

The Water Tower

Manjimup and Nannup, two black men, are squatting near a tree. Two or three very humble whitefella homes can be seen in the background.

Manjimup They say they gonna dig a dam. Build a tower. Water for every tap.

Nannup Don't want'em doin' it in the wrong place.

Manjimup Every place the same to them.

Nannup They dunno where they are, 'less they find themselves on a map!

The two men laugh. Enter Doreen, a settler's wife.

Doreen What you laughin' at, boys?

Manjimup We was wonderin' when you fellas gonna start digging that dam.

Doreen I've been wondering that for years. Nobody started digging, yet.

Nannup Why they not start, missus? Been horrible dry, lately.

Doreen They can't make up their mind where to put it. A dam goes in a low spot. But if you want to take the water out in pipes, it's got to be somewhere high!

Manjimup High like a cloud? How high's high?

Doreen High's like a tower. So you gotta pump the water up.

Nannup We never need no pumps. Just go and have a drink.

Doreen You aren't as clever as us. We like water on tap all the time.

Manjimup OK if you can get it missus.

Doreen (sharply) Oh we'll get it. Only take another twenty years.

Enter Keith, her husband, a cranky, impatient man.

Keith I need dinner early. Got a meeting about that dam.

Manjimup Where you gonna put it, boss?

Keith (giving nothing away) Let ya know tomorrow. Should be clear by then.

He stamps off, followed by a reluctant Doreen.

Nannup They don't even listen.

The audience can hear a good deal of activity in the bass part of the music. Sometimes it's lyrical, sometimes convoluted and bumpy. Nannup and Manjimup treat it as something that's there all the time. As time passes, we hear other noises added to it, mostly to do with the movement of birds and insects, then the screen at the rear shows us a mob of kangaroos, hopping about, grazing at times, but looking unsettled.

Manjimup Haven't got me spear.

Nannup Need to get a couple of them. Hello!

He's spotted Keith walking down the road.

Manjimup Off to his meeting!

Nannup How high they gonna build that tower ...

Manjimup However high the tower, the steeple's gotta be higher.
Reverend Dibble says so.

Nannup Church gotta be on the high ground.

Manjimup Here's Greg. We'll ask him ...

Enter Greg, a surveyor, and an outsider to the settlement.

Manjimup Evening Greg.

Greg (in good humour) Afternoon, I think. Howareya boys?

Manjimup Reckon you might know. Where they gonna put everything?

Greg The steeple, the dam, the water tower. Yairs, a good question boys.

Nannup All gotta go somewhere.

Greg If they ever get started.

Manjimup You reckon they not gonna build?

Greg Oh, they'll build something somewhere. Eventually.
I reckon.

Nannup You not too sure.

Greg Well ... they got plans drawn up ... something's got to go somewhere, hasn't it!

Manjimup What gonna be the highest?

Greg Well ... that's the sixty-four dollar question.

Nannup What d'you reckon the answer?

Greg Well ... they're having a meeting right now ...

Manjimup Another one!

Greg There have been a few ...

Nannup Doreen, she oughta know, she reckon they still be talking in twenty years time!

Greg Well ... she might not be wrong!

Manjimup What?

Greg She might be right.

Nannup Twenty years? I won't be round to see it, but I'd like to know ...

Again we hear the sounds of the earth, the coming of darkness in the sky, and the movement of birds going away to nest. Manjimup and Nannup move closer together, while Greg seems more isolated. Then we notice Keith coming home from his meeting.

Doreen How'd it go?

Keith Same as always. (noticing the surveyor) Hey Greg!

Greg Keith. Howareya mate.

Keith Tell me those readings again, willya? What's the highest and lowest points in this joint?

Greg Pretty flat around here. Highest to lowest, you got a three metre gap.

Doreen Not worth arguin' about.

Keith Our preacher man says the highest part of his church has gotta be higher than the water tower, else he's against it.

Greg Well who's making the decisions?

Keith (going inside) Buggered if I know.

Doreen follows her husband inside and Greg, after giving a wave to the two black men, leaves also. Manjimup and Nannup listen to the sounds of night, and look up at the stars.

Nannup They reckon they're improvin' things.

Manjimup (amused) They should start improvin' themselves.

The dark grows deeper.

Nannup Stars ...

Manjimup They not so far away.

The two men drift about, looking at the stars. There is a passage of night music, mysterious at first, then enchantingly close, as if the world above is looking to be united with the earth below. The earth music we heard before comes back, as if the earth is feeling wooed by the night, and likes the idea of union.

Nannup You know the story ...

Manjimup Mmm. Woulda been a night like this, I reckon ...

The sounds of night and the murmurings of the earth come very close to each other, resembling each other as a prior stage to joining, and then we see an agitated man heading for Keith and Doreen's cottage. It's the Reverend Dibble. He doesn't see the black men until they speak.

Nannup Nice night, mister.

Dibble (taken by surprise) Who's that?

Manjimup (as if chiding his friend) Man of god coming for a talk.

Nannup About the tower. Church steeple gotta be higher.

Manjimup Trouble is, all flat around here. Only three metres from the bottom to the top.

Dibble I've raised all the money I can. There's not a dollar left. And I still need more!

Manjimup Whyn't you put your steeple on top of the tower?

Nannup (approving) You solved this man's problem. Water tower's just a big tank. Underneath, you got a space ...

Manjimup ... so put your church in there. Nice and cool.

Dibble Not funny, boys. The house of God has to be a thing unto itself.

Nannup (interested in the word) Unto.

Manjimup Unto ...

Dibble You know what it means?

N & M Yeah, yeah, yeah ...

Nannup Got to keep God happy.

Manjimup He the big boss. More important than anyone 'round here.

Dibble (confused) So they say. So I say! What am I saying?

Doreen appears in the doorway of her cottage.

Doreen Who's that out there? I can hear you talkin'!

Manjimup Preacher man Dibble come to see you ...

Nannup Think he come to talk to Keith ...

Doreen Are you there, reverend? Why doesn't he come in? Keith!

Keith (appearing in the doorway) You there, reverend?

Dibble Yes, I'm here. I got talking to Nannup and Manji.

Keith Those blokes'll talk all night. Try to get a day's work out of them.

Nannup Oh, mister Keith ...

Doreen Come in, reverend, I'll make a cup of tea.

Dibble Good night boys.

Manjimup You lucky man. Cup of tea sounds good.

Nannup Reckon Doreen'd make a good cup of tea.

Dibble All right, all right. OK if I bring the boys?

Keith Leave'em right where they are.

Doreen I'll make'em a cup of tea. They can sit on the verandah.

Manjimup Sounds good to me.

The group moves to Keith & Doreen's cottage.

Keith (wanting the issue settled) If I had a dollar for every meeting I've been to, we could build a tower to the clouds and a steeple twice as high! It's driving me crazy.

Dibble The first thing I want to establish is that I'm not trying to be difficult.

Keith You're just a natural, untutored genius!

Doreen (to Keith) Pour the visitor a cup of tea. Make peace, darling, peace!

Manjimup (outside in the night) Peace, peace.

Nannup There's a star like a thought. Whole sky's like a mind.

Manjimup Wonderful night, isn't it?

Nannup Needs a cup of tea to be complete.

Keith (to Doreen, after pouring) Take'em out to those bloody free-loaders you invited. (She goes to pick up the cups. Keith calls sarcastically) Sugar boys? Drop of milk in your tea?

Nannup Black as the sky, that's the way I have it.

Manjimup Drop of milk for me. It's like making peace ...

Dibble That's why I'm here tonight Keith. It broke my heart when you walked out this evening.

Keith And I'm not going back. I got rain tanks. I don't need town water. Anyone who says they need town water, let'em get tanks like I did. We won't spend any money on town water. You can go around with your begging bowl, and when you've got enough, you can build a bloody spire so sharp it pokes into every cloud that's passing overhead!

Doreen (amused) And the clouds'll wake up after a while, they'll go around us, so we'll have to go somewhere else, and your steeple, Brian, will stand in the middle of nowhere, the highest thing for miles in an ocean of flat!

Dibble Oh you silly people. Just let me cool down before I answer that.

He stands, and paces around with his cup of tea. Eventually, as if he's picked up some of the feeling of the night outside, he sits again.

Manjimup Stopped talkin' in there.

Nannup Listenin' to the night.

Manjimup Stars are talkin' to us now.
 Nannup They wait till the birds go quiet.
 Manjimup (looking up) They moved a bit already.
 Nannup They take it in turn to roll over ...
 Manjimup ... look down a while, see what's goin' on ...
 Nannup ... make sure things are still the same ...

More night music and earth music, two strands circling each other.

Dibble (more or less calm by now) I am not being difficult.
 There are good reasons for the things I say.

Keith (a huge yawn) Oooooohh.

Dibble I am God's representative in these parts. I am not a
 crazy no-sayer, I hold service every day because it's
 God's way of letting man call him down to earth.

Keith (bored) Yeeeahh.

Dibble Every morning, when trucks and tractors are carrying
 out the world's business, God's in our tiny church,
 waiting to be called. And how many are there to call
 him? To listen?

Doreen I'm sorry, reverend, I've got a lot on my plate you
 know.

Keith Don't apologise. He'll settle down eventually.

Dibble You say I should settle down. You mean I should
 agree with you. No!

Manjimup Noisy bugger, isn't he?

Nannup He's goin' nowhere so he makes a noise to convince
 himself he's moving.

Dibble There's only one thing I need, and that's proof that
 God's been in my church.

Keith (exasperated) Put up a sign! God in residence today.
 God-botherers leave him in peace!

Dibble Exactly! You've put your finger on, shall we say, the
 tip of the spire! The eye of the needle! The ...

Keith (confused) What did I say?

Dibble You said I should put up a sign that God was in
 the little wooden house of prayer for which I'm
 responsible. And that's what I want to do! I want
 a sign, a piece of proof, that there's a link between
 heaven and earth. As people go about their daily
 business, they need something that joins this earth to
 heaven above, where Almighty God resides ...

Keith ... when he isn't talking to people in your little
 wooden box!

Dibble (triumphantly) Exactly! What I want's a reminder, a
 gentle hint, that he's still watching over us even when
 his little box is empty. People have only to turn their
 thoughts in God's direction ... (he points to the sky)
 ... to know that they themselves are the link between
 heaven and earth. The spirit makes its way, down
 and up, through them. That's why we need a spire,
 and that's why nothing anywhere near it should be
 taller. I rest my case! It's your turn now!

Keith (weary and angry) You always think in this all or
 nothing way. You drive me crazy.

Doreen (taking over) More tea, reverend?
 Dibble Thank you, Doreen, just a drop.
 Doreen You boys outside, another cup of tea?
 Manjimup Wouldn't have a whiskey would you Doreen?
 Doreen No I wouldn't. As you know very well. You'd start seein' things if I poured a whiskey for you.
 Nannup Preacher man before Mister Dibble used to say, might as well be drunk as the way we are!
 Manjimup Reverend Finney. Thought he'd done enough getting' that little church built.
 Dibble He did well. But it's the moment to take another step.
 Keith You do whatever you want, reverend. I've got a big day tomorrow. I need sleep.

Manjimup and Nannup leave the verandah and sit somewhere under the stars. Dibble goes home grumpily. Lights go out in the home of Doreen and Keith. Night music and earth music start up again, leading to a dark, soaring music which seems to speak of the stars looking at the earth. Then this night music and star music gives way to a heavier, more 'responsible' music suggesting the burdens brought by the arrival of morning. Light fills the eastern sky.

Manjimup It's too big. No-one can't deal with it on their own.
 Nannup We got each other. All the stories divided up between us, so, one person falls, the others hold each other up. We gotta lose people sometimes, but the rest have to keep each other going. Only common sense.

Manjimup It's only common among people who've learned what to do.
 Nannup Reverend Dibble's a fool. He think he can keep god in a box. If I was his god I'd wanta know what the world was doing. I'd wanta buzz around with the bees ...
 Manjimup ... see if the fish are still tasty ...
 Nannup ... listen to the birds, and see who needs a new song ...
 Manjimup ... fly off for a while and see where the rain's fallin' ...
 Nannup ... I'd bury myself in the earth to see if it's healthy ...
 Manjimup ... listen to the thunder, make sure it's got a good hearty crack ...

There is a rumble, far away, and we notice that part of the sky has darkened with cloud.

Nannup Mightn't need that water tower after all.
 Manjimup Whitefellers need it so they can say they're superior to us.
 Nannup That's the one thing where they agree.
 Manjimup Whitefella smarter than the black.

They both laugh, and their humour is underlined by the earth music we heard before. It seems to be pushing the 'responsible' music aside. The two black men lie down near a tree, where they'll be in shade for a few hours. Doreen, we notice, is awake.

Doreen Morning love. Did you sleep well?

Keith I had a dream.

Doreen What was it about?

Keith I had a plan!

Doreen What are you going to do?

Keith I'll show you. Where's them photos Dribble gave us?

Doreen You had'em last.

Keith Unless those bloody blackfellers pinched'em.

Doreen They haven't been inside.

Keith You and your cups of tea. What put that idea in your head?

Doreen According to you, it's good to have an idea in your head!

Keith It is too. Ah! (He's found a piece of paper.) Pencil needs sharpening. (Doreen produces a carving knife.) Jeezus! Don't get too excited. Let me think. How big's his bloody church? (He thinks.) That'd be right. Give or take a couple of feet. Metres. I still haven't converted. (He starts to draw, becoming quite involved.) We'll give him a nice new doorway. Coupla steps, so he can stand there and welcome us. We'll show the bastard a bit of respect. Pity he doesn't deserve it. We'll plant a line of trees here, for shade. And a balcony over the door, to keep out the sun. (feeling good) Yes. Now, where will we put the stairs? Gotta get up to the tank. Inside or out? Oooh,

not sure. Little shed round here for the pump. Out of sight. We'll paint it a nice shade of ... brown. Then, the crowning glory! The triumph of mankind! The tallest thing between Timbuctoo and Sydney! The tower! Sorry, the steeple, the spire!

Manjimup Gettin' excited, that fella.

Nannup (waking) What's going on?

Doreen What are you doing, Keith? Why you singing out like that?

Greg the surveyor enters.

Keith Down the bottom, this can be a community hall. Dribble can hold his services there if he wants to. Bugger him, but we'll let him in. Water's on the next level. Water! Life, we oughta say. Water. We'll pump it out of the earth, we'll save it when it rains. And then ...

Greg What's he on about, Doreen?

Doreen He's stayed home today, drawing. He says he's got a plan.

Greg What's it about, you know?

Doreen I think he's trying to tell us. Or he's telling himself, I don't know ...

Greg Can you follow what he's saying?

Keith ... the top bit's for the loonies. An almighty dunce's cap! If God gives us geniuses, God gives us fools, and this is for the crazy people. They can stand on the ground and look up, or they can climb to the top

and look down! They get a choice. They can have it either way!

Manjimup He kept it bottled up too long. It's all gone fizzy pop pop!

Nannup Here's the preacher man. Heard the shoutin'.

Enter Dibble, whom Keith calls Dribble. Manjimup regards him as an opportunity.

Manjimup If Doreen's making some more tea, tell her not to forget us.

Dibble What's going on, Keith? I can hear you from the other side of town.

Keith You've come at the right time. I've got something to show you. (He emerges with some sheets of paper, and takes them to the screen at the back. His drawings appear on the screen as he mentions them.) Flat country. No distinctions. All equal in each other's sight.

Dibble In God's sight.

Keith Everyone meets in here, everyone owns this place.

Dibble That's the house of God, I take it?

Keith It's the house of everyone. I wouldn't kick god out, if he wanted to come in.

Doreen Keith ... be respectful, darling.

Manjimup (to Nannup) Have a look at this fella's idea. It's what I was saying yesty. I think our people gotta support this.

Nannup Not much there yet.

Keith produces another sheet of paper, and the screen shows a water tank as the second level of the planned building.

Keith The tank. Owned by everyone too. The whole town ... (His voice is almost ecstatic; the earth music is bumping along beneath him vigorously.) And to get to the next level, there's two flights of stairs, one inside and one out. Inside's one's for the believers, and the outside one's for the people of common sense.

Nannup Common sense! I like to hear about that!

Manjimup Won't be many people use that one!

Keith And then the two staircases become one, because there's no room for two, and besides, it doesn't suit. If you want to get to the top, you've got to be inside, and when you get to the top, see these little windows? That's where you look down, if that's how it strikes you, or you can look up. For those who want heaven, reverend, that's where they go, and they look up! Or they can look down, which is what they want to do, most of the time. Look down on those who aren't up where they are. But there's nothing wrong with the ground, and that's where the whole thing rests, on a good block of concrete, a reinforced slab! What do you reckon, Greg? Reverend? What do you reckon? Not a bad sort of plan?

Loud clapping from Manjimup and Nannup.

Greg You got some support, anyhow.

Doreen (wanting to wriggle out of the situation) We'll put your drawings on display, darling. For everyone to comment. I think they'll ... (she doesn't know what to say) ... cause a lot of discussion. Reverend?

Dibble I'm not sure the authorities of my church would support it, but it's certainly ...

Keith Certainly what?

Doreen It's certainly something, isn't it.

Dibble ... it's certainly ...

Keith Yes, certainly what?

Dibble ... it's certainly a compromise (he underlines the word heavily) that's worthy of consideration. (He feels he should go a little further.) And respect. (making a final gesture towards peace-making) Where will you put it on show? You'll have to give people a period for making their comments on your ...

Keith My what?

Dibble That's the question, isn't it? Your ... water tower plan.

Keith My everything in one plan!

Doreen No more, darling, now. I'll get it on display and you can see how people like it.

Greg I reckon you've been up half the night planning this. You need a cup of tea and a good lie down.

Manjimup Talks sense that fella.

Nannup Same sort of tea as you made last night, Doreen. That's what he needs.

Doreen I'll serve you on the verandah boys. Keith doesn't need a lot of conversation. He needs to lie down and rest.

Manjimup I reckon he does. After a good cup of tea.

Nannup Been a big day in the life of our town. I reckon we'll be talkin' 'bout this for years.