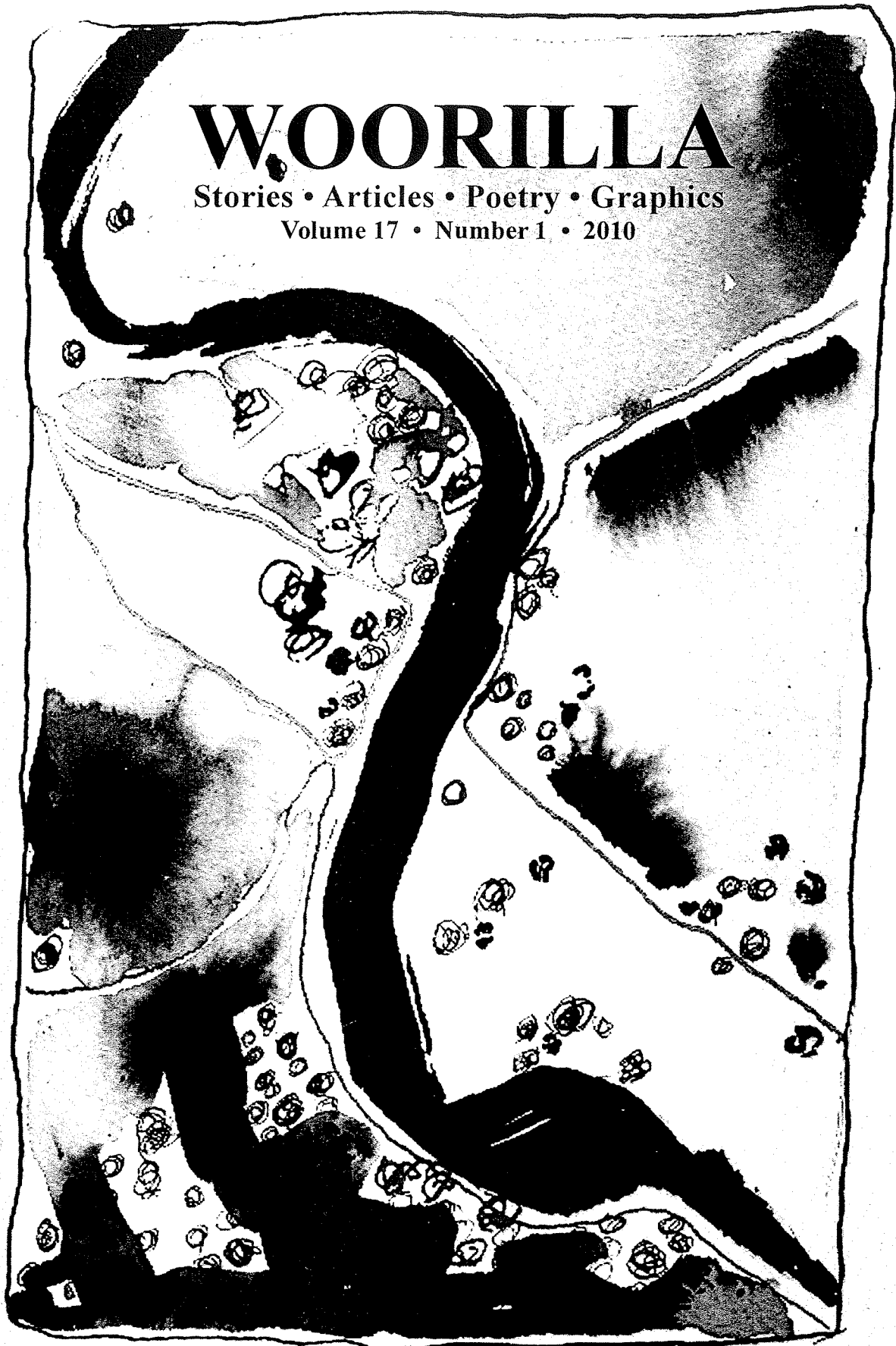


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Everywhere, Everywhen

BA Keon-Cohen

Clinging to our tiny Cessna, we circled at 500 metres, bumping violently through a swirling dust-storm. Next to the dirt strip, more circles scarred a large, flat salt-pan, remnants of drunken wheelies of aboriginal kids, petrol-heads all of them, defying the elders. From the air these skid-marks resembled women's sit-down places depicted on a traditional dot-painting that hung above the piano in the children's playroom. I liked that painting: a real bargain, only \$50 from an old law-man at Papunya, 600 km to the north. 'How weird is that?' I thought as my stomach hit the cockpit ceiling, then refused to return. 'That Papunya guy has never flown in his life. How did he look down when he's never been up?'

'Hang on,' James warned, fighting the controls. 'Here we go. Car'n the Bombers.'

An experienced bush-pilot, James selected a crumbling north-south fence line to guide his approach. Its few remaining wires were buried under sand and flying Spinifex, or were just visible, moaning in the wind, singing songs up the line, singing the country out loud, or silently, from beneath.

We hit hard, bounced once, and taxied towards a fuel shed. I climbed down from the baking cockpit, feeling queasy – to be hit by a hot blast of desert dust. Through the whirling willy-willies a sign appeared, tilting, no doubt nudged by a speeding vehicle trying to exit between the sign and the shed, a gap of about three metres.

'Some driver that one,' I thought, ramming my hat down tight. 'Not a fence, not a bloody gate in sight, yet wham bam, look out! Still, better the sign than the shed.'

'Welcome to Bingaboonga' it declared, Gateway to the Dreaming' and below, in lower case, 'Alcohol-Free'.

'Bullshit,' I mumbled, lugging my overnight bag. From perusing endless files stacked beside

my desk in Alice Springs, I knew that this was once true, but not now. The community elders had made a strong decision: they banned all grog – wine, spirits, beer, takeaway included – and closed the canteen, indefinitely. But then they moved on, or went bush, or just stayed away from meetings. People grow tired of the squabbling, the drafting of useless submissions, the endless rounds of meetings concerned with all manner of things.

'No such thing as privacy in a remote Aboriginal community,' I laughed, as Susan handed over my flight vouchers. 'Not with airstrips and roads. We bureaucrats, the police, politicians, law-reformers, medicos, teachers, we all fly in and out, all anxious to hold the most important meeting any one ever heard of. Endless streams of do-gooders who wouldn't know a bush-black if they fell over him.' Susan laughed, her white teeth flashing against black skin. She was a bright kid on work experience, all the way from Redfern, via a TAFE college in Darwin.

'Yea, I seen a few. But we're different, right? We're looking after them kids, right? An' you gotta go there an' get 'em bifer that damn petrol does, eh.'

'That's right, you got it. Now hold the fort whilst I'm gone. I'll be moving quickly. First stop, Bingaboonga, two hours flying time, no more. If anyone rings, I'm out bush, back Saturday.'

I was indeed on a tight schedule. Three communities today, three tomorrow, all strung along the South Australia border. Pitjantjatjarra country, all of it. And then home for a local cricket match on Saturday afternoon.

'Here comes your lift,' James yelled, into the wind. 'I'll park her behind the shed. Bit of shelter there. How long will you be?'

'Shouldn't be too long. What can I say about petrol-sniffing?'

'Not much' came the quick reply. 'All the brains are shot -- so who's listening?'

'Yea well, stuff you too, 'and you Bombers. Go the Doggies' I grinned. 'Jesus it's hot.'

'Yea. December is no time to travel -- not unless you're on law business. And even then, they stay close to water. Not like the old days, eh?'

A red Ford Ute hiding behind a large steel bull-bar careered across the dirt strip, heading broadly in our direction, dust spewing like an ocean liner. James passed me two litres of water from the forward luggage bay and grinned.

'Here's your mate. Hey, where does the word "boong" come from?'

'You're a disgrace.'

'Nah, true. See that Ute. That's your clue.'

'No idea. And I don't want to know. Save it for the pub.'

'It's the noise they make when you run 'em over your bull-bar.'

'God almighty. You'll get us all sacked.'

'It's true. Heard it from a Queensland guy last week.'

'That'd be right. Someone should float the whole joint offshore, way out, and let it sink into a deep hole. Do the rest of the country a favour. Full of stinking, bloated cane toads anyway -- and Country Party politicians. You can't tell the difference.'

'Good one Arthur, good one. Look, don't be late. Giles is another hour from here.'

'And beyond that? I often wonder what's beyond Giles.'

'Sweet buggery. Desert country 'till you reach Broome and the Indian Ocean. And we don't have enough fuel.'

'O-kay. I get the picture.'

My lift screamed up, and a joyful face under scraggy ringlets jumped out, sweating.

'You Mr Keenyon, yea?'

'I'm Arthur. Arthur Keenyon.'

'Freddy. G'day. The Chairman's out bush. You 'sposed to come tomorrow, eh?'

'No. No. No.' I took a deep breath. 'Look, this was all arranged. I rang him last week. Today, Thursday, a meeting about petrol-sniffing. The Health Department wants to fund a program. Where is he?'

Freddy pointed west, then swung in an arc, north of west. 'Out there. Long way, out bush. Law business, you know.'

I didn't know, but I could guess. December in the central desert was ceremony time. People travelled for days in beat-up cars, crammed into trucks, to attend isolated business camps, lost in the desert.

'When will he get back? Did he say?'

'Don't know. It's Dreamtime out there -- you know. Law business. Them stories are everywhere. They gotta sing the country, grow-up the country, you know.'

I had some idea. The singing, the dancing, recounting heroic feats of the ancient beings who left their marks on the landscape: all this could take weeks.

'They got some boys -- you know. They gotta put 'em through that business.'

'O-kay. Who else is around? Deputy-Chairman? Someone from the hospital maybe?'

'You come and see. Deputy-Chair, he's down the camp, with his Missus. He'll talk to you, but he's not too good. Pay-day yesterday. You know what I mean?'

'Yea. I think so. You mean flagons of sherry. Am I right?'

My driver looked at his bare feet, and then towards a distant line of ranges to our north and east. I had embarrassed him, said too much. They were probably related, customary-way.

'O-kay. Let's go,' I sighed.

We found the Deputy-Chair slumped against the front stairs of his house: a small, stained concrete building with a roof, a veranda, and broken windows. A derelict shell, in a former life a Toyota sedan, sat roasting in the front yard. Several scabby dogs lay beside a cracked pathway, panting.

'Hey, uncle, wake up, the health-man's here. Hey uncle.' Freddy moved to place a gentle hand on his uncle's shoulder, but withdrew. Kinship rules did not allow him, the younger man, to touch.

'Hello there. I've come to see the Chair — but seems he's out. I'm Arthur.' I didn't bother holding out my hand.

'Yaooll.'

'He's not too good' Freddy observed. 'Too much bloody plonk. Them bastards from the trucking-station down the road. They run it out here every Wednesday, when the welfare cheques arrive. Sell it down behind the car-dump. Bastards. And they charge 'em heaps.'

I turned to Freddy.

'Is the nursing-sister here? Can I talk to her?'

'Gone bush' he mumbled 'with his squeeze, that fuckin' community worker. Out to them Dreaming camps, eh.'

'No woman goes out there' I protested. 'Not to the law-business.'

'They gunna put him through the law' Freddy mumbled. 'That community worker. You know. He wants to ... kind of ... learn them stories. Them inside stories too. Not just the public ones. And he's paying for it, they reckon.'

'So what is this? She takes the razor blades, a cheque book, and a bottle of antiseptic, is that it?'

'Yea. Sort of.'

Jimmy was averting his eyes, his voice had dropped. The subject, I sensed, was tricky, and not for him, especially not in the presence of the Deputy-Chair.

'You initiated too?' I asked overstepping the bounds, again. After a lifetime in Central Australia -- well, seven years, but that's what it felt like -- I knew the bounds, but I was exasperated, fed up. Besides, the heat was physical, my head was throbbing, and my abandoned meeting had been carefully organised. Susan had spent days on the phone. Jimmy wiped sweat from his eyes.

'Naw mate. Bloody barbaric if you ask me. No way.'

'So what'll we do?' I looked back at the old man. 'Won't get any sense out of him. Not today. I'm on a bit of a tight schedule here, you know. It's all right for you lot to sing-along all summer. My plane is sitting there, on the strip, at \$400 an hour plus costs. The taxpayers in Melbourne won't be pleased.'

'Fuck 'em,' Freddy offered.

'Yea. Well what about the bean-counters in Canberra?'

'Fuck them too.' Freddy was at least consistent.

'Youse guys race about too much.' Freddy grinned, stepping around a dog-like corpse, a bundle of protruding ribs and long, skinny legs.

'Ya gotta slow down. Can't run in this heat, you'll fall over, perish. Sometimes, ya gotta stop. Otherwise, the country'll jump up and grab ya.'

'Where's the bloody canteen, mate?' I asked. 'Time for a cold one.'

We left the old man, and walked silently past a rusting water-tank, riddled with bullet holes. I slowed behind Freddy, sweating profusely, searching for my umbrella. We wandered into the Council office housing desks, phones and faxes that, Jimmy claimed, sometimes worked, and piles and piles of dusty papers.

'Looks just like home,' I laughed.

On the veranda was a line of pigeon-holes, most of them overflowing with letters, notices, Health pamphlets. I recognised some of my own, sent a month ago.

'Bloody-hell,' I mumbled, 'Susan and I worked on those.'

I guessed that the various addressees were probably out-bush, or had moved to another community, or were in hospital somewhere, nursing broken bones from drunken brawls. And beyond all that, the blazing sun sapped all energy, all ambition, leaving none to open letters, whilst generating abundant fumes for

the kids as they wandered the streets with plastic bags of petrol cupped to their faces.

The canteen was empty. Not a soul in sight. I collapsed under a bright blue beach umbrella, tilted towards the Spinifex country, and beyond that the Great Sandy Desert, and way beyond that, somewhere, the far north-west.

'When do they open the bar?' I asked. Jimmy appeared carrying two stubbies of beer. I didn't recall ordering -- but mine was pure bliss. Jimmy erupted with a healthy, muscular belch.

'Oh, anytime really. It was good for a while, like only six to nine at night. Then we'd throw 'em out and tell 'em to go home for a feed. But the Chairman left and things went sort-of backwards. You know what I mean?'

'Yep.' I savoured the beer, and bought another. The barman, a tall gangling teenager in a bright red basketball singlet, put my money in his pocket.

'Look,' I glared at Jimmy, 'this is a waste of time really. Tell you what. You drive me back to the strip. I'll fly on to Giles, and I'll come back later. Say after new year.'

'Yea sure' Jimmy smiled, enjoying the beer. 'Anytime. We'll still be here. This is our country you know. Always has been. All the time, you know.'

'The business camps should be over by then?' I asked.

'Suppose so.'

Jimmy swatted a swarm of flies and gazed towards the sky-line. Something was moving through the sand-ridges, but I saw only shimmering red sand and mulga trees floating, rootless, in the mirage.

'Don't suppose a month or two will matter,' I mumbled. 'Anyway,' with more force, 'this law business. Might bring some discipline to these kids. Isn't that the idea?'

'Yea. I wouldn't know, but. You understand?'

'I think so. But these Dreaming stories -- they're everywhere, they're always there.

So they could do these camps anytime. Is that right?'

'Dunno. Them old fellas, they always go bush at Christmas time, for some reason.'

'But those stories, they're always there. That's right isn't it?'

'Yea. Everywhen.'

'What's that?'

'Everywhen. My Auntie, she lived here for years, she used to say: 'Them Dreamings everywhere, everywhen. She's passed away but.'

'Oh -- I'm sorry. I knew her. She grew up in that sand-ridge country, out in the Great Victoria Desert, that right?'

'Yea. She told me once, when she was a kid, she and her mob, they were running around naked, and they came on this giant spider-web shining in the moonlight, stretching across the country. So they all ran away. They was, like, scared shitless. But you know what it was?'

'What's that?'

'A wire fence. Ha! A bloody wire fence. They'd never seen one, they reckoned it was some Dreamtime monster, some sickness in that place, so they ran a mile. Ha! Geez I laughed.'

'Is that right? Her first contact, what, only 70 years ago? Amazing. Your aunty too.'

'Yea well, really, my grandma's sister, black-fellah way. But us kids round here, we all called her "Auntie". That was her country out there, but. She took us way out into those sand-ridges. She knew it, like, she'd always been there. She remembered every little water-hole, every camp, every special place, like, where that big snake went, you know, and left his marks. And those seven-sisters, and those puppy-dogs, them dingoes. She told me that story once. Them stories, she followed them across the country, all over, everywhere, all the time. But she's gone now.'

'Yes. She has. But she did tell you some.'

'Some of them. But them business camps, you know, the old people, they teach 'em good. So those stories go on. They're always

there, but. Everywhere. You know what I mean?’

Jimmy’s flashing white teeth reminded me of Susan, my schedules, the Cessna cooking at \$450 per hour, for James would certainly claim his ‘extreme conditions’ allowance – a nice little earner.

‘Can’t sit here drinking all day,’ I groaned. ‘The Minister, bless her heart, won’t be happy.’

‘Oh I dunno. Looks like a good spot to me,’ Jimmy laughed. ‘Eh, my buy I reckon. Ya can’t leave a man owing a beer. Geez mate, you’d get smacked about for a lot less round here.’

That was right. I had to stay for at least one more beer. Jimmy returned – and behind him, staggering, came the Deputy-Chair, resurrected from his veranda. The word was out: the government-man had opened the canteen.

‘Hey uncle, sit down – over here.’ Jimmy helped him into a chair with surprising tenderness, as if caressing a child. The Deputy-Chair’s flowing snow-white hair hid his deep, black eyes. His hands, with cracked fingernails and two missing fingers, grasped the side of the table as he slowly sat down. He turned and peered in my direction.

‘How are you old fellah?’ I said, waving a hand, but keeping my distance. ‘Bloody hot eh? Plenty business-camps eh? You’re usually out there. Not this year?’

Jimmy discreetly took off. This old man knew stuff, knew all the inside-business not spoken of save in the bush camps, late at night, with clapping sticks and singing in full flight. Jimmy was not privy to that world: too hard, too painful.

‘Big mob,’ the Deputy-Chair growled. ‘Big mob out at the ten-mile. That ten-mile bore.’

‘So I heard. Good thing you reckon? Tell those stories. Frighten the shit out of those boys. Cut ’em a little, grow ’em up quick, you reckon?’

‘Yaoll. But him,’ flicking a crooked finger towards Jimmy, ‘he’s run off. Likes the white-fellah business. Just a boy – all the time, eh.’

‘Yea, but, remember, I hear Jimmy does a good job round the Council. You need those young fellahs. They do all that paper work, answer those bull-shit letters.’ The Deputy-Chair spat onto the canteen floor, and wiped his lips.

‘Yea, well, my honey-ant story, it’s everywhere, all the time. It’ll catch him up, you wait. It’s in the country. It’ll catch him up, proper.’

‘Is that right?’ I asked. ‘Maybe you’re right. I’m just a government-man in a hurry. You know what I mean? Meeting, meeting, meeting.’

‘Yaool,’ he grinned. ‘You come back – late on. They’ll be finished then. You got a dollar? You get me a beer, eh?’

‘No way mate,’ I said firmly. ‘Got to get back to The Alice.’ I climbed off my steel chair, red sweat marks running down my legs. I noticed long raised scars across his shoulders, the sign of a lawman, from the old days. ‘Busy, busy, busy,’ I added, reaching for his hand. ‘You know us government-men: never stop, all over the place like a madwoman’s shit.’

‘Yea,’ he laughed, his eyes widened. ‘You bin here, long-time now. Your be back next-time.’

‘That’s right. Been here before, and I’ll be back. When it gets cooler – say in February. Or March even. You be here. You reckon you can wait that long?’ And then, with a mischievous laugh: ‘I’ll buy you another beer. But you got to be here.’

The deputy-Chair grinned, and raised himself to his feet, stooping, and gestured me to come closer. Jimmy was revving up the Ute, the barman had disappeared. the old man spoke into my ear, quietly, as I turned to leave,

‘I be here, everywhere. Everywhen. Like them stories. Yaool.’