

Matt McConachie: This is Your Life!

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High above, a dark shape hovered.

Trembled by unseen currents, it dipped... rose again... a little closer... but no clearer. A question, demanding clearance?

Or the Kadaitcha Man, come to claim his soul?

No matter now. His body and soul have already parted company.

"Can't do it, mate." A finger raised: "Wind 'em up!"

B-dubs grumble: *You oughta known they won't travel.*

Airbrakes hiss: *You oughta known they won't travel.*

Gears grind; wheels crunch the rhythm: *You oughta known they won't travel.*

Headlights sweep the stockyards...

A constellation of clearance lights, the trucks are gone - leaving him to the dissipating smell of diesel and four hundred crow-poor breeders.

Matt McConachie, a man stumbled into someone else's waking dream, hears the throaty rumble become a smudge; the eyes in his head see the morning song of magpies reclaim the stillness. The ghost-like quality of his own presence, looking down on absence, hears his father hawk and spit: *Time you was gettin' on with it!*

Head bowed, he sits on a rusted forty-four, rifle across his knees.

His spirit, placid observer, is neither angry nor sad.

A piccaninny dawn holds the world in subtle shades of ash; but all too soon light will fragment, fracture and illuminate: at unique moments, sun-struck mauves and purples will transform to substantive reds and browns, and light will lend green tone and texture to the sibilant whisperings overhead.

Time enough then, to be *gettin' on with it.*

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Above the branding furnace the remembered smell of smoke still lingers, but time has leached the colour from his memories; they come to him in black and white: he feels the black flap and jostle of wings in the branches above, and sees a younger 'self' looking up into the white boughs of a younger gum. Up there is another world: lost world of whispered secrets, tribal wars... and Billy Widgell.

Up there weaving soft-tongued magic, Billy's face splits into a gash of teeth: *Hey, Whitey! You comin' up, or what?* Behind a mask of emu feathers, the sparkle in Billy's black eyes beckons. Up there, heads bowed, shoulders touching, his white hands and Billy's black are gummy with Spinifex resin pasting hair to an old piece of 'roo bone. Eyes locked in wicked complicity, they admire their *Kundela*: tangible expression of the vagaries of life and death; key to the capricious nature of evil spells and spirits.

The boys leap down with their killing bone and... are gone.

Feet slippered in cockatoo feathers, they leave no prints, but Matt McConachie tracks the echoes of their laughter... until it too is vanished.

His fingers end-for-end a bullet: full metal jacket, soft point tip.

His spirit, errant child, has buggered off - gone walkabout in a time when dawn came with the promise of so much more to come; a time when the footnote at the bottom of each day declared: *to be continued...*

Behind young Mattie, the shearing shed is cavernously dark. Outside, out there in the twilit world of Men, dark shapes and moving shadows are busy *gettin' on with it*: heavy saddles are being hoisted onto stockyard rails; the bit of bridles, jingled. Down on the river flats, made eerie by the glow of rekindled night fires, the station gins, come from tin shacks or crawled from bark humpies, are busy *gettin' on with it*. And yonder, beneath a frosty sky still littered with stars, the *tinker, tinker, tink*,

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of the night-horse bell heralds a thundering of hooves: horses, fleet-foot shapes and snorting shadows, come cantering from scrub.

Above it all, young Mattie - prince among men - sits on the step between two gods: his father, rubbing tobacco between dry palms, and the *chink, chink, chink*, of big-brother spurs, come to squat beside them. *Now, Luke*, his father will say, his tongue moistening a paper, *I want you to take some boys over to Wylong... and then... and when...*

Young Mattie chews his nails in silence. On one hand, he's brimful of the self-importance of a boy wearing big-brother hand-me-downs; on the other, there's the unsettled question of Billy bloody Widgell. Since *forever* Billy's slept at the big house with them and Queenie. Billy's *always* slept at the big house. Last night, Billy had taken himself down to the Abo camp again – without inviting Mattie. From the step between his boots, Billy's looking up at him. Billy's opening and shutting one eye at a time, and the game of making Mattie jump from side to side is making Billy laugh.

"An' you young fellas," his father finally says, strapping a swag behind his saddle. "I want you boys to clean these troughs today - all of 'em, mind! - before yous bugger off." Swinging onto the back of a half-ugly, raw-boned colt, he adds, "An' Matt, you keep an eye on Granddad. Queenie can't be tailin' 'im all day."

Snorting, Billy canters behind the horses, his tongue making hoof beats.

Mattie loves Billy pretending he's a horse. Mattie just loves Billy bloody Widgell! Billy with his shirt tails flappin' and trousers at half mast; Billy, who don't wear no boots 'cause Billy *ain't got no need o' boots!*

Mattie, in big-brother clod-hoppers, will never catch him...

From a time when all tenses were future, some external force had taken over. A force whose dark imagination has led him... steered him... to this point and place

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in time: the ghost of his father leaned against the branding furnace, glaring at the world with hard-jawed resentment: *You oughta known they won't travel*, four hundred head of crow-poor breeders, *Time you was gettin' on with it!* a box load of bullets between his boots.

He takes Granddad's watch from a leather pouch; strikes a match: 5:05.

Granddad, rising from the dust, glares at him with one fierce eye; the other eye is patched - speared by the horn of a clean-skin scrubber. At seventy years of age, still throwing bulls and branding clean-skin scrubbers, the old man had met the union case for equal wages for blacks with the same one-eyed ferocity: *Goan! Git yer black arses off me place! Goan git! The whole bleedin' lot of yers can git!* Loaded 303 and white man's law: *But not you, Queenie!* Billy, inane grin on his face, hops from foot to foot. On one foot there's his mum, Big Queenie - come to the McConachie's a *wee slip of a mission girl* some thirty years ago; on the other foot, there's a truck load of *walkabout black bastards!* gonna be dumped on the outskirts of town where: *We don't want 'em!* "You gotta understand, Billy, my Granddad, he owns all this. All this belongs to us..." Billy, nostrils flared and sucking air, shrugs him off. And then Billy's laughing! And then Billy's head-butting Queenie like a calf that wants to suck, but you can still hear him choking on his laughter. *Don't cry, Mattie,* Miss Millicent explains: *Laughter comes more natural to the black fella. He'll laugh when he's nervous, laugh when he's feeling shy; sometimes, he just laughs for the sake of laughing.*

She hadn't stayed long, Miss Millicent. Women never did.

His own mother, in bringing Mattie into the world, had chosen to escape it...

His fingers end-for-end a bullet: full metal jacket, soft-point tip.

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His other hand rests on the 303 Granddad got from war surplus WWII, somewhere down near Lithgow in New South Wales. Beautiful piece; stock made from Queensland maple. With the scope, you can drop a beast at half a mile...

An' Matt, you keep an eye on Granddad. It's easy to forget about Granddad with only one good eye and half his marbles. *Jessie!* you'll hear rackety Granddad calling: *Jessie! Where are ya, girl!* When Granddad isn't calling for a kelpie that's been dead for twenty years, you'll hear Granddad at the woodheap *toc! toc! toc!* splitting gidgee, and arguing with the past: *They was happy 'ere, those boys! All the tucker they could eat. Give 'em five pound at Christmas! An' five for the race meet! Ain't no use to nobody, bein' paid 'sit down' money in towns that don't want 'em.*

Toc! Toc! Toc!

Some days, Granddad throws the axe aside and claps a hand on Mattie's shoulder: *Hey, Jock!* he says, patting at his pockets for the roll-your-owns he liked to smoke, *How 'bout you an' me go on up to the top bar, wet the whistle?*

When Granddad conjures Great-Granddad Jock, imperfect past becomes past perfect: Granddad welcomes weekend guests: young men and women - mostly dead now - heads swathed in scarves against the dusty road, come to play tennis, swoon in the heat, take lemonade from black hands - that make the women just a little queasy; and, come evening, when Jock McConachie cracks a bottle *of the good stuff!* laughter ripples along lamp-lit tables laden with home-slaughtered lamb and beef; gramophone records play, and the women all dance with shy little Granddad because the men have withdrawn to the verandah to watch the sky and prophesy – and rue the day the chalk mark had been taken off the dance floor so the silver tails didn't have to rub shoulders with the working class.

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Some days, coughing phlegm, Granddad wanders off. *Granddad! Where are ya, Granddad?* Three days of him and Billy tramping paddocks, squinting at air ablaze with heat: *Granddad! Where are ya, Granddad!* They found him in a welter of black wings. Wild pigs had come and gone, but the birds were still feasting. Billy, eyes bolting fright, had bolted. Even with the spectre of Granddad-with-no-eyes hot on his heels, Mattie couldn't catch Billy-bloody-Widgell...

Nor, it seems, did he ever catch up with that older 'self' he'd been chasing all his life: the Man, he'd wanted to become: never did fill Luke's big-brother boots; never did measure up to those sun-bronzed gods of legend who'd cleared mountains with their hands.

Jock McConachie's tombstone looks down on a dry river bed. The lead letter moldings – admired at the time – have not weathered well.

From the stone, young Matt surveys his kingdom: land of jagged peaks and flood plains, softened by blue haze. In this high and sacred place, in his heartbeat and in the susurrations of his blood, he can feel another presence: a daring young man, come from a soft green land of islands, lakes and rivers to stamp his name on vast tracks of wilderness in a foreign continent; a man of vision who - so the story goes - could smell the eucalypts long before land was visible on the horizon, and had christened his vision *Ghost Gums* before he'd even seen it; an old man of ninety-three who'd gone to his grave secure in the knowledge and inner contentment of continuity: his blood, sweat and toil passed down to his son, and to his son's children.

How do you atone, 'say sorry', for another man's living dream?

And even if you could, should you?

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They've shifted the Abos from the outskirts of town. From riverbed gunyas and bark humpies under bridges, they've moved them into Government fibro and clapboard. Tourists in air-conditioned buses take photos of roadside channels filled with beer cans; and the town itself, grown tired of looking at a main street of front yards littered with dead cars, half-dead dogs and rats, has given itself over to the slow process of decay.

Young Matt glances down at Billy. In Billy's black eyes, centuries wax and wane. Strip him naked, Billy could almost be his own ancestor standing on a shelf of ancient rock staring into *Dreaming*: black-fella place where time and space converge. But sometimes, just sometimes, that brown skin - a chance expression - makes Matt wonder if the blood they share might not be more than just the cutting of thumbs and the oath of loyalty they'd sworn as children.

Great-Uncle William Widgell?

Laughing, Matt jumps down, takes his horse's reins and vows with youthful conviction: "We'll never leave here, Billy! They'll have to take you an' me outta here in a box!"

Billy's trance-black eyes look right through him.

"Hey, Billy!" he calls. "You! Black-fella-murray! Where you gone walkabout?"

Billy looks at him askance: "Luke's comin' 'ome."

"His tour doesn't finish till Christmas..."

Dark syllables of black-fella magic: "Luke's comin' 'ome."

Yer brother's dead. His father folds and refolds a piece of paper.

Newspaper headline: *Local Boy Killed in Vietnam* - and a box of ashes.

His father won't come up; some part of him has died: *Yer brother's dead.*

Billy won't come up; Billy never set foot on Jock's Lookout again.

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Heaving sobs of grief and loss, he'd scattered Luke's ashes on Jock McConachie's tombstone; but, from a nether place - a place too deep to plumb - a little boy in hand-me-down boots had whispered in his ear: *All this belongs to me!*

In grieving for his brother, he'd discovered the dual and ugly nature of 'self'.

From the branding furnace, a disgruntled crow flutters down and lights between his boots. He's read somewhere that crows have facial recognition; this bird eyes him with smug familiarity: *Time you was gettin' on with it!*

They're smart, crows; they've learned that Man - this man in particular - plus rifle equals carcass. Matt McConachie's not alone: all across north-western Queensland graziers are shooting cattle - a swagger of crows impartial observers of their fate: *Drought assistance that responds to whinging and carrying on by a few adversely affected ones makes life more challenging for the good farmers to buy out these poor performers...*

With a strange sense of detachment, Matt McConachie examines the hands of a '*poor performer*'; strong hands knit with calloused knuckles become his white hands and Billy's black, scooping big horny-backed toads from fouled troughs... *I want you boys to clean these troughs today - all of 'em, mind! - before yous bugger off.* Hunkered beneath the flap of black wings come down from above, the boys watch the greedy crows strut and squabble. They're smart those birds: they've learned to flip the toads and stab the throat where the skin is thinnest. Caught up in the cleverness of crows flipping toads, watching their long beaks tear out the non-toxic innards, he'd forgotten all about Granddad...

Somewhere too deep for thought is knowledge: some things were out of your control, but the image of Granddad-with-no-eyes still haunts him. A brain too long in turmoil, waking in fever-twisted sheets to the lonely sound of Granddad, *toc... toc...*

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tocking; falling back to deep exhaustion and the sense of things not done: ABC Exposes Shocking Cases of Cruelty and Abuse at Indonesian Abattoirs.... live export suspended in the middle of the muster season... trying to keep core breeders alive... while overstocked with steers destined for export... expenses doubled; income halved.... hay sheds empty; bank balance red...

Politicians spruiking perpetual growth in a finite world: growth over the next 30 years will be driven by the massive income growth in China, India, Indonesia... will trigger huge demands for premium beef, which the Queensland beef industry is uniquely positioned to supply - provided significant commercial and public investments in expansion can be made.

The legend of the sun-bronzed Aussie horse and cattleman consigned to myth: the house that Jock built - living heart of an empire - now beats precariously on the boarder of corporate interests. Across the river, quad bikes roar; up there in the sky, a hawk becomes a helicopter: a new Species of Man, governed by the clock and not the sun, come to muster Wylong - big chunk of Jock McConachie's dream sold for a song to foreign investors in the drought of '69. Men who know nothing of that intimate connection between Man, the land, and his stock...

Time and chance and circumstance, chip, chip, chipping away at his childhood: his father *Campdraft Legend Killed at Local Event* still glaring at the land with hard-jawed resentment when the land came up to smash his face and break his neck - leaving Matt alone to watch the sky and prophesy with ghosts: *What more do you want of me?* they answer him with silence. *What more can you ask?* the land, too, is deaf, closing heat-scorched eyes on another lonely day: 7 Mar 2014: *It is official - this drought is Queensland's most widespread on record, with almost 80 per cent of the state now drought-declared.*

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His wife of twenty years has left him - arms around two girls, she's crying, talking, explaining, gesturing; his son, sixteen year old Luke, glaring at him with adolescent anger, swiping at involuntary tears, *There's no future in it, Dad!*

Matt McConachie has no tears; the drought has sucked him dry; a ten year drought has turned his blood to rust and sucked the marrow from his bones...

Overhead a dark shape hovers.

A question demanding clearance: *How long does it take?*

Or the Kadaitcha Man, come to claim his soul?

Light is lending form and meaning to the world, but there's one more place he's got to visit: *Yous boys!* a place of lead-light cupboards and scrubbed-wood benches where only boys *with clean hands!* get big ceramic bowls and wooden spoons to lick. Beautiful Queenie, *black as the Ace of Spades*, come to the McConachie's a *wee slip of a mission girl*; gentle Queenie, wet nurse and only mother he's ever known.

He remembers driving back from town, heart breaking with news of Billy. *How do you tell a mother that her son is dead?* In the event, he didn't have to tell her. He'd found her down at the old black-fella camp. In some atavistic need for ceremony, Queenie's crooning, her hands scraping dirt and pouring it over her head. Defeated, she asks him to help her back to the house, help her to her bed; asks him to close the curtains 'cause *Kadaitcha Man comin'*; tells him *white-fella medicine got no power over black-fella bone-pointing magic...*

On the wall is a faded newspaper clipping framed in glass. Billy in satin shorts, boxing gloves cocked at the camera. Caption: *The next Lionel Rose?* In Billy's eyes, a touch of scorn but no malice. Billy, an outcast longing to be readmitted

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into the company of men - the privilege of belonging, however briefly, to one side of the other - had come back to town.

Looking for Billy, he'd driven streets of broken fibro shacks and front yards littered with dead cars, half-dead dogs and rats. On the street corner, a black woman sags against a fence. From inside the house comes a lazy male slur: *Get fucked*. She dares a step inside the yard and shrieks: *No, you get fucked!* and waits for her cue: *Get fucked. No, you get fucked!* On the opposite corner a gang of brindle kids are teasing a little fella - black as the Ace of Spades and not knee-high to a grasshopper. Raggedy pants at half mast, he tears off his shirt. Fists up, dancing like a boxer, black face a mask of fury, he yells: *Yous want fight? I'll give yers fuckin' fight!* From inside the house, a lazy male slur: *Get fucked. No, you get fucked!*

Great-Uncle William Widgell - blemish in his heart that time has not erased.

Billy, whose smile was all friendliness; Billy, who'd laughed for the sake of laughing, hadn't wanted to be found. Billy bloodied Widgell - drunk, asleep on the road and run over by the publican; Matt remembers too how the publican had had to leave town under police escort...

As to that boy who'd stood looking up at Billy in wonder, he feels both tenderness and contempt: how many crossroads, weathered signposts pointing out alternative routes and different fates - which in the end were all the same: small print page six: *Man Shoots Herd and Self*, every twist and turn decided in advance.

This last page - mourning the old man Billy never became; the old man Matt McConachie will never be - belongs to him alone. *How long will it take?* the abstract has become active: *to shoot four hundred head?*

Sinews without substance, Matt McConachie fixes a clip to the rifle.

Tomorrow, they'll take him out of here in a box.

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Bidders for foreign investors, phones to their ears, will strut and squabble.

Tourists taking photos from the windows of air-conditioned buses will be disappointed: that shearing shed - gaunt skeleton of some forgotten creature - captures none of the romance they've seen in glossy magazines and hardcover books on coffee tables; in sweltering heat, they'll wander through stockyards where sunlight paints black shadows more substantial than the lancewood rails and gidgee posts that cast them; paused at a fence held up by twists and turns of wisteria, they'll read the plaque: *Ghost Gums: this is the site of one of the first homesteads in the district* - and maybe even take a moment to listen for the ghosts who lived and loved and died here.

But, with no one to keep them alive, the old ghosts have all departed.

Only Billy, the earliest and most vulnerable Billy, had never left *The Gums*.

Up there in the high country - beyond the forgotten shock of rifle shot and the scrimmage of crows - up there in the high country where fine droplets of volatile oil dispersed by eucalypts perfumes the air and scatters blue light to dazzling effect: *Hey, Whitey! You comin' up, or what?* the sparkle in Billy's black eyes beckons.

Feet slippered in cockatoo feathers, they leave no prints; only, up there in the high country you might glimpse echoes of their laughter pursuing some imaginary game to where the footnote at the bottom of each day declares: *to be continued...*