

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 Mmmmmmmm ...

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.