taking Deanne's hand) Andiam, andiam, mio bene
 ...

Janet Where's Carlo?

Lyn Carlo!

Roger See what I mean? He's been swallowed in the night!

Lyn Rubbish. Carlo!

They listen.

Graham That's funny. Carlo!

Janet Carlo?

They look at each other, then form a group and call together, the seven of them.

The 7 Carlo!

To their amazement, they are answered.

All 4 Carlo! Carlo! Carlo! Carlo ...

Roger That's not an echo, there's someone there!

Janet It's coming from everywhere at once ...

All 4 Carlo! Carlo! Carlo! Carlo ...

The beach party is amazed. Night has settled by now, and the voices they've heard have come out of darkness. A moment later, so too does Carlo, returning to them, ashamed, afraid, not trusting himself to say anything. He walks to Lyn and stands before her, helpless.

Lyn Where have you been? (He's trembling.) Who's that
 out there, calling?

Carlo offers no reply. He stands before Lyn as if she must take control of him.

Janet Did you see those people, Carlo?

He shakes his head.

Graham Well who are they? What do they want?

Hilde They must have followed us here. How did they
 know?

Rene Don't look at me. I've no idea.

Graham Let's go home. I feel in danger.

Deanne We can't escape. It's something's inside us, trying to
 get out.

Janet What thing?

Deanne That's the question, isn't it. Going to tell us, Carlo?

Lyn (because he says nothing) Carlo?

The 7 (because he says nothing) Carlo?
Carlo (weakly) You're splitting me in two.
Lyn You were split already. Those women followed you here. They want you.

Carlo grabs her clumsily, trying to put her arms around him, as if that will make him safe.

Lyn Tell me who they are.

This is too much for him. He gasps, clinging to her.

Carlo Ooohh.

Hilde You do know who they are, don't you Carlo?

Carlo I can guess.

Hilde You know their voices?

Carlo I've got an idea.

Deanne And every one of them's an ex?

Carlo Only two. The others I haven't had ...

He stops, sensing that he's put his foot in it.

Lyn And you want them?

Carlo They want me to want them.

Lyn Do you want them, yes or no? The night's full of desire, Carlo. It's a big wide world, you have freedom of choice. They've called you. Do you want to go?

There is a pause while he grasps his situation.

Carlo I want to be with you.

Lyn That means ... are you listening ... you have to make me want to be with you.

Carlo I want to be with you.

Lyn You aren't listening, are you? In a minute, I'm driving home. You won't be lonely. You can get a ride with anyone who's got room. Or you can go off into the dark with those women ...

Carlo Ooohh ...

Lyn (sharply) What are their names?

Carlo Ooohh ...

Lyn Their names!

Carlo (weakly) Matilde.

Lyn That's one.

Carlo Tizzy ...

Roger (laughing) That's a good one! Did she get you in a tizz?

Carlo It's short for Titania, Queen of the Fairies. Tatiana ...

Rene The letter scene ...

Hilde Don't encourage him.

Rene He needs a bit of strength, poor boy.

Lyn (affected by the name) Queen of the Fairies. So she calls you into the night?

Carlo I don't want to go.

Janet Who are the others, Carlo? Do we know them?

Carlo Judith. And Wilma. Wilma was the one right at the back, far away. She was always like that, even when we ...

Lyn ... made love?

Carlo nods abjectly, wanting to be forgiven.

Lyn I'm going, Carlo. And once I've gone, you'll never get me back. Got anything to say?

Carlo Stay.

Lyn Why?

Carlo Because I need you.

Lyn You needed them ... (pointing into the night)

Carlo I don't want them now.

Lyn Oh?

Carlo They're nothing to me now.

Lyn Oh?

Carlo Since I found you ...

The seven break into laughter. It really is too pathetic.

Lyn Try again, Carlo. See if you can do better. Be quick though, because I want to watch XXXX (she names a television show) when I get home.

Rene Fin ch'han dal vino / calda la testa / una gran festa / fa' preparar ...

Hilde (softening towards Carlo) When they called you, Carlo, did you go off to find them?

Carlo I ran away.

Hilde Why did you run away?

Carlo I didn't want them to find me.

Hilde They'd already found you.

Carlo I didn't want them spoiling what I had.

Hilde With Lyn?

Carlo That's what I mean.

Hilde And when you heard us coming back to the fire ...

Carlo I came back ...

Hilde ... because ...

Carlo ... because I wanted to be with Lyn ...

Hilde ... because ...

Lyn (strongly) Because?

Hilde (gently) ... because ...

Carlo ... because I knew I'd feel safe ...

Hilde ... safe from?

Carlo Safe from temptation ...

Hilde (pressing her point) Safe from?

Carlo Safe from myself.

There are a few moments of silence while they consider the ground he's covered, and where it leaves them now.

Janet If we weren't here to restrain you, you might go off with one of them. Which one, I wonder, Carlo? Which one?

Carlo Wilma's always the furthest away. She puts distance between herself and the one she desires, and she makes him cross that gap. It's terribly tempting, I have to admit.

Lyn It's tempting you now?

Carlo This isn't fair. You can all read what's going on inside me. What's going on inside you people? Don't tell me you're never tempted to be with someone else. We all are! It's the way we're made.

Rene Andiam, andiam mio bene ...

Carlo You wanted to go off with Deanne. She sang with you. Love and music... they're as close as two fingers rubbing ...

Deanne True enough, Carlo, but it's one thing to feel desire and it's another to act on it.

Graham Thank God for that!

Deanne puts her arms around him, reassuring.

Graham Why are you with me, instead of him?

Deanne Two reasons ...

Graham Two?

Deanne He's got Hilde, and she's got him ...

Graham ... and ...

Deanne ... I want to be with you.

Graham Thank God for that.

Deanne God's getting a lot of thanks tonight.

Lyn Not from me he isn't.

Roger (looking at Carlo) I think he needs you, Lyn.

Lyn Do I need him? That's the question. Still. Do I want him, or would I be better off watching XXXX?

Janet You're the only one that knows that.

Lyn I want to be persuaded.

Graham (to Carlo) It's up to you, mate.

Carlo Can't you find it in you to love me again?

Lyn No.

There is the splash of a wave as they take in her refusal.

Carlo The sea's coming in.

Roger We should've built the fire up in the dunes. It's going to get flooded.

Carlo We'll all be home by then.

Lyn What are you getting at?

Carlo (pointing to the fire) If we wake up in the night, let's think about this. It'll all be black, and wet, and washed away.

Lyn So?

Carlo Next time we come here, we'll make our fire on higher ground.

Rene It was only supposed to last a couple of hours.

Hilde That's what he's getting at, I suppose.

Lyn What is he getting at?

Carlo There's such a thing as a mistake ...

Lyn Four of them?

Carlo ... and realising what you've done ... and knowing you have to change ...

Lyn Where are you now, then, great lover?

Carlo I'm recovering. I'm learning.

Janet Tell us about it, Carlo, if you want us to believe.

Carlo We do things because they're natural, but being natural isn't being smart.

Lyn Are you trying to outsmart me?

Carlo I'm trying to catch up with you. It's easier for you than for me.

Graham Double talk, Carlo. Come straight out with what you want to say.

Carlo I wanted to have as many women as I could ...
 Deanne Oh, men ...
 Carlo Yes! Men have to learn. Love's not an island where things happen and there's no result. Love's the everyday. Love's all around us, waiting for us to tap in ...
 Lyn (more amiably) So?
 Carlo We need to let it into us, and open so it can.
 Hilde Open all the time?
 Carlo Aware of it all the time, letting it do its job. Turning us into the best thing we can be.
 Lyn Nice idea, but is it going to last?
 Roger I think he means it Lyn. Going to give him a try?
 Janet Roger! Let her make up her own mind!
 Roger I was only making a suggestion.
 Hilde Was it a good suggestion? It's not easy to say.
 Rene My good wife means we're all on trial, tonight. Those voices have opened us all.
 Graham You wanted Deanne to go for a walk with you.
 Rene I did. She wanted to do it, too.
 Deanne We've sorted this out already. What's next, that's what I want to know.
 Lyn You're all looking at me.
 Janet Well ...
 Lyn Someone do something! Help me make up my mind!

Carlo La ci darem la mano ... (He offers his hand to Rene, asking for the tape. Rene gives it to him.) Shall I throw this tape in the sea?
 Hilde Don't do that. It means something to us all.
 Carlo La mi dirai di si ...
 Lyn Felice, e ver sarei ...
 Deanne You're on the right track!
 Lyn ... ma puo burlarmi ancor! Ma puo burlami ancor!
 The 4 (far back in the night) Carlo ... Carlo ...
 Carlo Go away! I don't want you any more! I belong to Lyn!
 Janet Does she belong to you?
 Lyn I think she does. I think he's ready for me now. I think.
 Janet We have to take chances.
 Roger There's nothing else to take!
 Lyn Andiam, andiam, mio bene ...
 Carlo ... a ristorar le pene ...
 Both ... d'un innocente amor!
 All 8 Andiam, andiam, mio bene
 A ristorar le pene
 D'un innocente amor.
 They listen to the night. The distant voices call no more. Another wave breaks, more loudly than the earlier one that caught their attention.
 Rene When the water comes up, the fire's going to have a story to tell!

Janet Home time everybody.
Roger Are you right to drive, love? I think I've had a bit much.
Janet You'll be all right Roger. You stretch out in the back.

Three couples take each other's hands and leave.

Carlo I'm sworn to you now, in front of our friends.
Lyn Good, Carlo. Thanks for getting me out of that.
Carlo We'll come back in a year's time ...
Lyn ... and weigh up what we've done.
Carlo Are you driving tonight, my love?
Lyn You drive. I'll sleep till we get home. I'm exhausted.
Carlo I put you through so much.
Lyn I'll be right in the morning.
Carlo Another day.
Lyn We don't need many more like that.
Carlo It only needed one.

He takes her hand, she responds, and they follow the others.

Various lines in this libretto refer to the Mozart and Da Ponte opera, *Don Giovanni*. Specifically, the quotations are from 'Fin ch'han dal vino', the Don's song of excitement and expectation as he gets ready for a ball, and the seduction duet of Giovanni and the peasant maid Zerlina, whose wedding to Masetto has been interrupted by the Don. Going to see *Don Giovanni* was perhaps the first decisive thing I did after finishing school, and I have never forgotten the pleasure and excitement it gave me. The events of the libretto are loosely – very loosely – based on the events of a beach party near Lake Tyers, Gippsland, circa 1966, and it is dedicated to those who were there that night (names long forgotten, naturally).

Molly's Man

A man of sixty or so is showing a young couple the site of a long-deserted mining settlement in inland Cape York. Trees have sprung up everywhere and the guide, Ernie, is not finding it easy to pick up his bearings.

Ernie Round about here, I think ...
Thomas Are you looking for that lake?
Ernie I'm looking for the track ...
Thomas It'd be over this way, wouldn't it?
Ernie We'll give it a go.

They walk through scrub until they find themselves looking at a lake which has formed as the backwater to a stream.

Marg What a lovely stretch of water!
Ernie Well!
Thomas (to Margaret) Apparently it has a story to it ...
Ernie 'All who went there, stayed there.' It could tell you a story, if it spoke.
Marg What would it say?
Ernie Gunshots. Yells. Screams of the dying.
Marg (rejecting this) It's so peaceful here today.
Thomas Wasn't always that way, apparently ...

Their thoughts are disturbed by voices, murmuring quietly, all about them, but emerging from the water.

Voices Whitefella hunt on our land, where they no belong. Chinee feller too. Go everywhere lookin. We drive'em out but they shoot us. Lose all our men. Coupla fights, all over. Guns. Bang, bang, bang.

Ernie They're talking about the Sniders.
Marg You can hear them too?
Ernie You can hear them everywhere, but this is one of the best places.
Thomas Meaning the worst, I take it?
Ernie Things that happened ... they happened a long, long time ago.
Marg I don't think that makes me feel any better.
Ernie You and I can't do anything about what happened.
Thomas It puts a nasty shade on things though, doesn't it.

We hear more shots, screams and yells. We hear the curses of white miners and the frustration of black men fighting for their land but unable to rid themselves of the invaders.

Marg (rushing suddenly to the edge of the lake) Oh no more! No more! Please, peace! No more!

The scene becomes silent again.

Ernie You're quite a peacemaker, young lady.
Marg This is supposed to be a peaceful land. That's how I want it to be.

Ernie The bush is deceptive, isn't it. That's because it's so unlike us. It's humans that make all the trouble, when we arrive.

Thomas We're part of nature ...

Ernie A pretty wild part, at times. I've got a lot more to show you yet. (He leads them away from the still-murmuring lake, to a cleft between two rocks.) The Gap. One of the most famous places in the whole area. Miners heading for the Palmer used to take a cut through here. Might've been better to find another way ...

Thomas The natives, again?

Ernie They kept themselves well hidden, then, when the miners were in single file, down came the spears! I forget how many men died here. There were quite a few attacks.

Marg So the war went on a long time?

Ernie The miners kept on coming, and every time the blacks did something to hurt them, they retaliated. Bodies in the bush. Bodies in the water. Bodies down a shaft. Bang, bang, bang. It took a few years to break them, but what happened was inevitable.

Marg At school we were taught to honour those who opened up the country.

Ernie Lies, lies, lies.

Thomas What should we think?

Ernie The Snider beat the spear. It was never going to be otherwise.

Marg Weren't there native troopers?

Thomas Protecting the white man?

Ernie Nasty bits of work. They liked to dress up, have a horse, and shoot their own kind. They made war on other blacks with all the advantage of being white.

Marg They shot their own kind?

Ernie Whenever they got the chance. There wasn't much love lost between the blacks. Some tribes were friendly, others not.

Thomas I'd like to see this place you call Battle Camp.

Ernie Tomorrow, with any luck. I'll show you something else.

The three of them push their way through the bush, then stop where a few posts rise out of the ground.

Ernie A man called Jack McLean was bringing supplies through here. Flour, tea, sugar, treacle, and bully beef in tins ...

Marg What a diet!

Ernie That's what the miners thought. They wanted beef! They told Jack to kill his bullocks. They'd pay him in gold but if he didn't, they'd shoot them anyhow. He started to argue, but they pulled out guns ...

Marg Wasn't there any law?

Ernie (chuckling) Now and then!

Thomas Finish your story ...

Ernie Forty head of cattle. And ten times that many men. Ten men to eat a beast. It wouldn't have taken them

long. Then they bought Jack's other stuff. He took his money, left his wagon, and set up somewhere else.

Marg Mister Taylor, why do you spend your life talking about these things?

Ernie Call me Ernie. People who don't like me call me Mister Taylor. (answering her question) Because it fascinates me. I grew up in this area. I can't get it out of my system, no matter how often I tell the stories I know.

Thomas How do people react?

Ernie Can't get enough of it. They want to see the bullet, the spear, the very spot where something happened. The truth's got some magic!

Marg The truth? That's the last thing we'll ever find.

Ernie All the places I'm telling you about, there's remnants, there's no doubt about people having been there.

Marg That's not the truth I mean.

Thomas What do you mean, Marg?

Marg I hardly know. I want to feel at peace with my country. Killing and armed hold-ups, and shootings and spears ... they make me full of hate, and then despair. If that's our past, what sort of future have we got?

Thomas The future's in our hands, surely? It's up to us.

Marg We're strung out on a long line between the future and the past. We don't have much room to move. We only connect the two.

Ernie That's a funny way to look at it.

Marg It's how I look at it, and it's your problem now, because you know about it. You've been telling stories; now you can deal with the effect they have.

Thomas The effect they have?

Ernie The effect they have?

Marg You're a prisoner of your past. You turn yourself into a guide, so you can tell people what happened. You're handing the problem to us. It's a burden I'd rather be without.

Ernie I admit there's ghastly bits, but the past is as rich, to me, as any bags of gold.

Thomas Really?

Ernie Otherwise, I wouldn't be here ... with you.

Thomas (testing what he's saying) We wanted to hear it all, and that's why we came?

Ernie You're unusual because you're upset. Most people say, Gee, Gosh, Amazing! They're protected by surprise. They think it's nothing to do with them.

Marg When they've listened to a story about themselves!

Ernie Or maybe it's not. There's another lake I'll show you, attached to a little stream. An Irish girl lived there with her man and baby, and she nursed the child beneath the trees that were as big, back then, as they are today. And they're big! The baby's grown up, and died, but the place where its mother watched it play is still there, and it'll be there forever, as fresh

and delightful as it was when she and her baby were young. Their memory lives in that water, and it's available to anyone who knows. So you see, we get a choice of what to remember, and what to forget. It's as if we drink from the past, and we fill up our minds, so that what's in our imagination is what we chose, and the choices we make are the truest way you can judge us for the sort of people we are!

Thomas I'd never thought of that!

Marg Nicely said, Ernie. Where does that leave us now?

Ernie You take over, Miss Margaret. You've seen my map, and my plans for the trip. Where are we going now?

Thomas (as Margaret thinks) That second lake. Where the mother kissed her child.

They disappear for a few moments, then reappear, beside another stretch of water.

Ernie They had their dwelling in front of those rocks. There's a cave, and they used it as a room.

Marg There's nothing there.

Ernie Long gone. You'll find bits of glass, bits of china. I once found a knife. I hid it under a rock.

Thomas Do you think it's still there?

Ernie I hope so, but I don't want to look.

Marg (interested) You don't want to look?

Ernie If someone took it away, I'd feel wretched. This place is sacred to me.

Thomas Were they (he points to where the dwelling stood) connected with your family?

Ernie Only the way we're all connected ...

Marg How are we all connected?

Thomas We're all human, not animals. Human.

Marg The worst animals.

Thomas And the best. We dominate ...

Ernie ... even when we don't deserve to.

Marg This is your place of peace, isn't it?

Ernie Nobody knows how peaceful the Kokjobididji people were before the whitefellas came. Or how warlike. They fought so well against the miners they must have had experience of battle. I suppose they fought other tribes ...

Marg Embodying death, so they could dish it out to others ...

Thomas ... and cop it for themselves. There are people who'd rather die than live. There always have been. I can't understand it. In a beautiful place like this, how could you consider killing? Dying?

Ernie It's in us all, and it's hard to control.

Marg It's stronger in men.

Ernie It is, but it's in women too. There are women who like men to fight over them. It gives them value, like a jewel.

Marg (staring at the water) A mother's love for her child.

Thomas The father's love for his son.

Ernie Nobody knows when they left, or why. They just did, leaving their dwelling behind. For years, people passing through slept in it, feeling safe from attack, and then the inevitable happened. It got burned down.

Thomas Leaving the cave!

Marg The cave!

Ernie The cave!

Marg Some things last forever.

Thomas Very few!

Ernie What does last forever? Tell me that!

Thomas The bush will burn; that doesn't change. Beyond that ... human nature lasts forever, always the same.

Marg Trying to get the best out of ourselves, and keeping the lid on what's worst.

Ernie You can only do that for a little while, then the evil gets loose ...

Thomas ... all over again. What a world!

Marg We're the pinnacle of nature, or so we think. This means the problem's most urgent in ourselves.

Thomas Too true, I'm afraid.

Ernie We've seen a lot today. Will we make our camp here, for the night?

Marg Yes. I'd like that. We can think of the little child at play.

Thomas I'll light a fire.

Ernie In front of the cave. We can sleep in there tonight.

Thomas We can play mother, father, child ...

Marg Who's the child?

All 3 (laughing) Not me!

Marg Maybe it's best to be the child. You can be natural, and never know the bad that's in you.

Thomas You have to wake up one day.

Ernie That's when you're not a child any more.

Thomas lights the fire in front of the room-sized cave in the rock.

Marg Do we know the names of the people who lived here?

Ernie Molly was Irish. That's all we know.

Thomas What about him?

Ernie Nothing at all. Just a miner.

Thomas They pushed into the blackfellas' land. They took it off them. Both sides were ready for a fight.

Marg And fight they did. But what's it got to do with us? I didn't shoot anybody. I didn't throw any spears.

Ernie What's it got to do with us? That's the question I can't get out of my head.

Thomas We know it's got something to do with us. We know that for sure. Do you want to say I'm wrong?

There is a silence, and then we hear again the shots, the shouts, the screaming of warriors and the groans of the dying.

Ernie It won't go away. Even here, it comes to haunt us.

Thomas That means we're accepting. We know it's always there.

Marg It's changed us then, hasn't it?
 Thomas I have a feeling we came here wanting to be changed.
 Why else would we come?
 Marg Have you seen people change before, Ernie, like
 we're changing now?
 Ernie No. But I get letters occasionally, and I don't know
 what they mean.
 Thomas Letters?
 Ernie From people I've shown around. They say they can't
 get these places out of their minds ... but what do
 they mean by that?
 Marg They don't know themselves. They want to hand the
 problem back to you.
 Ernie And I pick up more tourists and I take them on the
 usual round.
 Thomas And nobody's any the wiser ...
 Ernie When I stop here I want to see the Irish girl, and her
 child. I want to ask questions ...
 Marg ... which she wouldn't be able to answer. She doesn't
 know about us, and we know about her. The advan-
 tage is ours.
 Ernie Mm. That's the end of that, then.
 Thomas No, it's the beginning ...
 Marg ... though the black people were earlier still ...
 Thomas ... but they had to start somewhere, sometime, so far
 back we can't see it any more ...
 Ernie So we talk as if they were always here, when they
 weren't.

Marg So we can't see the start any more, and we certainly
 can't see the end ...
 Thomas ... we're drifting in a stream of time ...
 Marg ... and events ...
 Ernie ... and ideas ...
 Marg Does the stream have an end?
 Thomas Does the stream pass a soft, inviting bank, where the
 swimmer can get out?
 Ernie It does. We're on the bank, our feet are dry ...
 Marg Hello, Irish girl!
 Molly comes out of the cave, considering them.
 Molly You're a funny-looking lot!
 Ernie You wretch! You've never come out before! All the
 times I've been here, calling, and you've stayed out of
 sight!
 Molly I heard ya talking ...
 Thomas ... and ...
 Molly ... it made me rack my brains, and I wanted to see
 who could think of such silly ideas.
 Marg What do you think, Molly?
 Molly I think life is short, and you need to stay active ...
 Thomas Because if you don't?
 Molly ... ya get tangled up in ideas. Like your hair getting
 so wild and woolly you can't drag a comb through it.
 That's what I think.
 Thomas Can we camp in your cave tonight? Close to you?
 Molly You can camp in the cave for sure, but I won't be
 there.

Marg Where will you be, Molly?
Molly (pointing) Over there.
Thomas Over there?
Molly Where Brian my husband died with a spear in his
neck. By the time I got to him he'd gone. We never
said goodbye, so I say it to him, every night.
Thomas And your child?
Molly He grew up. He went to sea. There came a day when
I knew I'd hear no more of him, so I brought myself
back here. I thought if he wanted to find me, he'd
know where to come. That's how you found me. But
don't tell any others. I'd rather the place to myself.
Ernie Do you want us to go?
Molly I don't mind you being here. Stay away from the
place where Brian died. That belongs to me.
Thomas And the black people?
Molly They were doing what they had to. The place we
took was theirs.
Marg You bear them no ill will?
Molly They killed my husband. I find that hard to love. But
we killed their people, so why should they love us?
Ernie Will you let us sleep, if we put our bedding in your
cave?
Molly I won't be sighing nor moaning. It shouldn't be hard
to sleep.
Marg When do you sleep, Molly, if you're up all night look-
ing for the ones you lost?

Molly I don't need it any more. Clouds don't sleep, wind
and water, they don't need to sleep.
Thomas Do you miss being alive, Molly? Do you stick around
in hope of being called back?
Molly (wandering towards the water) I had my turn.
You've got yours. Use it well.
Ernie Let's put our bedding in the cave. She said we
could.
Marg I'm sorry she won't be with us, through the dark
reaches of the night ...
Thomas She will. She said she would be, in her way.

This libretto is a response to a reading of *Chasing the rainbow: the golden gullies of the Palmer*, by Glenville Pike, Pinevale Publications, PO box 822 Mareeba, Queensland 4880, published 1993.

The River

A man is driving a sign into the ground; it says New South Wales/ Victoria, and it is on the southern, or left hand bank of the Murray River. Jack, an unemployed man, approaches, a roll of blankets on his back.

Jack You got it on the wrong side, mate.
Sign man This is where they told me to put it.
Jack They told you wrong. (then, dismissing the sign)
 Where's the bridge they said was goin to be here?
Sign man Won't be long. Coupla years. Why don't you lie
 down and have a sleep?

The sign man walks off, Jack lies down to sleep. We hear a tooting, and a paddle steamer appears.

Jack That's better than walkin. Hey!

This is to the people he can see on the steamer.

Banks (in charge of the steamer) How's it goin up there?
Jack Shiddouse!
Banks What's the problem?
Jack I want to get into New South. Lookin for work.
Banks What areya like at cuttin firewood?
Jack Best you've ever seen!
Banks Come on board. I can use a man like you!

Jack clambers down the bank and leaps to the steamer. Banks hands him an axe and sends him below. The boat moves through

an endless forest of river red gums, visible occasionally as it meanders with the stream. Then we become aware of other creatures, a heron and a Murray cod.

Heron They're not going away.
Cod We're stuck with them.
Heron Worse than the black fellas.
Cod Not so dangerous.
Heron They don't know much, do they?
Cod They're not so smart. They do everything at a distance.
Heron They're cutting down trees ...
Cod I didn't know about that.
Heron Back from the water, so you don't see.
Cod I see'em well enough. They haven't got a clue. Not yet, anyway.
Heron Spread the word, that's what I've got to do. Trouble is, they're everywhere.
Cod The Murrumbidgee?
Heron The Lachlan, the Darling, all the rivers to the south. Way up into the Channel Country ...
Cod What the hell are they doing there?
Heron Running sheep and cattle, buggering everything in sight.
Cod Disaster!
Heron They're building towns.

Cod What are they?
Heron Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Crow You calling me?
Galah What's up down there?
Magpie Yodellellihoo!
Robin You've never seen a coat like mine!
Willie What about my tail?
Heron We've got a problem, guys. It's not going away.
Crow When they die I'll pick their bones.
Heron Won't work. They bury their dead.
Crow Bastards!
Heron We have to find a way to live with them.
Magpie They have to live with us!
Cod You'll live in their bloody bellies if you're worth eating.
Robin I'm safe. They won't get a meal out of me.
Heron So what are we gonna do?
Crow Ignore them.
Robin Sing! (She does so.)
Willie Dance! (He does so. The others join in to some degree.)
Heron That's nice guys, but it doesn't solve our problem.
Magpie Which is?
Heron If we can't get rid of them, we have to reduce their influence.
Magpie If they come near my nest, I'll go'em! (He whistles as if he's a missile arriving at a target.)

Robin Make them envy us.
Galah Move into the back country. There won't be many of them there. (She wheels around, and hundreds of other galahs come wheeling around her, in the air above.)
Heron That's a great show you fellas are putting on, but they'll get binoculars, they'll come out to watch you!
Galah What's so bad about that? You think we're not worth watching?

Again the flock of galahs does their spectacular fly-around, filling the air with sound.
Cocky (piqued by a display of which he's not a part) Who's putting on a show without me? Eh? If you do it again I'll leave you without a feather to fly with!
Crow Don't get aggressive. Black's stronger than white any day.
Robin (all vanity) Humans know an aristocrat by the clothes he wears!
Heron So we haven't got any ideas, we're just going to be the creatures we've always been.
Cod What did you expect?
Magpie Hello! I didn't know you were there.
Cod You're not a waterbird. You don't know much at all.
Magpie Don't be rude to me.
Cod Water's life. I can only live out here because there's water. It comes down from mountains I'll never see.
Willie How do you know that, you lazy dope?

Cod I swim in wisdom, fool!

Heron Okay, nobody's going to change. That much is clear. Our resistance, then, is to be exactly as we were?

Cod The bastards have put dams across the river. And they've brought the European carp. Get rid of them. Drive them into the sea!

Magpie Can't be done, mate. We have to defend what's left.

Cod You'll find they control you.

Robin Not while I can choose my clothes!

Willie Shut up you little cock-sparrow. You're so full of yourself you can't see the problem.

Robin I can see my waistcoat in the windows of their houses. It's a better reflection than this mud. (He looks scornfully at the river.)

Heron We need to organise ...

Galah We're organised. Left turn, everyone. Land!

There is a tremendous flutter of galahs, then they settle on the ground.

Cocky Nobody does anything without me!

He squawks, and a dozen or so cockies appear, squarking loudly as they settle in the trees.

Cocky Now, what appears to be the problem?

Cod It's these bloody humans, of the whitefella variety. They'll put a few of you in cages, and wipe out the rest. (miserably) It'll be fish farms for me

Roo (coming on with a gentle hop) It's worse on the roads. They knock you down with cars. Lights in your eyes. Bang! Bang! Bang! The only safe place is on their coins!

From somewhere among the redgum forest we hear the sound of the paddle steamer tooting, then it comes into sight, through the many thousands of trees. Banks is at the helm, with Jack beside him, pointing.

Jack Plenty of wood in there. Easy cuttin, too.

Banks I'll pull'er in.

The steamer comes close to the bank.

Jack Plenty of birds around today.

Banks Nice, aren't they?

Jack (reaching for a gun) Something for the stew pot!

He fires. The birds take to the air and after a few moments of screeching, they're gone.

Banks You silly bastard! What'd'ya do that for?

Jack Stirred'em up a bit!

Banks I like to have'em around.

Jack (looking at the bank) Hello, hello? Coupla blokes up there.

There are two men beside the NSW/Victoria sign, taking readings with a theodolite.

Jack Whaddaya doin, boys?

Surveyor There's gonna be a bridge!

Banks Is that where you're putting it?
 Surveyor Right here!
 Jack That's where I got on this boat!
 Surveyor The bridge'll lift so you can go underneath.
 Banks That's handy. When're ya gonna start?
 Surveyor Not my decision. I take my levels back to the government. They decide.
 Jack More bloody years!
 Surveyor You wouldn't be going past Echuca would you?
 Banks Climb on board!

The surveyor and his mate go down to the steamer, which paddles away, as before.

Heron (returning) You hear that? They're building a bridge.
 Cod Gloom. They'll stir up mud in the river.
 Cocky (returning to a high branch in a flurry of squawking) Noisy bastards, aren't they?
 Cod (morosely) Look who's talking.
 Heron We've only got one weapon. Make them ashamed of themselves.
 Cocky Show'em we're superior ...
 Heron I think that's it.
 Cod Ashamed of themselves? That'll be the day.

He sinks into the deepest water, leaving only a string of bubbles.

Cocky You realise that we're a mystery to them. They don't know where we come from, or where we're going next.

Robin I don't know myself, so long as there's a mirror!
 Cocky (ignoring this) Surprise is our best weapon. If we don't like what they're doing, we go somewhere else.
 Heron And?
 Cocky We've got the air. They say it's good to keep your feet on the ground. It's because they have to!
 Galah (as a huge mob circles in the sky) We've got the numbers!

In the distance we hear a couple more shots fired by the truculent Jack.

Heron They're going to wipe us out.
 Cocky No they're not! I swear by my crest of sulphur we'll be here when they've gone back where they came from.
 Heron They've acclimatised. By now, they're locals too.
 Roo (jumping on with another mighty hop) We've got to make them more like us.
 Heron How're we going to do that?
 Roo Make them forget their lions and tigers. We'll be the heraldry of their tiny minds!
 Magpie In South Aussie that's what we do ... and in the west, the swan!
 Heron True, true, now I come to think about it ...
 Roo We've been here for thousands of years. They know who came last!
 Heron Doesn't stop them thinking they're the first!

Roo We'll teach them slowly, over time.

Two more shots are heard, far away, followed by the tooting of the paddle steamer.

Heron Teach that mob humility? Let me know when you're gonna start!

Galah We're only safe in the sky. All up, boys and girls, in the air!

There is a tremendous flurry of birds, with the mob of galahs leading the way, then all the others joining them. Wings flutter, and they call to each other as they move aloft. The viewpoint of the audience moves with them, until the scene has altered to become an aerial view of the river, with all its anabranches breaking away and rejoining intermittently.

Heron They never see it as we do.

Magpie If you can't see something, you can't know it.

Crow Caaaaaa! Caaaaaa!

Galah Pessimist! We can do better than that!

Again the galahs break into an orgy of squealing sound, which stirs the cockatoos to join in, coarsely but with raucous vitality. All the other birds do their best to beat the cockatoos and galahs. The magpies calls are the most noticeable.

Roo (still on the ground) Excuse me. Do you need some local knowledge?

Surveyor (who's back with his mate to help him) No thanks, mate. All we have to do is peg it out, and the builders

can get underway. I wouldn't hang around if I was you. Some of them do a bit of shooting.

We hear the sound of guns as the roo disappears.

Cod (out of sight in the river) And there you bloody have it.

Heron (still in the sky) Fish and frogs. We haven't run out of them just yet.

Crow (high above) Caaaaaa! Caaaaaa!

Magpie Quardle quahdle quardle quahdle waah!

Heron No political sense, my fellow birds. They won't be organised. Look at those bastards down below!

Builders are erecting a bridge over the river at incredible speed. The central section lifts, and the paddle steamer passes through, tooting with vigour.

Banks Great day for the river people. Two states are joined!

Jack Not all that good, ya know. If you and I can get across, so can the cops.

Banks You want to keep a jump ahead, do you Jack?

Jack It's the best policy, in any walk of life.

Banks I'd say the best policy's to stick to the middle, where the water's deepest. You're less likely to strike trouble, there.

Galah Boring bastards, they only talk about themselves. Everyone ready? There's a flood out near Moulamein. Balranald's going to be next!

The mob of galahs wheels this way and that, sorting out its direction for the move, then it moves away with its squealing lingering after it's gone.

Heron They don't give a stuff. So long as they've got somewhere to go.

Robin Eternal optimists, that's how I see them.

Heron (looking down) Hello, are you still there?

Robin Me, and Willy, and a few others, we keep in the bushes. It's amazing how much trouble you avoid by keeping out of sight.

Willy We give a lot of cheek, but we don't do any harm.

Heron I might come down and join you.

As the heron comes to the smaller birds, the audience's view of the river reverts to the way it was at the opening; that is, on level terms, and close.

Willy (warning the heron to keep at a distance) I've got my nest in there. Couple of little ones.

Robin Chirp, chirp, chirp, all they want is food.

Willy I was the same, once, then I grew up to be a bird!

Heron That's our fate, my friends. There's no avoiding that.

Roo Unless you're me! Those fellas still around?

Heron No. You've got your five minutes clear.

Roo (jumping on) Made up your mind yet? What're we going to do?

Heron It looks like we're going to share. They're going to change everything until they wake up one day that they're wrecking it.

Roo And then?

Heron They'll say, we should have left it as it was.

Roo Too late!

Heron Depends how long it takes them. They'll save what they can if they wake up in time.

Roo And if they don't?

Heron I'll take to the air again, I suppose.

Roo And me?

Heron You'll hop out of the way. As long as you can. There's no guarantees, are there.

Roo Absolutely none at all.

Heron It's a wonderful river. It's a lesson to us all.

Roo It's life. Who needs anyone to explain.

Heron I love it from the air, but I'm not a high flier by nature ...

Roo If you're not, what am I?

Heron You're a clod-hopper mate, as these whitefellas say.

Roo They're clever, as you must have seen.

Heron We can only hope they're clever enough to know what's good for them.

Roo That's asking a bit too much, I think.

Heron And I don't think we can settle for less.

Roo (looking up) Looks like things've dried up at Balranald. The mob's coming back!

Heron They're flying heavily. I think they're pretty well fed.

Roo Want to go and greet them?

The heron agrees, and the two of them watch, applauding, as a vast flock of galahs settles near the river. Even the cod indicates his welcome with a string of noisy bubbles.

This libretto is a response to the area (Barham, NSW, facing Koondrook, Victoria) where my father grew up. Returning to Barham always gives me an uncanny sensation of connecting with a time before I was born. It is as if, by returning, I am accepting my place in a continuity which is greater than any individual life.

Back o' Bourke

Some fine public buildings can be seen, although, disconcertingly, they are scattered, and they move around occasionally. More stable is an endless stretch of sandy soil, with a few weary-looking trees. A man, a woman, and two children are considering this cheerless prospect.

Will This is it.
Melinda Thank God there's a river.
Will (cheerfully) It flows occasionally.
Melinda It doesn't flow all the time?
Will The river's like luck. It brings what you want occasionally. The rest of the time, you're stiff!
Melinda I don't think I understood that. I thought it would be flowing, all the time.
Will (cheerlessly) Out here?
Melinda Well, where does the water come from?
Will Where does God go when he wants a holiday?
Melinda I didn't think God ever took a holiday.
Will If he lived out here he would.
Melinda If that's how you feel, why did you bring us here?
Will It's an opportunity to have nothing in your mind.
Melinda What's the good of that?
Will And nothing all around you. (He indicates the empty landscape.)
Melinda You want your children brought up here?
Will They'll make the most of it.

Melinda The most of nothing?
Will Sounds silly, doesn't it? But you'll find it's good.
Who's this?

Fred Hollowes enters, with a black nurse called Flo.

Will What are you up to, mate?
Fred People out here have eye problems. Trachoma, mostly. It's not hard to fix, if you know what you're doing.
Melinda Do you need a nurse?
Fred Flo knows what to do. She's learning the trade from me.
Will Doing a bit of good, eh?
Fred Your kids look okay. (taking a shrewd look at them)
Melinda Can we get in touch with you if anything goes wrong?
Fred I'm based in Sydney but the clinic knows when I'm coming. You can get in touch with me there.
Will Anybody paying you for this?
Fred The government puts up some dollars. And there are generous people who give support.
Flo Doctor Fred doesn't worry about the money. He reckons if you do a good job someone'll keep you going.
Will A man after me own heart.

Melinda Will!

Will Darling there's more in life than money.

Melinda It helps if you have some. Don't you think, doctor?

Fred My bloody oath. And you need a lot of cheek. I tell people, this is what I'm going to do, and you're going to help. Got your chequebook?

Will (laughing) Bloody lovely!

Melinda (looking at the emptiness beyond them) How do you find your patients?

Fred Flo's in charge of that. She spreads the word, and people hear, don't they Flo?

Melinda Have you got a wife, doctor?

Fred I'm the luckiest man on earth?

Will Is he talking about you, Flo? (She shakes her head.)

Melinda Where is she, doctor? Tell me how you met her.

Fred She's in Sydney. She's been out here. I think she thinks it's pretty bloody bloody. But she wants me to go on. I go to Africa, I go to New Guinea, but I'm happiest when I'm here.

Will You see, love?

Melinda How does this place make you happy, doctor?

Fred There's nothing to distract you. I come here to do a job, and I do it. If there was nothing to do, I think I'd go mad.

Melinda Will?

Flo There's plenty to do. Always.

Will I reckon you see things the way I do.

Fred Nice to meet you, but I can't talk all day. You ready, Flo?

They nod to Will, Melinda and the children, then walk into the emptiness in front of them.

Will There's a bloke with his head screwed on.

Melinda (doubtfully) He's doing a lot of good in this world ...

Will And so will we.

Melinda What are we going to do, Will?

Will Eat one and a half meals a day, love each other, and bring up our kids.

Melinda To do what?

Will They'll find things to do.

Melinda Who are those men over there?

She points toward the river, where a paddle steamer is marooned in a long, shallow pool.

Will Stuck. Waiting for some water. They'll be having a good time.

Melinda Bored out of their brains.

Will How long've you been there, boys?

Bummer Only a coupla months.

Charl Bullshit! The boat's been here a year. We took this bummer on when we heard there was rain up north.

Bummer You shouldn't take any notice of stories.

Charl Shouldn't take any notice of you.

Bummer Who got you that steak for dinner last night? And the eggs the day before?

Charl If you weren't so crooked you wouldn't be useful.

Bummer If you didn't have me to do the dirty work, you'd starve.

Will Only the two of you?

Charl There's another bloke in town. Got himself a woman. Don't see very much of him now.

Bummer Nesting!

Will (to Melinda) The kids're interested in having a look at the boat.

Melinda Julie's not. She knows there's something funny if there's no women about.

Will You want to have a look, Timmy?

Melinda (despite the boy nodding) We stick together. In this family, it's all or none.

Charl (calling to Will) Are you any good as a carpenter? The left side paddle needs some work.

Will I could do it for you. I'll have a look tomorrow.

Charl (surprised) Tomorrow?

Melinda It's not going to rain tonight.

Bummer Missus, where I am, it never rains. If they're having a race meeting, first person they invite is me. To keep it dry!

Charl Bullshit! He's the last person invited anywhere. They gotta be desperate! What did that fella say?

Bummer Any club that'd have me as a member, I wouldn't want to join it!

The two men laugh riotously, and a moment later we hear shots as they fire at birds in the trees near the river.

Melinda No, Timmy no. That's a path you do not take.

Will Hello, here's Fred back again. And Flo. What's wrong, I wonder?

Fred Everything all right?

Melinda Yes, but what about you?

Flo We spent a week in four different camps, then no more work to do ...

Fred She's covering for me. I've been a bit crook lately. Gabi made me promise to come home if it came again.

Will Sydney?

Fred Afraid so. This is my last trip.

Melinda Won't you be coming here again?

Fred (chuckling) In a box. I've told Gabi what to do.

Will Gabi's the wife, I take it.

Fred She surely is. No man ever had better. I put my life in her care, and when the end comes ...

Melinda Sssshh. If you're sick, can she look after you?

Fred Flo helps. Lots of people help. When you know what a mess the world is, it's surprising how good people can be.

Will You set'em a good example, Fred.

Flo He's always doing good. People give it back.

Fred (to Melinda) How're the kids finding it out here?

Melinda I worry about them. I can't find anything for Julie, and Timmy ... there's too many things I don't like on offer.

Fred It's never easy to live a good life. I'm thankful that a good one was shown to me.

He and Flo shake hands with Will and Melinda, then leave. Julie and Tim, the children, are curious about the meanings of the exchange they've heard.

Will An eye doctor. He gets among the black people because they've got problems they don't know how to treat.

Melinda He helps the suffering. He gives people hope. It's a great way to live.

Will And he's going home to die.

Melinda Will!

Will That's what he was telling us. You kids want to be doctors? (The children have never thought about this.) Not a bad life, if you can pass all those exams!

Melinda Not your forte, darling.

Will It is not. Exams!

Melinda A woman! She looks lost.

A beautiful woman floats onto the scene, wearing white. She has dark hair, she isn't wearing shoes, and she seems abstracted as if she may be only an apparition.

Gabi Where are you Fred? In all this emptiness, where?

Will It's not as empty as it looks. You looking for Fred the doctor?

Gabi You've seen him then?

Will He's on his way home. The black people are going to miss him.

Gabi Everyone's going to miss him. He's an angel, with a temper and a foul tongue, but if you know the good he does, you know him for what he's worth.

Melinda I felt that straight away.

Gabi Everyone can feel the goodness of my man. It's like a backbone, steel and straight.

Melinda You don't mind if others love your husband?

Gabi Why shouldn't they love him? Everybody does. Fred? (She calls into the void.)

Will He's on his way back. You need to be there to meet him.

Melinda We could take you to the bus terminal ...

Will (perceptively) I don't think she needs any bus ...

Gabi No. I can manage for myself. (She disappears.)

Will I hope you kids are watching what's going on.

Melinda You're in the middle of a miracle. Learn from it. Watch, and listen, and learn!

These words are perhaps truer than she intends, because we notice that the buildings of Bourke are moving more constantly. The scattered trees on the plains beyond the river seem to be wandering too, as if the whole countryside is trying to find itself while having a bad dream. We notice a small group of men emerging from the desert, buckling under the heat.

Sturt (looking at a thermometer) One hundred and thirty degrees Fahrenheit this thing will measure, and it's broken. The mercury's running out of the tube! My God, deliver us from this heat!

Bummer (calling from the boat) There's water here, boys. Get yourselves a drink!

Sturt's party rush to drink, then throw themselves down in the shade of a tree.

Sturt Don't talk about rescue. We've got to get ourselves out of here. We'll sit out the summer and go south when it cools.

Men Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Melinda There's nothing but suffering here. Will!

Will No love, truly. Wait. The kids're doing well at school.

Julie and Tim are bigger now, and waering the uniform of their school in Bourke. They have a certain natural confidence about them as they look at Sturt and his men, and also Bummer and Charl, pretending to maintain their paddle steamer.

Julie Aren't you ever going to move that boat?

Charl When the river brings some water.

Tim Won't you need more men?

Charl (pointing at Sturt's party) Those blokes'll do.

Sturt I'm riding down to Adelaide, as soon as I get a horse.

Bummer If that's all you want, I can fix that for you.

Sturt I don't steal. Explorers are men of principle.

Charl I don't reckon that'll get you very far.

Melinda Will? Will?

Will I've got no answers, love, but I reckon something's going to happen. Look.

The trees are moving closer, and with them the black people that Fred and Flo were helping. The country on the other side of the Darling is populated, and coming closer. The buildings of Bourke are jumping about in excitement, while the landscape beyond them is gathering in its unity. The advancing trees form a line along the banks of the river, with the black people scattered here and there.

Blacks Mmmmmmmmm ...

They are expecting something. The buildings of Bourke line up at far left and far right.

Tim Something's coming, mum. I can feel it.

Julie It's the doctor man, he's coming back.

Tim It's the lady too, the white lady ...

Julie That's his wife!

Melinda For goodness' sake!

Will The miracle's going to happen ...

Melinda It's already happened, and we were there ...

We see Fred, sitting on the edge of a bed, looking to Gabi, who enters, bringing food, and a glass.

Gabi This'll make you strong.

Fred I'm draining away, my love. It's only you that keeps me going.

Gabi I'm strong enough for two. The two of us add up to one.

Fred When I die, darling, take my ashes west. Throw them on the land I loved.

Gabi Where you brought health, and hope, for others.

Fred There's so much suffering in the world ...

Gabi Thanks to you, there's less.

Fred There's always a need for help. I can't give it any more.

Gabi Eat and drink, Fred; you know that's what you have to do.

Fred I need to be light, so you can carry me. Are you ready, Flo?

Flo (appearing) Yes Doctor Fred.

Fred Get someone to carry me, Flo. You know all the people.

Flo I get'em, Doctor Fred. (She signals, and four of the men among the trees by the Darling come forward.)

Fred It would be easier if I were ashes. Farewell, my love.

Suddenly, he's gone, and Gabi, Flo and the black people have only a box of ashes.

Gabi (taking the box) All that's left of a wonderful life.

Flo We go forward, Missus Gabi. Long way before we stop.

Gabi I want to carry him forever.

Flo He want to lie down sometime, Missus Gabi. He tell us when he want to rest.

Gabi Okay then! We're setting off now. Who wants to join us? (She looks up and down the Darling, and at the people clustered near the buildings of Bourke.) I don't know when we'll stop. I'm waiting for Fred to tell us. There must be a spot out there where he'll say put me down, now. That's where I'll sprinkle his ashes, let him go back to the soil.

Flo All you feller that Doctor Fred ever helped, you walk with him now.

A line of people emerges from the trees gathered by the river.

Gabi (referring to the number of people) Heavens, I don't think I ever knew ...

Flo They come to show you what sort of man you married.

Gabi Thank you. Thank you, one and all.

Melinda What a wonderful woman.

Will She had a man to match.

Flo Some walk in front, some behind. Also, some walk out the side, like we're a flock of birds ...

Gabi ... moving with our wings!

Julie Is she going to come back, mum, or will she stay out there?

Melinda I think she'll come back, but she's got something to do before she can ...

Tim What's that, mum?

Will (as Melinda hesitates) Listen to your mother. I think she knows ...

Tim	What's mum know, dad, that you don't know?	Flo	Little clump of trees over there, Missus Gabi, what you think?
Will	That's more than I can say.	Gabi	I think Fred's saying put me down. He's saying he wants to go ...
Julie	(holding her mother) She's only walking slowly. She's ever so proud!	Flo	(to the people walking with Gabi and Fred's ashes) Missus Gabi going to stop now, let Doctor Fred go free.
Gabi	Human goodness. What a rarity, when it's found ...	Gabi	What an emptiness I feel inside me. What an emptiness all around. (She opens the little box of ashes.) Love fills the void. (She flicks some of the dust in the box towards the sky.) He knew everything was connected. If one suffered, everybody did, unless they closed their hearts. He opened to let us in. Look, I've opened the box to let him out. He wasn't for me to hold, only to care for. Now he belongs again to all. Go free, my love. Circle the souls of suffering, make them know you're there. Be happy in your work. Make the world as generous as you were ... (She moves among the group standing among the stunted trees, tossing her husband's ashes left right and centre.)
Flo	In the emptiness, it's all about us, ready for the taking ...		
Gabi	I've got you in my hand, holding you hard against me ...		
Melinda	That means she's got to let him go ...		
Julie	Where does he go then, mum?		
Will	Nobody ever knows.		
Julie	Mum?		
Tim	(after her silence) No answer, mum? No answer at all?		
Melinda	He's going where you came from. He's going where everybody goes ...		
Will	... but he's very special ...		
Gabi	... because he's floating on a sea of love ...		
Bummer	Amazing! I reckon if she whistled, she could make the river rise!		
Charl	She's walking into the desert ... which is more than your mob (he's talking to Sturt's party) could bloody do!	Flo & group	Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Sturt	Vision! Madness!	Gabi	He was with us, and he's gone. He's only a memory, now, but what a measurement, in the scales of love!
Bummer	More love than I ever needed ...		Gabi turns and walks, much more quickly, back towards the river.
Charl	Makes you feel almighty small!	Will	(to his son and his daughter) A lesson, my loves.

The black people come to the river bank. The men from the paddle steamer and the remnants of the explorers' party stand respectfully. Will and Melinda look at their children, and Tim and Julie raise their hands to Gabi as she disappears.

Many years ago I visited Bourke and was affected by its ability to maintain itself in a location which had entered folklore. Anyone who put themselves beyond the town could only be a fool, apparently, deserving whatever they got. Yet the town had dignity and its people were courteous. When I read, years later, that the eye specialist Fred Hollows had asked for his ashes to be sprinkled back o'Bourke, I took him to my heart, as others had before me. This libretto is dedicated to him, his memory, his ideals, and to all who loved him.

Dig

A remote corner of South Australia, on the banks of Coopers Creek. A stockman and the manager of Innamincka Station are by a fence.

Jacky Ya want me to check the far paddock, boss?

Tom That's the idea. Got all ya need?

Jacky (nodding) Don't need much. Only coupla days.

Tom See ya when you get back.

Jacky leaves, and a couple, Esrom and Lily, come up from the water.

Esrom He won't get lost?

Tom (surprised by them, but hiding it) He couldn't lose himself if he tried.

Esrom You depend on those men, I suppose?

Tom We do. The way they depend on me. Who do you depend on?

Esrom My wife. My four wheel drive. My wits.

Tom You're lucky to have some. You're camping there are you?

Esrom Got in last night. Stay for a couple of days, depending ...

Tom Depending on what?

Esrom How we like it, mainly.

Tom How you like it. (musing) What if it doesn't like you?

Esrom How would I know that?

Tom It's funny country out here. Things happen that you're not expecting. You have to be ready.

Esrom Ready for what?

Tom You're not ready, I see. I've got a lot to do. There's a little store at the homestead, if you're needing supplies. Petrol, if you're running low. Seeya.

Esrom Any fish in here? ((Coopers Creek))

Tom (moving away) Such things have been seen. Don't depend on it. (He goes.)

Esrom Not very friendly.

Lily He doesn't want us here.

Esrom He doesn't own the place. He only works for the owners.

Lily I can't imagine anyone owning this place.

Esrom A few deadbeats, keeping away from the law. There used to be a pub, and a nurse. Couple of beds for men who got crook.

Lily You make it sound pretty wretched.

Esrom What do you think it was like?

They are startled by the sounds of shots, and breaking glass.

Lily What's that?

Esrom One of those funny things he was talking about. They had the biggest bottle heap in the world, at the pub.

Lily What pub?
Esrom It's gone now. Hoons drive up here for a shooting weekend. They line up the bottles and fire at them.

Offstage, guns go off and bullets smash bottles from the vanished hotel's stack.

Lily That was years ago. Someone's doing it now.
Esrom We're in a time warp. Or call it what you like. All time's present at the same time. (He feels foolish.) If you see what I mean.

Lily A time warp? What are you talking about?

Esrom Are you feeling older? And younger too?

Lily I am as a matter of fact.

Esrom That's what I'm talking about. It's one of the things he was talking about.

Lily That man? What would he know?

Esrom Things that would surprise us, I suspect.

We hear the roar of an aeroplane, and then, mysteriously, a clergyman (Flynn) appears. Tom returns to welcome the arrival.

Flynn You need a couple of sisters out here. We'll raise money and build a nursing home.

Tom Sounds good.

Flynn Isolation's a curse. We'll start a flying doctor scheme. Radio when you need help.

Tom It's a great idea, Pastor Flynn, but you're wrong about loneliness. It's one of the best things you can have.

Flynn Really?

Tom You're a man of god. Don't you think we crowd him out if we keep talking all the time?

Flynn I suppose that's true ...

Tom It's as hot as hell out here, and hard as the hardest rock. When someone does a kindness, it's as if an old wound's healing.

Flynn God has mysterious ways of showing himself.

Tom And so have we.

Both disappear.

Esrom Where'd they go?

Lily Very strange. What's going to happen now?

Two more figures appear, Mickey and Minnie. He is small, and she is very large. He's a bachelor of fifty, she's a young woman of twenty. Their arrival is marked by another fusillade of shots and the smashing of glass bottles.

Minnie They didn't do that in our time.

Mickey I'd've grabbed their guns and shot'em if they'd done it while I was drinking.

Minnie Drinking was important to you.

Mickey Only an excuse to see you in the pub.

Minnie That was my excuse to be where you were.

Mickey Together.

Minnie We had a lot of years together, darling ...

Mickey Nobody ever called me that, till you ...

Minnie Nobody called you darling?

Mickey Nobody, ever, at all.

Minnie Till me?

Mickey I needed you to change my life.
Minnie I needed you to change mine.
Mickey Hey, it was a good thing you came here!
Minnie Where else could you go, if you were built like me?
Mickey This is not the end of the earth!
Esrom Well, it is ...
Minnie Who the hell are you?
Lily You'd call us tourists. We've come to have a look.
Mickey There's nothing out here to look at!
Minnie (taking Mickey's arm) All the good men have been taken.

Esrom laughs.

Mickey (truculently) Well?
Lily Don't be offended. We're not married, you see.
Mickey (proudly) Well, we are!
Minnie How long's it been, darling?
Mickey Five minutes, as best I can recall.
Minnie The best five minutes of my life.
Mickey The best twenty years of mine!
Esrom When are the explorers coming back?
Mickey About a hundred years ago ...
Lily That doesn't sound right.
Mickey Don't ask me! I can't read or write! She's the brains in our combination.
Minnie Brains only get you so far.
Esrom (pointing at the country around them) They got you as far as this.

Mickey It looks like nothing, doesn't it. Absolutely nothing at all. And bloody hot. The arse-end of the earth ... (He's interrupted by the sound of shots, and glass bottles smashing.) And hoons smashing bottles. Maybe we've come down in the world ...
Minnie ... and maybe we've gone up!
Lily You've still got your pride.
Mickey The sunsets'll take your breath away. And the way people treat each other. You've got to be good ...
Esrom Are you really kind?
Mickey If you want to know, you have to live here. Put yourself to the test.
Esrom (humbled) I don't think I'd be good enough.
Lily Don't reduce yourself, my love.
Esrom He's given me a challenge, and I don't think I'm up to it.
Lily What was the challenge, darling?
Esrom To be able to live with nothing ...

Enter two nursing sisters, Ina and Liz.

Ina The nursing home's gone.
Liz They've taken it away. It's a station homestead now.
Ina We're left with nothing, then ...
Liz That's how we were when we came.
Ina City girls, full of goodness, we thought ...
Liz And we found a goodness greater than ours, by far.
Ina It made us humble.
Liz We could do so little.

Tom	(from offstage) You'll never be forgotten out here.		
Liz	Who's that calling?		
Tom	Tom. I manage the station now. Come and have a look.	Lily	away. He didn't need no saving. He was alright where he was. Here with my mum.
Ina	There'll be so much that's new ...	Alice	Do you think he ever knew?
Liz	And so much that hasn't changed. Those rocks!	Lily	No. He never come back.
Minnie	They still break your heart ...	Alice	And you think he would have come back?
Mickey	Till the sun sets on them, and you say, I'm going to sit down and sing, and drink a beer ...	Esrom	I'm his girl. He'da wanted to see me, if he knew.
Minnie	... or three!	Alice	You'd like to see him?
Liz	Some things never change. Do you still crawl over The Cobbler?	Alice	They showed me a picture once. I don't know if it was him. That's what they said.
Mickey	There's a road, now. Better than in your day. They get oil and gas out there. (He points.) The horizon's not so empty.	Lily	How old are you, Alice?
Ina	I'd like it if the explorers came back. I'd listen to what they'd say.	Alice	I dunno. When they buried me they said I was seventy one.
Minnie	They'd say we should have left it to the blacks.	Esrom	Can you see all those years in your mind?
Ina	They needed tenderness too. (Yellow Alice slips on quietly.) Who's this?	Alice	Like they was today. But I need a lot of rest. I'm going up the creek to lie down. Somewhere near that tree.
Minnie	Yellow Alice. She was old when you were here. She's only a spirit now, but she remembers.	Lily	Goodbye now, Alice. Sleep well when you get there.
Alice	That man they call King, he put spirit in my mum.	Esrom	We'll come and see how you are.
Esrom	What?	Ina	Innamincka's entering your soul.
Alice	Very cold at night, he was almost dead. My mum took him in her arms to warm him. He put spirit inside her, then the whitefellas came back. Took him	Liz	Remember how it did that to us, my love?
		Ina	We'll never have those days again, Elizabeth.
		Liz	You married a man from here.
		Ina	The best thing I ever did.
		Liz	And he outlived you ...
		Ina	We knew it would be that way.
		Liz	A fine man for a fine woman.

Ina (her spirit-state overcoming her) Let's go with Alice, and lie down.

Liz and Ina walk off as Alice did.

Mickey They had their years ...

Minnie They had their time ...

Mickey ... and so did we, my love ...

Minnie ... and so did we, my love ...

They too follow Alice, Liz and Ina. Tom enters.

Tom Things've gone quiet. Jacky should be back soon.
(Jacky appears as if called.) Everything okay?

Jacky No problem there boss. Everything okay.

There is another flurry of shooting, and smashing of glass.

Tom (casually) Fuckin hoons.

Jacky Others all gone to the Dig Tree.

Tom Must've seen the explorers coming back.

Tom and Jacky also go upstream until they reach the famous tree.

Jacky Nobody here.

Tom Spirits. You never know when they're around and when they're somewhere else.

Jacky Whitefella spirits starting to crowd out blackfella.

Tom (affectionately) Shut up Jacky. There's plenty of room.

Jacky Some of them spirits like great big thunder clouds ...

Tom ... and some of them're so tiny you wouldn't hear a squeak!

Jacky Must be them now boss. The splorers're coming.

The land grows dark, and the approach of the three explorers is indicated by sounds indicative of their yearning, their desperation.

Jacky Oooooooooohhh ...

Tom Out on their feet.

Jacky Oooooooooohhh ...

Tom Absolutely bugged, and they're coming back tozilch.

Tom and Jacky watch as the explorers look around the site.

Burke Gone!

Wills (at the tree) Dig.

King I can't go on, sir. We've marched thirty miles today.

Burke What have they left us? Anything to eat?

Wills (as if hypnotised) Dig.

King I'll do it sir. (But he lets the shovel slips from his hands.)

Wills Dig.

Burke Careful. There might be glass.

Wills Dig.

King Don't say that all the time, sir, it makes me think my life's been buried there.

Burke Well what do you think they've done?

King I don't know what they've done, sir. Why did they leave us on our own?

Wills (digging) Dig.

Burke Dig indeed. What else is there to do? If only we could dig a hole right through the earth and come out where it's green.

King You're an Irishman, Mister Burke. You remember your country now?

Wills Dig.

Burke I can see it clearly, King. There were no stones in the Ireland of my youth, and everything was green.

King Will you see it again, Mister Burke, or is this the last we see before we die?

Wills Dig.

Burke Dig if you want to. We might as well have a grave!

Jacky Why they starving when blackfella got plenty to eat? Eh? You tell me that.

Tom Because they were the biggest fools that ever were.

Esrom (to Lily) Someone's talking sense.

Lily They're dying men, darling. We all know the end. There's no mystery here.

Tom That's just what there is. Strange. It upets me every time.

Esrom You see this often?

Jacky I don't like to come here.

Tom And neither do I, but I have to.

Lily Why?

Tom I'm the manager of this place. I mustn't let it happen again.

Lily Can you stop it?

Tom Sometimes no. Despite the grim reminder.

Wills There's a box sir. Shall I open?

Burke Why not, Wills? It's not as if our lives are hanging by that thread ...

King What thread are you talking about Mister Burke?

Burke I've marched thirty miles today. My mind's a blur.

Wills There's a note. (He hands it to Burke, who looks at it in his confused state.) Sir?

King Mister Burke?

Burke What's the date, today, Mister Wills? What's the day?

Wills My diary sir.

(He shows it to his leader.)

Burke It was only this morning that they left.

King (staggering, and peering into the night) Brahe! If you hear me, call! (after a silence) Call!

Jacky Nobody there, mate. Except the spirits, and they can't get you home.

The spirits we've already met begin to appear, and also the black people of the Cooper, who are both contemptuous of the white men, and concerned.

Blacks Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Mickey Poor buggers. Never had a chance.

Minnie They did it wrong ...

Mickey ... and paid the price.

Liz That's why Mister Flynn put us here ...

Ina ... so there'd be someone to give help ...
 Tom ... whenever we're in need ...
 Mickey ... and that's all the time, for most of us.
 Minnie Darling?
 Mickey I had you my love. You came when I'd given up hope.
 Lily Aaahhh ...
 Esrom What is it, love?
 Lily We've brought ourselves to the very edge of despair ...
 King Can we lie down now, Mister Burke? We might feel stronger in the morning.
 Burke We might. And we might be lucky ...
 Wills Lucky, Mister Burke? What luck do you see around you? Here, where Satan himself wouldn't care to stay!
 Tom He'd say it was too bloody hot!
 Jacky Get used to anything after a while. Got water all the time.
 Burke It would be good fortune if God himself put his hand on our brows, to cool them, so we could get some rest.
 King And brought us a bed to lie on ...
 Wills (passionately) ... instead of these everlasting stones!
 Jacky You fella rest now. Somebody come for you, in a while.

Ina (as the explorers lie down) They did, of course, and it was too late.
 Alice (referring to King) That man my father. The photo was right. He woke up in the arms of my mother.
 Liz It wasn't proper, but it was kind.
 Ina Being kind ... it's the last thing we can do, and the first.

The spirits from the past begin to disappear.

Mickey Were you only being kind to me, my love?
 Minnie No, I loved you for what you were.
 Mickey What I was ... I'm only a story now ...
 Tom That's the fate we're given, Mick. Live a little while and leave a tale.
 Jacky I do the top paddock tomorrow boss. See everything all right.

Tom nods, and everybody moves away, leaving the three explorers on the ground.

In the story of Burke and Wills one disaster follows another, in places where mistakes are dearly paid for. Anyone travelling across the gibber plains near Innamincka knows how harshly, unforgivingly, the land can treat the traveller. Anyone seeing the flowers after rain, or the sunsets, knows the beauty that's on offer too. As usual in such circumstances, humanity can be at its best and its worst; this libretto tries to show these forces in their operation.