

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 ...

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