

# The Outback

by

J.J. Counsilman

Meandarra looked like many of the tiny, desert towns JJ had seen in the American Southwest, with people, buildings and cars that appeared to have aged quickly and then to have hung on for an unnaturally long time: quickly shabby, then preserved. And with unnecessarily broad streets, which might have been a cheap way of appearing more substantial, or a sign of the town's initial hopes for a bright future, or simply ambivalence by the kind of people who would live in those places. More often function ruled, though frequently with a mindless twist, like buildings made doubly nondescript by being painted nearly the same colour as the soil. Or the general store that was so poorly lit that even in the middle of the day it was difficult to see what was on many shelves; a design that reduced the heat without concern for the stray customer who visited before it was cool and dark enough for the locals and lamps to come out. Or the height of utilitarian ugliness, the pub with its "Earlier Urinal" decor of stainless steel and plastic furniture and tiled floor that began from half a metre up the walls and sloped down to drains across the middle of the room. Chucking must have been a featured event in a town with no cinema, poor TV reception and no live or even recorded music in the pub: "Heh, mate, 'member when that Jacky did the technicolor yawn top o' Brisse. What a dag!"

Hell, it was home---for two hundred or so people, at least one of them black. The blackfeller, who was really a dry, dark chocolate colour, approached JJ as he was entering the pub for a break after a lonely week on the Station. He'd been in Queensland over a year and a half and the first Abo he met was a drunk. But then, he chuckled, that was what he intended doing, getting drunk. And he was already stoned from a smoke during the ride over from Boningar Station.

"Mate. C-c-could ya give us a dolla?" And he did, just before the publican came out to tell the black to piss off.

"Ya shouldn't done that, mate. It only encourages the bastad." At least there was no racial slur. Inside the pub JJ ordered a pot and while waiting at the bar one local told him that he got touched because he obviously wasn't from around there; and another rudely commented that "the nigger probably thought he had found his brother." Who's he calling a nigger? Since when were Abos called niggers anyway? If he hadn't been stoned, he probably would have said something about that black being more interesting than white pissants who appeared genuinely proud of being booze artists. Instead, he asked the publican how the black lived.

"Begs; and lives off the land down by Brigalow Creek, I guess. And sometimes he does odd-jobs on a few of the Stations around here. Ya're out at Boningar, ain't ya? Laurie hires him sometimes, but he ain't much good no more. Use to be a shearer, but ya need strong and steady hands for that work, mate. Even for daggin'," and he gave a nasty laugh.

The bloke sitting nearest JJ asked him what a Yank was doing on Boningar. JJ answered that he was working for the uni, and then left the bar for a table so he wouldn't be questioned any further. Jesus, why is bad company better than none? There's that ambivalence again. Great Babbling God, or whatever Hunter Thompson use to say, if only he could only get laided by a beautiful woman, he wouldn't need company. He wouldn't have to visit dustholes like this. Of course he wasn't in as much pain as that black bloke out there buying something with that pitiful dollar. Petrol? He'd heard that some even sniffed that. He had an idea, to hire the Abo to help him. A few bucks, some beer, and perhaps even some dope; he had enough of everything, even food. Show these galahs who the intelligentsia preferred to associated with! But after he left the pub, he couldn't find the Aborigine anywhere.

It was dark when he pulled up to the shearers' quarters. I'm back, he yelled to the geckos as he climbed out of the campervan next to a long stretch of screen that enclosed the verandah. The Station house was several hundred metres away, so there was no danger of disturbing Laurie and his family. The verandah was in front of a row of bedrooms and next to the kitchen and dining room. Everything inside and out was dirty and had probably always been so, now from disuse, but in the past from heavy use and unenthusiastic cleaning. The plates were as clean as rats could lick them, he liked to say. Not that he ever used them. Or the hanging shed, where freshly slaughtered animals were hung to bleed and cure, whatever that meant. One of Laurie's sons told him that geese were hung for three days, but JJ couldn't believe anything would be edible after three days here, except during an exceptionally cold winter.

His fully equipped campervan had a freezer, so no sweat; and beds, though he preferred the verandah, dirt and all. It had the only show in town, on the big, wide, brown screen: gecko meets gecko, gecko falls in love with gecko, gecko marries gecko; gecko goes to war; and gecko meets hard times. Whatever script booze and dope could write. And out past the screen a few metres away was another stage, with his absent colleague's infamous dunny and its penis-hating spiders, and a little farther, in a small pen, the enormous red-brown bull that had been stupid enough to step on his own penis and was now worthless as a stud machine. What was it with all this penis peril? Was it exclusive to outback stations? At least we should be able to discover a moral here: let's see, when you've got a wanger that's long and comes to attention while your sitting down and you suddenly have the urge to stand up---Be Fucking Careful! No, no, that's for the bull only. Forget it. You make up your own.

And then there were the corrals, slammers for cattle and sheep, where barely visible smudges of fence encouraged the imagination to concoct horror stories told by old wethers to lambs about being lucky just to lose their balls. But few seemed to have been even this favoured because the adjacent shearing shed apparently had not been used for years, which suggested that the poor little buggers were hauled away before they were old enough to shave or shag.

Beyond the corrals, fields that were pale yellow in the daylight were now just blotches of light and black darkness, but the thinness of the line between the ground and the sky, only the height of grass stalks for thousands of hectares, suggested enormity. Here, JJ thought, was the real story of Australia for the past two hundred years, not a vastness of size but a vastness of assault on the land, the animals and the native people. I don't want to think about that time; just before, when tribal Aborigines lived free with a working metaphysics that made them tough to anything this brutal land could throw at them while naked of clothes, houses, crops and animals (except the dingo and that only for the past few thousand years), and with the simplest tools of any extant human culture. He wondered if that blackfeller in Meandarra knew much about his original tribe's way of life. Well, he wasn't there, which left JJ to create his own fanciful images of the lives and deaths of a kind of generic, sophisticated bushman. While sitting propped up against an outside bedroom wall, he wrote in his diary.

I am alone but the country is open and familiar. My pace is steady, strong and comfortable from all the miles I've walked before; and these next few will be easy. Except today. I'm tired from a long, fruitless search and an empty belly. Over and over my feet hit the earth with soft crunching and rasping noises that strangely remind me of my daughter's baby sounds. Another sound comes to mind, a whistle given during group hunts, and another that I speak softly over and over as my feet fall over and over. I don't know why---its just a sound to carry me home. Here's another. And another. And another. And here's home.

I dance tonight to make my sight keen, my legs strong and my aim true tomorrow. I dance tonight to learn about my rivals and my loves, to gain my father's approval and my mother's praise, to raise my family's status and my sister's future, to strengthen my friendships and feed my grandmother's conversations. They watch us and over the fire we watch them and each other. I dance tonight for tomorrow, for knowledge, for family and for myself.

My poor husband, you are such a fool believing that power lies only with the strong and skilled in the bush. My mother taught me another way, to use the smooth tongue and the sharp; to use the truth and the lie; to see the facts and create the fiction; to dream and face reality; to sacrifice for the future; and to use deadly violence if I must.

This, my beloved daughter, is all I can give you: a name to make you aware of your loneliness; love to make you brave; praise to make you confident; and teaching to make you adaptive.

Why am I alone, father?

Because you are unique beyond the stars.

How can I survive, father?

Adapt.

But how can I recognise what is adaptive?

I can only tell you what my father taught me: an unfit body, extreme feelings, discursive thought, inaction, goallessness and lovelessness are maladaptive; and a fit body, evenmindedness, mindfulness, action, goals and compassion are adaptive.

When he finished, he turned off the portable gas lamp and laid down on the air mattress. There was a part of the station he had forgotten. Behind the shearers' quarters was the manager's house, a large barn, a small vacant guest house, horse corral, dog sheds, chicken yard and a billabong with a windmill. JJ knew much less of the play going on over there, and tonight at least there seemed little for him to laugh or wonder about. The Station was run by a hardened, bow-legged character who preferred horses to motorbikes, and his stouter but equally tough or tougher wife. They had two teenage boys that helped at home when not driving tractors or harvesters on other properties to make extra money for the whole family's goal of buying its own station. The bull with the mangled dick had been a great setback for them, because he had cost so much and they had had such hopes for starting their own high-quality herd here. Bummer, JJ didn't want to think about that either. Time to sleep. He would ask Laurie about the Aborigine tomorrow evening.

Fortunately for his morning headache, babblers were comparatively lazy. The group he intended following that day, group orange, did not leave their dormitory until about sunrise, well after all the other birds on the Station had begun their day. Members of the group first spent a short time preening themselves and each other (allopreening), and then began searching for food, an activity that consumed about two-thirds of a babbler's day all year round. During most mornings, groups encountered their neighbours and disputed over the boundaries of their territories. During this morning, group orange contested with group blue. As usual all members of both groups joined in the dispute, which lasted about half an hour, a few minutes shorter than average for Boningar. Whether short or long, encounters usually consisted of brief chases, raucous babbling and frequent huddle displays (that probably helped preserve cohesion within the group during this period of stress), with intermittent periods of foraging and even resting, preening and allopreening. Only rarely were there physical combats in which two or more birds flew at each other, grabbed one another and fell to the ground shrieking, pecking and grappling. After its encounter with group blue, group orange flew away from the border, foraged for a few minutes and then gathered in a brigalow for intense preening and allopreening, activities that kept the birds clean but also like huddling probably helped in maintaining the group's bonds. Until retiring to its dormitory shortly before sunset, the group flew from one food patch to another, foraged, avoided noisy miners (a fierce honeyeater) and froze once for twenty-three minutes in response to a noisy miner's aerial predator alarm. It was a fairly typical day. An atypical day would have included a frenzied territorial dispute involving three or four groups, an attack by a predator, a member leaving the group or a non-member joining it---things like that.

JJ walked to the Station house after dinner. It was not a Queensland type raised on stumps, but rather reminded him of his grandmother's home in Fresno, from both its external appearance---old, small, white, square and wooden---and the fiftyish style of furniture and appliances inside. He wondered if the bathroom was like the one in the flat he had rented in Auckland several years ago, with the water tank for the toilet nearly above his head, a hot water heater made of bare steel and cooper, and a tub with toed legs. As every visiting American observed,

British countries were a step back in time for many things and two steps for plumbing---didn't their plumbers know that hot and cold water could be mixed through a single tap? Except for a disused ice-box on the verandah, the furniture wasn't old or shabby, just bulky, squarish or rounded in all the places that signalled old-fashion, like the small fridge with a rounded top, the sharp-angled, pasteboard cabinets, and so on. In the living room there was neither TV nor bookcase. As expected, the radio was a large wooden stand-alone; and he was willing to bet that in the boys' bedroom was a small bakelite model with a distinctive dirt and chemical smell after the tubes got warm. Like his grandmother's house, it was spotless and smelled of cakes, scones or biscuits under flycovers or in the oven, and of fresh washing.

After Laurie's wife gave him tea, JJ told Laurie that he was leaving on Saturday, the next day, or Sunday, and thanked him for permission to stay on the Station. He felt embarrassed asking about the Aborigine, and just mentioned that he had met one for the first time in Meandarra.

“Met Benny Joseph outside the pub, eh?”

When JJ commented that that didn't sound much like an Aborigine name, Laurie replied that Benny was a half-caste, with a white father who had deserted his mother when he was a small boy. It use to happen all the time, he said. JJ had read about tribal Aborigines being exogamous, and how it had apparently predisposed them to forming liaisons, including marriage, with whites after the invasion of Australia. Interracial unions had been and still were common for this ethnic group, and consequently most present day Aborigines, at least in the eastern and southern States, had mixed blood. Although he hadn't seen it written, he got the impression that Aboriginal women in the past had been easy prey for white men using humiliation, food, clothes, booze and force. And they had been easy to abandon. Who were they going to report to? The white police? The white station owner? The white mission boss? The white reserve manager? All of whom were major perpetrators of these and other crimes. Managers were apparently among the worse because they had nearly dictatorial powers over the native residents until as recently as 1967 when Aborigines were finally given citizenship---that is, managers lost their powers then in all States except Queensland, where the “protection laws” were still in effect.

While Laurie talked about Benny and his seasonal work on Boningar before the booze got him, JJ wondered how this family's transparent honesty and decency, like that of thousands of conservative Country Party and Liberal Party families throughout Queensland, failed to translate into political wholesomeness, how they willingly let their personal virtues become distorted by “Bible-bashing bastards” into obscene policies, like Beljke-Petersen's refusal during one election year to permit a team of eye specialists to treat children on reservations because he believed that the doctors would distribute liberal propaganda. He was a megalomaniac, but given the chance by people who weren't, people who individually wouldn't have allowed mortality among infant Aborigines to be among the highest in the world or who on a broader scale would have allowed their native people to be among the poorest and most powerless anywhere. It was difficult to refute the Aborigines' long-held belief that white men were a spiritless people, or refute their right to feel enormously bitter.

What a Nation! If it ever got anywhere in the world, there was no God! [*Capricornia*. Xavier Herbert]