

Preserved

From above, from a distance, the shack was russet brown like the earth. 500 kilometres away, on the coast, green leached from copper roofs that had seen relentless downpours, perhaps reflecting the verdancy of the floodplains that its towns were born on. Here, things became a sterile brown after the hundred-year assault from wind, moisture and sun. Sheds and homesteads were dotted about like vagrants on the unwelcoming land. The town of Bunjarra – 500 residents and 10,000 sheep – had only a dusty main street, devoid of more luxurious estates such as a hospital or shopping strip. They were immune to words like ‘food court’ or ‘aquatic centre’, relying on bore water to service lawns and gardens and mouths. Never wash the Ute with a hose. Groceries delivered fortnightly. Families were big, schools were small. A day ended with long shadows and a weary stride. It was their ageless rhythm.

The shack faced boldly inland against the horizon. If a visitor were to walk out its door, not knowing of the neighbours 5 kilometres east in the Bunjarra township, they would watch hot beaten ground stretch and dissolve into the horizon, meeting at one inscrutable point between land and sky, and wonder if they would ever see another person again. The transient landscape of this region, accustomed to blow-in blow-out types – leather-skinned men with Akubra hats traversing the coast looking for labour, or backpackers used to soggy European climates looking to be ‘enriched’ – meant Bunjarra’s sheep were more permanent residents than half the townsfolk. So the shack was left alone, near a thin wire fence; the only intimation of life to the unnamed visitor. The fence carried on past a dirt road back into town, journeying through homestead and grazing boundaries, burnished white by the relentless sun.

Kate, a British girl who had gone to the local pub looking for nannying jobs had once seen a stooped figure next to the shack as she drove up to the township. Simon was a jackaroo who had been out roo shooting in the next town, and he found it strange to see steam rising from a tin chute in the shack’s roof. As far as anyone knew or suspected, it was abandoned. But he had been sleeping in a tough-sheeted motel for 2 days and was eager to return home. So no more was seen or said from anyone. This is how it was. Occasionally, a truck would bluster past, spewing plumes of dust from its back wheels, a brief roar from the engine; soon to be absorbed by the stifling vastness as the dust gently settled, leaving only the tyre tracks that sit perfectly until the next lonely visitor.

The shack wasn’t a landmark, not really. In the most literal sense, constructions like these became sparser the further west you travelled away from Brisbane and thus became colloquial notations, like ‘5ks to the tin shed’. ‘20ks from the watering hole.’ But the lonely shack stood west, poised toward a sun that would eventually set red over the ocean, facing a blistering canvas that took no visitors. So no one noticed when the door was opened and then never shut, exposing a crack of its contents for the first time in 50 years to nobody but the rim of the turning world.

Jack followed the wire fence as it meandered down the road like a thin silver vein. A vessel, seeming to widen and constrict as he rode over unsteady ground in his buggy. He could feel his own blood pooling in the tips of his fingers as they gripped the handlebar, swelling in the heat. They would be red if he looked at them, clubbed up around little half-moon fingernails.

Red and white. The colour of the dirt and the sheep. Blood and bone. Two very human colours, unlike the eerie silver gleam of the fence bisecting east from west.

They followed it with the sheep, droving them along the fence to the grazing paddock. Snowy rode up ahead, and Jack noticed the contrast of his ruddy sunburnt neck against the shock of white-blond hair that gave him his moniker. White and red. It's because Snowy is a good sort, Jack thought. Sometimes the other stockmen were transients, the type that skulk down the border doing jobs for a paycheck and a bottle, but Snowy was on a contract. He came from inland, a town which Jack had once heard him gruffly refer to as a piss-and-shit stop. He was a taciturn man but a fine drover, having shown up to the house with only boots and a letter of character reference. Jack imagined everything else had been cast away, forgotten at a far-away pub or left at the roadside. His real name dropped like unwanted luggage. Jack wondered if he had a birthday.

The now-tender skin on the back of his own neck told him they had been droving for a few hours. He readjusted his grip and looked ahead, counting the sheep to stay awake. Jack counted them up, down and crossways, zeroing in on one bitten and tagged ear in the undulating mass of fleece. They slipped through each other like old friends, rubbing shoulders and flanks, groping close down the unsealed track. The late afternoon sun touched each coat golden, marrying the herd with shades of umber. He was in first gear, lapping at the tails of any would-be stragglers as the bike crunched over dirt, and rock, and shale, and nothing. The track was nothing. Kilometres bordered by fields and worn to the grey bones by the endless tremor of sheep. He counted their tails. Swaying in unison, pressed close, like the girls at school who moved in their little flocks. They too, kept their berth while he lagged behind.

He yearned for his friends, who would be down at the reservoir on their bikes that afternoon. He and Luke had discovered it last summer, on a map in his Dad's drawers that made it look like a blue rectangle. 'What is it, mate? Can we fish there?' Luke was originally from the south coast, and he always had a story about some whopper fish he had caught back home. These marlins, or cod, seemed to grow bigger in size whenever there were girls around. Jack told him the only thing he could catch would be ticks. He guffawed, and they staked out the watering hole on the map to explore later. Jack thought Luke had this startling honest laugh, one which lit up his whole face and spoke for him like a beacon of unabashed approval. People always remembered the joke they told when someone laughed like that. He imagined Luke sunning with Michelle Andrews on his raft at the reservoir, veiled in the dappled light that filtered through the giant gumtrees. Purple swimmers, the same colour as her schoolbag, laughing next to him with eyes that shone blue even under the competing sky.

Jack looked up from the handlebars and noticed that Snowy had pulled around into a stop. There, the sheep gently grazed in afternoon grass turned apricot by the dying light. Snowy sat on a log, finishing a cigarette with lazy draws. Jack watched them both as they appreciated the day in a similar lackadaisical manner, in their separate spheres of momentary peace. He sighed. Just west of the wire fence was the shack, known to him by many droving trips. For the first time he had seen, its door was open. In Bunjarra, he reasoned, people had to look out for one another. Something could be wrong. But Jack knew his chest now smouldered in the same way as when he led Luke across the gully into the reservoir, a hard spark of teenage exultation. Discovery. 'Going across!' He called out to Snowy, who tipped his head in a miniscule sign of assent.

Jack lightly tested his voice in the gloom. The shack was a cool, dark room with another space adjacent. The walls were corrugated iron, and gaps in the joinery meant pinpricks of sunlight bled in at the seams. There was a bed, and a kitchen in the adjoining room. Everything was neat but not clean, under a thick layer of dust that reminded him of the idle shearing shed before summer. The bed was still made. His legs ached for a comfortable seat, but visions of decaying arms grabbing his ankles dismissed that thought. He thought back to Snowy, within shouting distance, and stepped into the larger adjoining room. A breath stuck in his throat when he looked. Bordering the room were shelves and cabinets made from roughly hewn wood and piled with glass mason jars. From the loose flooring to the corrugated roof, jars were stacked and ordered all over the walls. They were not empty. Dark masses, barely visible in the half-light. Held in the womb of each jar. Jack stepped closer to examine one at eye height and wiped away a filmy cataract of dust. Something big and bulbous, floating in a kind of amniotic fluid. His hands jerked away, a moment before he realised. They were preserves. A pear, lemons, limes, all sitting forlornly on furniture that had not moved since the last century.

He turned to the left. Strawberry jam. Marmalade. All unopened and unlabelled, like they had never quite made it to market. He turned to the kitchenette and tried to decipher its contents. They could very well have been expecting visitors. Everything had been put away with finality, cutlery stacked in draws; no idling butter knives waiting for another sandwich. His head almost grazed the bulb fixed to the ceiling. There was a generator, he supposed. Not surprising as lots of people in town had them, but it meant that whoever lived here must have been capable at some point. Maybe a stockman's wife's hideaway. His mind lingered on the bed, built from heavy planks. He couldn't imagine it being shunted in here let alone ever retrieved. The jars, not taken back to the main house but left here to expire. It didn't make sense. Luke would pick one up and crack it open with a grin, he knew, wiping a grimy finger on his shirt for sampling. Jack could think of nothing he wanted to do less than taste the eerie jam. It was hours of stirring and boiling and congealing, litres of salty sweet pickling liquid and arms burned by hot sugar, air gone from warm to unbearable in this shack facing west. Somebody had spent a life here, for one reason or another.

Back in the main room, the air was thickly humid. Jack didn't bother to fumble around for the generator switch. Instead, the afternoon sun filtered through a chink in the open door. A herd of dust motes glowed and swirled in the light like creatures in amber. He noticed conspicuous papers on the table, weary with age. They felt good in his hands, hard promises of paper and pen, something he could understand. They were letters, out of their envelopes and rigid with ink. Jack had never been a reader. Snowy's crude handwriting was a nightmare to decipher on various household logs, and he only ever picked up books to wedge them under wobbly tables. But back through the doorway the jars lingered like a question that had never been asked, and so Jack began at the first line. Each of them had a return address in England, United Kingdom. 'How are you?', they would start. 'How is it over there?'. More lines about the weather. I miss you. Things are well here. Everyone wants to say hello. Plodding reports of rainy days, sunny ones, grandchildren, and friends. Jack imagined that they were kept, organised, collected in the grasp of paper-thin hands; that clutched at slivers of written laughter and the memory of damp soil and pages out of time gone by.

He had been relieved when Snowy first called for him. Jack promptly left the shack through the front door, and for one lonely moment stared straight out west into the place where the earth met the sky. They were wretched plains of solitude, and the other stockman suddenly seemed far away. It was a land of mirages, where tiny distant trees shimmered on top of great

false lakes. Jack saw the shape of a girl in purple swimmers splashing alone, beckoning him with her waving hands. She danced in the offing like a nymph and he almost reached for her. Someone called his name again, and this time he ran.

The unsealed road tremored underneath him while the thin wire shone with the dying sun. Snowy had called him back onto his bicycle, and they rode in single file, sheep left in the grazing paddock. Jack thought about the jars. It was a lonely craft, big syrupy pots that had outlasted their maker. Preserved in jars and now the dust of a strange old shack. Mail correspondence arrived in Bunjarra around once a month, and it seemed like there were many isolated hours in between. They were made by someone, he thought, for who time dripped like honey. Slow and sticky. Living at the beginning of nowhere. Waiting on post from the UK that never came. Hours bottled in jars like the sands of time, someone who yearned for something more than he did for Michelle Andrews. Out the front, the mirage of the west was steady and unyielding in its offer. Dustier than the road to death. Then, the flutter of a hand toward an opalescent visage. A step. Perhaps it was green like England.