

18. THE PAINTER OF YIRRKALA

The painter sits on the floor, his paints arrayed at his feet, his painting between his knees. The pigments are brilliant – vivid greens, blazing reds and orange, luminous blues and turquoise, stark black, a shining white – all lying at his feet in their uncapped tubes, a spectrum of energy in potential, awaiting translation into a composed work on paper.

Respectfully, I stand a little behind and to the side of the painter, hoping not to let my watching presence disturb his flow. I have seen Aboriginal painters at their work before, at Desert in Alice, and at Warlayirti Arts in Balgo. Like this artist, they work seated on the floor, bent forward over their work, their brushes and paints scattered around their feet. But this painter is different; he and I have a relationship, as patient and doctor.

My patient flew to this hospital a couple of days ago, unable to breathe properly. At present, he is a nine-fingered painter: an electronic probe sits like a thimble over the tip of his left fifth finger, monitoring the oxygen saturation of his blood. He has hypoxia, a condition that creates an anxious feeling and agitation. His breathing is a labour, born of the joint efforts of his heaving diaphragm and the straining muscles in his chest. Even the muscles of his neck have been recruited to the pursuit of breath. The noises of this labour are rhythmic and relentless: a fast gasping as he sucks air

in, a rattling and growling as he squeezes the dead air out. In, out, in, out. I stand, quietly appalled, fighting down my own agitation.

But my patient the painter paints on imperturbably.

The 'canvas' is small, really just a sheet of A4 torn from a book of art paper. A margin of black has been painted onto the paper. I stand and watch as the artist transforms the empty expanse of white into something that lives. Unhurried, unhesitating, unerring, he dips into blobs of pigment expressed from the tubes then transfers the paint, dot by blazing dot, onto the page.

Within moments the page is alive.

I move on, drawn by the more urgent need of even sicker patients, away from this scene of creation and birth.

When I return only twenty minutes later, the painting is complete. From margin to black margin the paper is covered entirely with brilliant dots.

The patient's mother lifts her son and offers the breast. He is three years of age.

19. BIDYADANGA, PETAKH TIKVAH

In 1886, my grandfather was born in Petakh Tikvah, a small settlement across the sand dunes from Jaffa, in Turkish Palestine.

Tel Aviv did not yet exist and the desert had not bloomed. Someone, some dreamy optimist, was inspired to give the wind-blown settlement that name. It means 'Gateway of Hope'.

One hundred and ten years after my grandfather left his birthplace, I find myself in another dry and sandy place on a coast, another gateway of hope. It is in the Kimberley, in the north-western corner of Australia, a couple of hundred kilometres south of Broome. Its name is Bidyadanga. It is the largest Aboriginal community in Western Australia.

They say the population of Bidyadanga is nine hundred souls. A problematic statistic: how do the census takers count souls? I accept that there are nine hundred people alive and walking around. Many, many more lie in small anonymous graves. Each grave is marked by a small wooden cross, placed there by the mission when a young child in their care passed away. There are no names. These children were stolen. (Not the fault of the mission, as far as I can see. They received and cared for the children; they never stole them.)

Where are the souls of the stolen children, I wonder. For indigenous people, such questions are emphatically not idle. Recently

some (not all) European museums returned to Aboriginal hands human 'specimens' that were taken from their country a century or more ago. A museum is an institution with pretensions to scientific purpose and records. Thus it was possible to return many of the remains precisely to their places of origin. The return to the custodians of country was marked by the most passionate oratory I have ever heard for persons long nameless, long dead.

Serious ceremony followed as tribal remains were accorded their fitting rites. All this to allow the spirit to find rest. With return comes recovery of the indefeasible unity between Aboriginal body and ancestral land. That unity recognises no distinction between fauna and flora and land and Law.

The small nameless graves of Bidyadanga lie surrounded by long grass. The traveller has no intuition of a burial ground and skirts these long grasses unaware. The trade winds sigh, the grasses wave, the souls of these lost children continue the endless wait for their own country ...



My wife and I drive the 200 kilometres from Broome to Bidjby with the regular doctor, Dr Larni, a young woman who gives us cheerless and cheerful news: 'The town is supposed to be dry. There's a community statute that prohibits the sale and importation of alcohol here. But people fill up their car boot elsewhere and bring the grog into town ...' We discover it is pretty much soaked with grog; it is possibly Australia's foremost diabetes training ground (fifty per cent incidence), and it has an astonishing rate of kidney disease requiring dialysis. And few of the people have real work.

Yet for all its sorrowful past and its patchy present, Bidyadanga of today is a place of hope.

Dr Larni continues: 'About half the people drink and about half go to church. There are two churches here and they're both going strong. One's been here forever – that's the Catholic Church, and

the other is newer – they're the Assemblies of God. The Catholics have a crackerjack young minister from the Philippines.'

Would I normally be encouraged by a fifty-fifty ratio between drinkers and non-drinkers? Probably not. Perhaps I have just been infected with the doctor's enthusiasm. This young lady is probably half my age. She is completing her Fellowships in General Practice and in Rural and Remote Medicine; she has already done a Diploma in Child Health, and is about to enrol in the Master of Public Health program.

Larni comes from down south. She's been here for a year-and-a-half and has no plans to move on. Her time in Bidgy has coincided with a great increase in funding and resources for the clinic; they're recruiting and retaining lots of Aboriginal health workers, and the local health workforce is skilful and motivated. And stable.

Unspoken but encouraging to me is the fact of Larni's continuity. People are getting to know and trust her. Larni is typical of her generation of remote doctors. Patients who bewail the passing of the multi-skilled, dedicated country doctor should look at the outback. Happily, it is indigenous people who are the beneficiaries of these gifts.

We drive into town. The Olympic-size swimming pool gleams, brilliant in the afternoon sun. More good news: when a town has a swimming pool, ear infections are halved. Apparently it's all a matter of snot management. Fewer ear infections, better hearing, better learning – that's the pattern. But the best news about the Bidgy pool is the local rule: schoolchildren may only swim if they have been to school that day.

Next morning I miss the bus. Who would guess there'd be a bus in a town of this size? It is the school bus. This, I learn, is a walking bus. The Principal and all the teachers meet early in the morning at the school, then walk together and pick up all the children from their homes. They walk from house to house, waiting for the kids to come out. Would-be truants cannot resist the fun or the peer

pressure or the personal pull of the teachers. They all come out and they all *walk* to school.

The school itself has a stable and able staff, young and enthusiastic. School attendance is high. At work I meet Possum Stephens, a national treasure. His tremendous prestige and influence are not confined to this community. And Possum is not alone; there appears to be a culturally intact generation of elders here. That endows a community with structure, with a known history, with people who carry and teach Law. The young prosper; pride grows.



My wife and I are looking for the new Arts Centre, perhaps to buy something. We have heard the remarkable story of the very recent birth of an entire new school of painting, principally among the old people here. But we are disappointed; with the astonishing success of the painters, all sales take place in the Short Street Gallery in Broome.

The new art movement was largely brought into being under the stimulus of a local teenager who encouraged the old people to make a return to the desert country of their childhood, after initially forcible and now unnecessarily prolonged separation. The old people did return and, culturally refreshed and inspired, began painting. Their young 'leader', now nineteen, is a finalist in 2008's Telstra Indigenous Art Awards. What will this mean for Bidyadanga's future? Past experience shows that leading artists neither bring communal betterment, nor enjoy better personal health. But the art movement in Bidyadanga is unusual. It emerges from an alliance between elders and the young. Perhaps Bidgy can break the mould.

My boss in the Kimberley is a veteran. She tells me that Bidyadanga genuinely appears to have a negligible incidence of child sexual abuse. 'It was difficult for me to believe what I heard. But I heard it from all quarters, from doctors, from nurses, health

workers, social workers, sexual health workers. I heard it and I keep hearing it. Now I believe it. And we have the facts and figures that show our little children are healthier today than a few years ago.'



Reviewing all these hopeful portents, some six months after that short visit to Bidyadanga, my high hopes read like diagnostic features in a personality profile. They might tell a reader more about the frame of mind of this optimist than about the world he sees.

However, the good news trickles in. It comes from all points. The flow carries with it an endless load of odd facts and figures. I begin to gather and retain statistics of good news like the terminal moraine of a glacier.

In Halls Creek, students now receive a nutritious breakfast and lunch every day. School attendance has doubled as a result. Critics argue that this practice disempowers parents. Meanwhile, the kids learn better with a full tummy and their nutrition can only improve.

A pilot research study has been carried out in a remote school. In this experiment, every child was given two pieces of fruit a day. After only six months, antibiotic prescriptions and absenteeism were halved, hearing testing results were better, all markers of health showed improvement. Daily cost per student of this breakthrough intervention is less than a dollar.

Fitzroy Crossing has an Aboriginal-owned pub, long famous for its colossal per capita sales. This pub killed more Aboriginal people than any other. Belatedly, the community clipped the pub's wings: the sale of full-strength beer was restricted and immediately the rate of arrest and injury from violence plummeted.

The hospital's casualty department is quiet at night. With the slowing inflow of grog in the Territory, alcohol-related hospital attendance has fallen by fifty per cent in some places, eighty per cent in others.

Since the Federal Government's Intervention, the community of my Garma dancers has received twenty-six new houses. More are being built.

Thursday Island has a population of only 3700 people, served by five alcohol outlets. The list of houses of worship on the island is much longer. It includes the Quetta Anglican Memorial Church, the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, the Uniting Church, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Assembly of God, the Full Gospel Church, the Church of Torres Strait, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Independent Church of Torres Strait and Kaiwalagal. In addition there is an impressive Baha'i establishment fronting the main street.

I meet a keen church musician and chorister seconded to Ngurupai; he reckons this list is incomplete. He assures me he knows of numerous additional congregations on Thursday Island.

What, if anything, does all this signify?

During a visit of seventeen days and nights to Ngurupai, the second most populous island in the Torres Strait, I do not encounter a single drunk person. I walk the unlit streets at night and I hear no cries, no crazed shrieks of laughter, none of the sounds of the hooning youth that pollute the nights elsewhere.

Each morning I run the roads and tracks of the island and count abandoned wrecked vehicles. In the course of my long runs I find only seven wrecks on an island of 654 persons.

Seven car hulks, zero drunks, in seventeen days in an Aussie country village. It's un-Australian.



More ambiguous, because untested, are the radical plans of the indigenous leadership in Cape York country. These ambitious plans are underwritten by very serious whitefella philanthropy. They include overturning welfare; *removal* – by consent – of children for serious schooling, away from abuse in their troubled communities;

real job training with guaranteed real employment to follow – these are initiatives of breathtaking audacity.

Most radically, the Cape York leaders argue explicitly for individual bank savings, personal bank loans and mortgages, and private home ownership. A generation of Aboriginal capitalists will arise.

To an outsider these policies seem to confront and affront ancient cultural norms. In particular, they threaten violence to traditions of collective action and communal ownership. Only an indigenous leader could propose them. Will they speed an end to grog welfare or an end to culture?

Or both?

In all the confusion and contradiction of signs, in all the pain and squalor, when light separates itself from heat and sparks are seen from so many quarters, why should one not hope?

20. POSSUM STEPHENS

Bidyadanga sits on an endless beach with its back to the desert. Its peoples are various; four separate tribes came in from a nomadic life in the desert in a modern exodus that is one of the great untold sagas of this continent. But the fifth tribe of Bidyadanga was always coastal. These saltwater people have been here forever.

Bidyadanga's desert peoples arrived here in a series of immigrations in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Until the fifties and sixties these were desert nomads; some had never seen white men, others had seen them at a distance and kept them there. But family by family, clan by clan, straggling from their places of dune and singing winds they yielded to drought and famine or to the government people who rounded them up and 'brought them in'.

From a place where time was measured by sun, by phases of the moon and by the seasonal migrations of game, they entered a place of clocks, and schools, and churches and doctors.

There are people still alive in Bidyadanga who were born in the desert and who carry memory and story of that life of austere riches.

Led by their teenage grandson, a cluster of the very oldest of these desert people of Bidyadanga returned recently to their country. Their joy on finding intact, buried under sands and time, a remembered desert spring, a *jila*, was recorded on videotape. The footage captures the intensity of this reunion with that site

of immense spiritual meaning. These ancients were once again whole. The *jila*, a secret place of permanent water in the desert, has sustained and defined the people, always, beyond all memory, beyond memories of memory, ever beyond time, to the Dreaming that never ends.



Possum Stephens is a vivacious man. When I meet him in Bidyadanga, his bony face lights up the room. He is, he informs me, ‘the heldest in the Law in this country’. Tall and lean, with an ancient hearing aid in one ear, hard of seeing as well, he speaks slowly, in near-circular sentences that make their way slowly across the rough terrain of English.

He is clearly an old man. Officially, his year of birth is 1934. That was the recording official’s best guess. Possum says he is ‘seventy-four, might be eighty-four, could be ninety-four.’ The middle estimate seems about right to me – for what it’s worth.

And in Possum’s scale of chronology a decade is not worth much, a breath in the winds of timeless time.

I wonder whether Possum is a member of one of the four clans that came in from the desert and settled in this coastal settlement last century. They came, these reclusive nomads, drawn slowly by long drought to the government ration station. Others ‘came in’ to work on the large cattle station here, yet others were stolen and ended up here in the care of the church.

I ask Stephens, ‘Are you a desert man?’

Possum bends and turns his aided ear towards me. It is a movement not of age or of decrepitude but of physical grace. There’s that smile again, bathing me. Shining he says, ‘No, I’m saltwater man, freshwater man. This my country, this one here. This my place, all this, this Frazier Downs country, used to be ration station ... all my country.’

Possum tells me about his people’s successful claim for these

ancestral lands: 'Big lawyers, three lawyers, from Melbourne, from Sydney, I take them everywhere, I show them my country ...' Possum led the three through his country, from its northern extreme to its southernmost edge, and westward to its inland margin. His narrative makes clear that as the senior traditional owner, he, Possum, was the defining witness to his people's claim. He convinced the court, carried the day for his people, and he is proud of that.

He has a whitefella book that records the facts: 'It's all in the book, that book at my place, all this country, all Law. You can come and look at that book, Doctor.'

Possum tells me he does not read or write. He can sign his name, and he demonstrates that skill, forming letters that are large, round and spiky, ciphers in an uncracked code. Possum never went to school. He was given the Law by his father and his father's father, by uncles, by older brothers-in-law, as they walked and criss-crossed their lands; that was his schooling. That he cannot read the writing in his own book, the lawyers' book of his own country, weighs upon Possum not at all. He knows the Law, he holds the Law. That is everything. The book attests to the truth, but the book is a mere artefact of that truth, good for people who read, good for people who do not hold the Law.

As I sit and listen to this slow-speaking old man, this elder, this man at once gaunt and radiant, time begins to fall away. Possum tells me how he passes on the Law – 'my big Law, ceremony Law' – to his following generations. 'I take 'em, I show 'em: "Don't go there – that secret ground; go there. This one here, this meeting ground ..."'

Time is the medium of all my living reality. But as Possum's account of himself and his land and his Law spirals and tumbles unevenly from him, I begin to shed this chrysalis of my own time and to enter into Possum's world.

In white man time, the government men came and fed the

blacks at the ration station; then the Church came, built the mission and took over from the government; then the mission went away and the government came again.

In Possum's abiding reality, governments come and will also pass. *The lone and level sands stretch far away ...* Clearly I am in thrall of my guest who is, in deeper truth, my host.

Afterwards I scrutinise my reactions: have I romantically imagined or wishfully thought a man after my own dreaming? How much is real? Irreducibly real is a man of great charm and winning gesture, a courtly man of rare self-possession. Possum knows who he is, what he is, what is his, where he belongs.

Had I instead met an hereditary aristocrat on his estates in Europe, would I feel this deep impression, I wonder? Those estates would be smaller, that lineage shallower, the European culture an infant in comparison. This is Possum Stephens, no less; this man is the eldest in the Law in his country.

Beyond the personage, I enquire about the person who is Possum: 'Do you have children?'

He ponders, looking at me as if it is a trick question. He looks away. At length he says, 'I had seven ... I've got four girls.'

I am not heartless enough to address the deficit. I ask about the girls. They are dispersed around the state: one in Perth, two others are in the Kimberley, one of them here in Bidyadanga.

A pause. 'Did you ever work with cattle?' This lights him up and sets him going. I hear him enumerate the stations where he worked; I hear of his working life in the saddle, and he refers without rancour to the wages: 'They pay me flour and tea, you know, flour, sugar, tobacco. I like that work, horses, cattle. The stations, all stations, they want me to work for them.'

Then Possum reverts to his children. 'My boy, he worked cattle too ... with me ... He died, his horse crashed.' Possum relates the story of the horrific two-horse collision that took his boy; how he, Possum, watched his son, riding at the gallop, taken out by another

horseman who, unsighted, galloped into his path from an angle. The horsemen were thrown. One horse landed on Possum's son and broke his neck.

Outside the window little kids are riding their tiny bikes. They ride with all the flair and abandon of cattlemen at a rodeo, but these kids ride on footpaths and wear helmets.



Mollie is another old person, like Possum, blind and frail. She has come today to have her prescriptions renewed.

Mollie comes from desert country. She has lived here in Bidiyadanga now for sixty years, since her early teens. While the nurses restock her dosette box, she tells me about her life here. She too had many children: 'I've got daughters, five, four now ... I had three boys. They're not here now. One in Kununurra, one in Halls Creek.'

I am curious about the ones not accounted for but I cannot bring myself to push Mollie where tired memory holds ancient pain at a distance.

'Do you have anyone at home to help you, Mollie?'

'I don't need much help ... one daughter with me. Two more not far. Some of them died. Two boys left, one at Argyle mine.'

'My husband not alive now. Long time now. In the night I wake up, every night I look for my husband. I don't find him. Then I cry.'