

THE STRANGER ARTIST

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*Life at the
edge of
Kimberley
painting*

Quentin Sprague

Hardie Grant

BOOKS

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*We move as if we had no shadows and were
unperturbed by that appalling fact.*

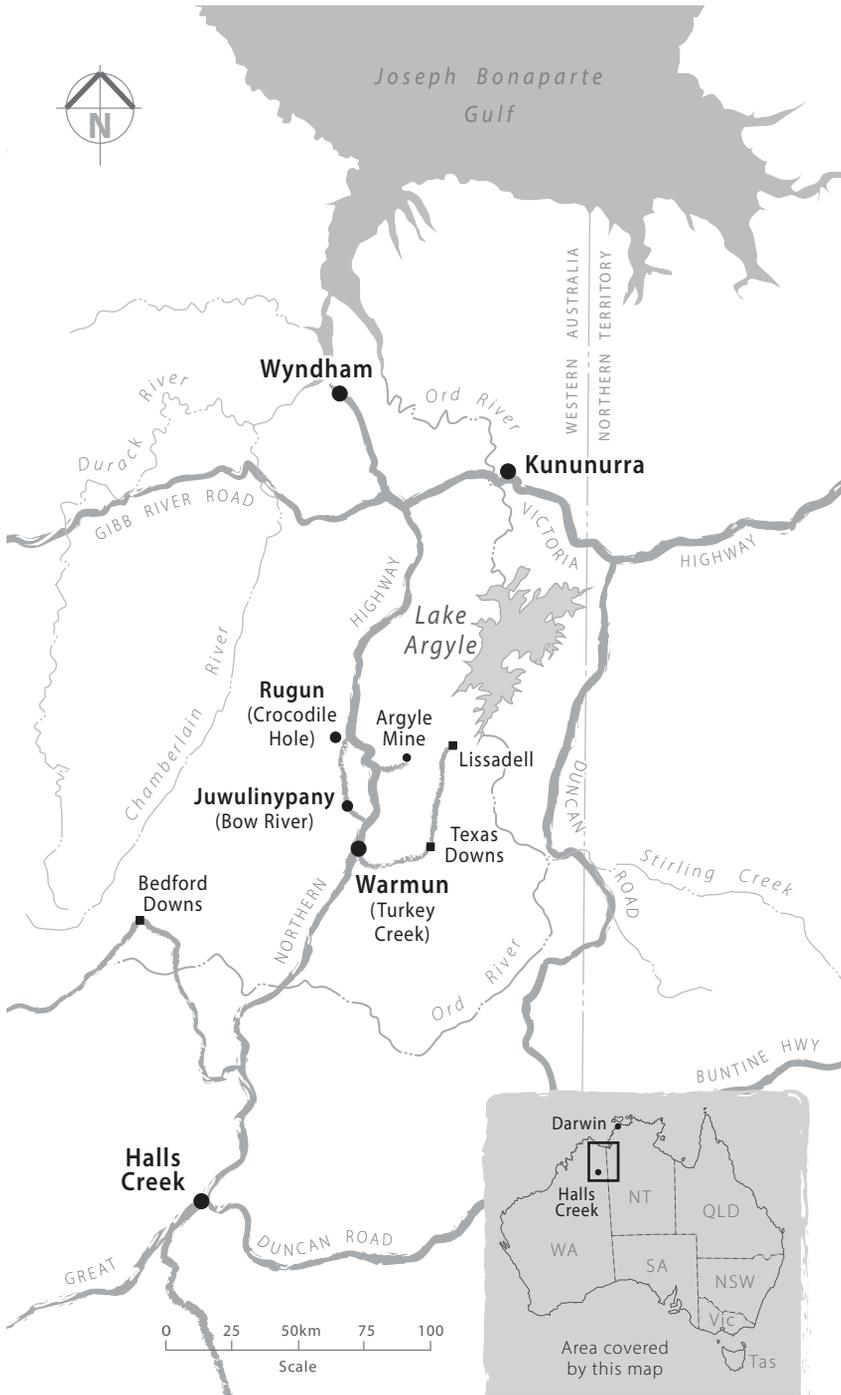
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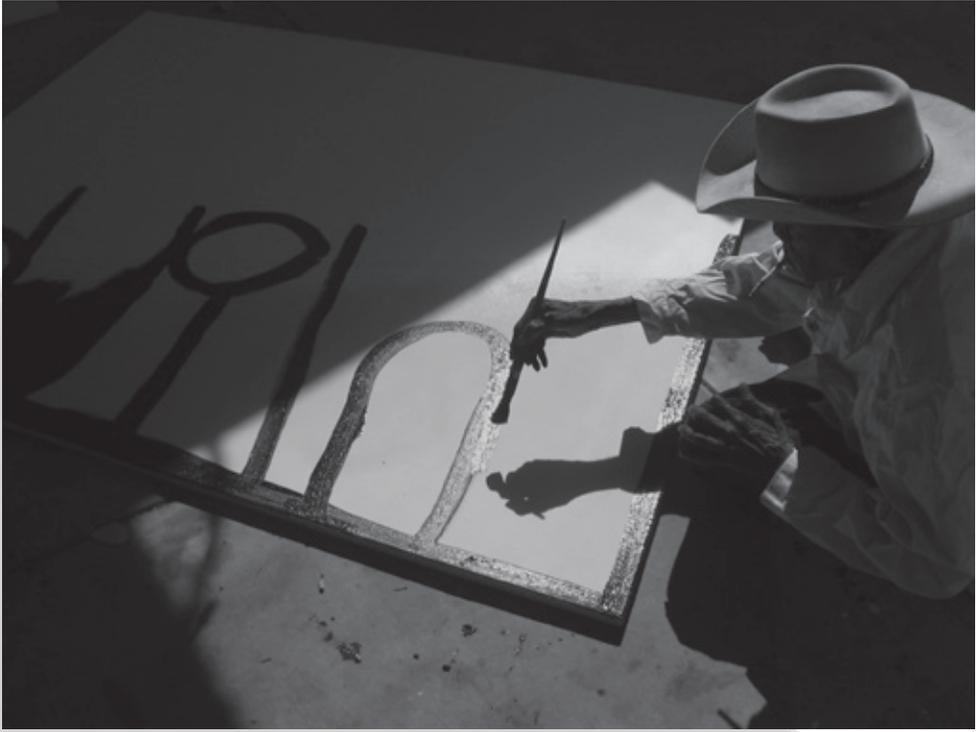
To Annie, who filled her home with books.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this book contains images and written depictions of people who have passed away.





Prologue: Vietnam

At first, Tony Oliver would never remember the dreams in full. They were strange, impressionistic sequences: the faces of those he had known, the old people who had taken him in and guided him, the young ones he'd so often seen buried.

Black faces, all of them. He'd lived in the Kimberley for nearly a decade and couldn't count the funerals he'd attended.

He would wake tired, his sheets tangled about him, sweating.

That morning he woke waiting for his great friend Paddy Bedford to die.

•

He had said goodbye to Paddy only two weeks earlier, just before departing to visit his girlfriend Le Chi in Vietnam. By the end he hated the Kimberley as much as he loved it, but he knew he couldn't truly leave until after Paddy's death. It would be unthinkable; he and Paddy enjoyed a closeness he found hard to articulate.

Painting lay at the centre of their friendship, and always had. Soon after the two had first met in the community of Warmun, Paddy had become famous for his roughly elegant canvases, for the sweeping lines and ellipses he traced there, for the fields of muddy white that, in the crowded world of Aboriginal art, were so uniquely his. Many among the art world had come to know him as 'PB', which is how the ex-stockman signed his paintings, but few knew his stoic presence in real terms, nor his quick laugh and distinctive humour. Few knew his life story, how the hardness of it sat in such contrast to his generosity of spirit.

Few knew him as well as Tony.

He had been there, watching Paddy as near every painting the old man made took shape. 'It's like we were tied together, climbing the mountain,'

Tony would say years later, attempting to capture the feeling. Consciously or not, he would be paraphrasing Georges Braque's words explaining what it felt like to invent cubism with Pablo Picasso.

Recently, Paddy had been almost marooned by failing health, too frail to get around much at all. There had been misguided talk that doing some painting might be 'good therapy' for him, but it wasn't. A male nurse had brought him out to the studio Tony had set up at Wyndham, but by that stage watching Paddy try to paint was heartbreaking. With the nurse in the background, the intimacy of the studio was gone. Tony couldn't assist, couldn't steady Paddy's reaching arm. The old man made a mess of it, his once perfect hand perfect no more.

The day they said goodbye, Paddy arrived at the Wyndham studio again, but this time any talk of painting had vanished: everyone, it seemed, understood. The nurse knew to give the two men space – not much, maybe half an hour – and Tony simply pushed Old Man in his silver wheelchair around the studio, past the new paintings by his friend and countryman, Ramney Ramsey, past the big windows at the end that looked out across the spear grass.

Although Paddy was far from shy, Tony had known him to most often speak quietly, sometimes little more than a rasping whisper. To hear him, one would have to lean close. Sometimes Paddy would reach out a hand, place it firmly on his interlocutor's shoulder, and draw them closer still. It was likely he did this because he was partially deaf and wanted to hear more clearly, but just as often he did it to share small intimacies.

Once, he drew the art dealer Dallas Gold in close and said in his sandpaper voice, 'I love you', as if it were the simplest thing in the world, as if old Aboriginal men told white people this all the time.

Now, with Tony, he wanted to know if his money was right.

He asked this quietly, but his concern was clear – his health had stopped him from painting and he had found it harder and harder to visit the studio. He was worried. Previously, he'd been taken to the Kununurra bank on a regular basis so he could check his balance, something he would do with habitual flair, sometimes wearing his button-down shirt over nothing but a pair of bright satin boxers, his walking stick clasped in his hand. Old Man was largely illiterate, and possessed only working numeracy,

but in his final years, the news was always good – painting had made him a wealthy man.

Towards the end, Tony had extricated himself from the money side of things near completely, but that day he knew Paddy was simply seeking reassurance. He told him that his money was fine, that he would be well looked after.

Then Paddy wanted to show him his new purchase: the white LandCruiser the nurse had driven him out in, down the gun-barrel-straight highway from Kununurra.

He was so proud of it.

Cars had always brought the two of them together. Paddy loved them: there was no greater measure of wealth in the Kimberley than a new LandCruiser. Family could pile in and an old man like Paddy would be driven wherever he wanted to go. The previous year, Tony had gone as far as renting an open-topped red Cadillac and chauffeur to drive Old Man to his retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Tony, who had walked down from the hotel early, was already standing at the entrance as the sleek vehicle arrived: he watched as it crept along the side of the museum and pulled up at the front, back-dropped by the harbour.

The whole scene played as a kind of riff on the art world's vanities – the Cadillac, Paddy immaculately dressed in his three-piece Henry Bucks suit, Rammey Ramsey similarly attired in the seat next to him, both cool behind black sunglasses. But for Tony it was also deadly serious. Back in the Kimberley, in the run-down fibro house outside Wyndham that he called home, he had recently begun a rough collage directly on the kitchen wall. This was partly to keep himself occupied during the long hours he spent alone, but it was also a map of influence, one that charted the kinds of references that he'd always been alert to in the work he'd undertaken with Paddy and the others.

He'd pinned a photograph of the jazz great Dizzy Gillespie next to one of Paddy dressed to the nines during a city visit: Gillespie in his suit and shades, his silver trumpet clasped to his chest; Paddy with his perfect black felt hat and his neatly knotted tie. Nearby he'd added reproductions of paintings: Bedford's work alongside Tony's enduring favourites, the American Philip Guston, the New Zealander Colin McCahon.

Equivalences.

Shuffle all those pictures together and Tony's work with Bedford began to make sense: like the Cadillac they were icons, all of them, played for maximum effect across the colour line.

At the museum, Paddy was helped into his wheelchair and pushed up the ramp towards the entrance hall. People were still talking among themselves but, as it became clear the artist had arrived, a quiet began to spread.

For Tony the theatre of it was irresistible. It always had been. That's what got him. He knew that symbolism was as important in Bedford's Kimberley life as it was in the white art world. Images were power; they proved knowledge. But they could be recalcitrant and contradictory as well. What better way to signal the old man's success to a crowd of whites than a red Cadillac, this ridiculous vehicle once the domain of American rock 'n' roll stars and oil barons? Tony knew that Paddy understood the symbolism too: none of the whites in the Kimberley – the gardiya, whose lineage extended to the settlers who had taken Bedford's ancestral country by force and killed his people – possessed anything nearly as grand.

Inside, the retrospective unfurled across two floors of the museum's galleries. The first looked especially stunning: it was hung with recent works like *Mad Gap*, with its corner of ochre red and its blushed ground, and *Motor Car Yard – Blanket Lizard Dreaming*, with its central black void like a bolt of velvet against the white wall. The curator, Russell Storer, had offset them beautifully: on the same gallery's far wall a selection of PB's much sought-after works on paper hung in a neat grid, their bright colours anarchic against the sombre tones of nearby canvases. As Tony walked through for the first time, he couldn't help but see it as a measure of the success that he'd helped Paddy achieve, proof that his time in the Kimberley had paid off. But although the experience would form one of the pinnacles of Tony's Kimberley life, doubts had already begun to plague him.

Later, he will question whether he succeeded in his undertaking with Paddy or not, whether the play of icons that came to define their work together had been his alone, or Paddy's too. It was true that Paddy died a millionaire, that in his final years he had wanted for nothing, including the kind of medical care largely unavailable to his countrymen and -women.

But towards the end, even as Paddy's retrospective was met with widespread acclaim, Tony could never quite ignore how distant all that was from the blunt fact of Kimberley life. Nothing had changed since he'd first arrived; he would wonder if he was once really naive enough to think it would.

It was easy to despair, and he did.

When the two of them said goodbye that day at Wyndham he said, 'Take care, Old Man,' and returned to the studio alone as Paddy was driven away in his new car.

•

Waiting for the call to come was hard.

He sat in the hotel in Vietnam, in the mountains above the coast, where it was cold and the mist lay heavy in the mornings. *So far from the Kimberley*, he thought. Le Chi went sightseeing, but he waited behind.

When his phone rang he received the news quietly, and hung up as the inevitable wave of numbness washed over him. It was a feeling coloured partly by regret: he should have been there holding Old Man's hand as he died; it would have made the shape of their story more perfect.

There was also relief, and the sharp spark of guilt that followed. If he was honest with himself he knew that among the small group of artists he'd worked with in the Kimberley, it was Paddy who had kept him there. For all that place had offered him, it had also intensified the darkness he'd always carried. Now he knew he could leave. He had waited until the end and felt now that his conscience would at least partially be clear. He found he couldn't cry, so he sat there alone and began to drink. That particular Kimberley habit would take years to kick.

Later, once he'd slept again, Tony sat with Le Chi in a taxi as it slowly wound its way down the mountain. The houses there were made of lengths of timber, their thatched roofs were arched. They were long and raised off the ground on stilts: in the mist they appeared otherworldly.

Local K'Ho people lined the roadside in procession, quietly ascending against the taxi's descent. It was a religious holiday: the people were dressed in brightly embroidered cloth; there were garlands of flowers

and clusters of smoking incense. Young women clutched perfect babies to their chests.

A slow-forming knot of anxiety began to form in Tony's stomach. He now had a funeral to help organise. This one would have to be a big production. It would need to honour Paddy as both a famous painter and a manambarrany, a senior Lawman. Family would come from across the greater Kimberley, art collectors and other supporters from around the country.

How many people? Five hundred? A thousand?

The grave would have to be dug at Bow River, in the cemetery that almost seven years earlier Tony had helped reopen for the burial of Paddy's brother-in-law, Timmy Timms. It was hard to believe it was seven years since the death of the old Bow River boss had brought a mass of people to the tiny community.

Now it was Paddy's turn.

Old Man.

As the mountains gave way to the tablelands below, Tony steeled himself for the weeks to come.



Warmun / Turkey Creek

1.

Picture a vehicle moving at speed through a landscape, the near-empty highway a straight black line before it.

The vehicle is a red Toyota LandCruiser and is registered to the Gija painter Freddie Timms; the landscape is one of stark red ranges, of dry earth scattered evenly by clumps of spinifex and sprays of young cane grass. It is only sparsely treed: gums, spindly acacias, the beautifully malformed boabs that seem spaced at impossibly regular intervals. Later in the year, by the time the low fires of the dry season have moved through, the flanks of the ranges will be stripped clean, and the crumbling, ore-rich bones of the place exposed. In the heat of the day, it will appear as if the country is breathing with almost malevolent energy. But now it's far softer: after the regular rains of the wet, the earth is veiled by a wash of bright green.

Tony Oliver, an ex art dealer from Melbourne, is sitting in the cabin next to Freddie. Although Tony's gallery has been closed for a number of years, and his own practice as a painter has never quite found form, art remains his passion. Tony has not been in the Kimberley long, but already the possibilities seem endless. He and Freddie are starting a painting group together, one that will unfold independently of government funding and will hinge on the distinctive work of artists like Freddie. But Tony's relationship to Freddie is far from transactional. They are also friends driven by a shared desire to try and make something together with what skills they have.

Beyond the windscreen the landscape flings past.

•

Their day has begun early, they have risen with the dawn in Kununurra, and driven out of town and across the bridge at the dam while the sun still hung low on the horizon.

Over the years they will drive this highway together countless times; each journey will blur into the next. They might stop at the tiny settlement of Doon Doon so Freddie can visit family – perhaps to drop off some money, or collect a rough cut of recently butchered beef – or they might continue past. From there the highway begins to curve smoothly through a series of shallow valleys. The ranges give way to hills and, here and there, strange sentinel-like rock forms. Freddie, who often appears taciturn and brooding in the presence of whites but already knows Tony well enough to trust him, might point to them, and in his clipped, slightly severe manner, recount the names and stories of these places. Tony’s learning, but he still sees only with Western eyes.

That rock, for instance, which rises almost vertically from a surrounding hill, is known as Pompey’s Pillar by European settlers. Gija call it Neminuwarlin. It was there that an Aboriginal outlaw called Major once hid from a punitive party of police constables, trackers and station workers intent on his capture or death. This story is one of Freddie’s favourites: his grandmother and her older sister were among Major’s entourage. A lifetime later Freddie rode that country as a stockman and, through his grandmother, carried Major’s story with him.

As they pass Neminuwarlin, surely Freddie gestures towards the site. Surely he makes mention of the paintings he has already made of Major’s story (Tony knows them well). For Tony, the pieces of his friend’s world fall more securely into place.

The signs for the pastoral stations begin around this point. One, which reads ‘Lissadell’, arrives on the highway’s western side.

Freddie has known Lissadell since his youth – at ten years of age he was taken there to live after a childhood in the bush. His father was sent to Bungarun, the leprosarium far to the west, near Derby, and died soon after. Freddie was raised alongside the station manager’s children: as they grew, they learnt to speak Gija, just as Freddie learnt English.

These are the kinds of stories that Freddie has for the places they pass: how the manager’s daughter later cooked for him after long days of station

labour, how he'd sit in the homestead kitchen for his meals, how this was a sign of the esteem in which he was held.

By the time he left for the outstation of Frog Hollow in 1987, Freddie had risen to the rank of head stockman. By then he was the last Aboriginal worker at Lissadell: it was just him and a handful of white jackaroos.

In step with the turn-off to Lissadell comes another story.

Since the 1980s the station's entrance has been shared by Rio Tinto's Argyle diamond mine, which by the time Tony and Freddie pass in 1998 has become the largest producer of natural diamonds in the world. Look up above the highway and a neatly tiered gap in the ridge line draws slowly into focus. The Gija who drive this stretch daily – coming and going between Kununurra and Warmun in a procession of overloaded vehicles in various stages of disrepair – have, over the last decade and a half, watched that gap open in staggered increments.

In his first years in the Kimberley, Tony will hear the story for that place in many variations: how the Ngarranggarni women hunted Daiwul, the barramundi ancestor, in the creek there, pushing tangled clumps of spinifex through the shallow waters as a net; how the barramundi leapt not only over the women, but over nearby Mount Pitt too, and then became stuck between two hills. Her attempts to struggle free scattered her glittering scales (or was it her eggs?) that in turn brought forth the miners and their trucks. As they dug in search of the pink diamonds that would soon be world famous, they set in motion all kinds of trouble in the Gija spiritual realm.

Along that same stretch of highway, Freddie and Tony pass the dirt turn-offs to Crocodile Hole and Bow River: the first just before the mine, the second after. 'Rugun', Freddie might say, or 'Juwulinypany', offering Tony the Gija name for each of the tiny outstations where Tony will soon live, one after the other.

The two men won't stop that day – the road into each outstation is long and rough – but will instead continue towards the roadhouse at Turkey Creek, where, on the other side of the highway, the community of Warmun lies sprawled beneath a kangaroo Dreaming site.

There, at a rundown house in bottom camp, a friend of Freddie's called Chocolate Thomas is already waiting.

2.

Some two years before, Tony had arrived early at a house in Ivanhoe, a suburb in Melbourne's north-east.

It was a simple place, only partially furnished, and owned by an entrepreneur turned art dealer called Peter Harrison who had recently closed a fledgling tech business and opened a gallery called Kimberley Art.

Harrison's venture was straightforward: he was flying Freddie down to Melbourne to prepare a new suite of paintings that Harrison would then sell. He had worked directly with Freddie before and this time was paying Tony to act as both studio assistant and minder. It would take ten days, Harrison had said, and, because Tony needed the money and was already familiar with Freddie's work from Kimberley Art's stockroom, he'd readily agreed to do it.

Inside, one room had already been set aside as a studio in anticipation of Freddie's arrival: there was a stack of blank canvases there, along with paint in various colours. Tony waited there and when Harrison arrived with Freddie, fresh from the airport, he introduced them and then left them there together.

Tony had been unsure what to expect, but he now sized Freddie up. The Gija man was tall and, although he was quiet, he seemed self-assured. He was also handsome. At barely fifty, Freddie was as healthy then as Tony would ever see him. His clothes appeared meticulously chosen: boots, jeans, a black stock hat, a deep blue RM Williams shirt, the colour of which would sear itself in Tony's memory. Freddie's belt even had an elaborate silver buckle on it.

All this was worn with absolute ease and although it was a decade since Freddie had worked in the cattle industry, it was clear that his clothes told of that time. *A real stockman*, Tony thought. Tony would soon learn that near everything about Freddie was passed through this lens, even his practice as an artist. All his distinctively spare work showed country that spread across the stations he'd once worked on: Lissadell, Old Greenvale, Bow River. The canvases stacked in the studio would soon be named for those places and others like them. In the coming days, Freddie would paint them all from memory as Tony watched:

the hills and waterholes, the river-ways and roads that bound that country together.

Although shy in those first moments, Freddie hid it well. He wore a stoic-seeming expression composed of a careful scowl and slightly pursed lips – it would be days until Tony saw him smile. Tony was nervous too, not sure where to begin. Harrison had left the fridge stocked with beer, so they had each taken a can and sat there at the kitchen table, drinking.

Tony would recall an antique clock on the wall, ticking away above them. As he tried his best to draw Freddie out in conversation, the clock marked the many silences with excruciating precision.

•

Freddie was already an old hand as far as the painting business was concerned.

In those years the Aboriginal art market was booming: over the previous decade and a half, attention had spread quickly from the distinctive and optically vibrant canvases of the Western Desert, replete with their roundels and fields of dotting, to work from other areas: the bark paintings of Arnhem Land and the large, all-over ‘abstractions’ from the Utopia region in the central desert. Against that backdrop what had quickly been dubbed the East Kimberley painting movement had carved its own niche – another regional style that marked yet another chapter in what then seemed a constantly unfurling narrative.

As far as the white art world was concerned, the ‘inventor’ of East Kimberley art was a man of Gija and Wangkajangka descent called Rover Thomas, or Joolama as he was also known by his countrymen and -women. Rover still lived in Warmun, the largest of the Gija communities, but by the time Tony and Freddie met he was at the tail-end of what had been a short but storied painting career. Like Freddie, he had once been a stockman and at the pastoral industry’s height had driven cattle from the desert to the Kimberley but, following a series of prophetic dreams, he had eventually become a celebrated artist.

That’s what had started it all: dreams. It was almost too perfect.

The story went something like this: Rover had fallen asleep one night in 1975, not long after an accident on the highway near Warmun had fatally injured his kinship mother-in-law. Near death, she had been airlifted to the Wyndham Hospital and had flown above the vast patchwork of Gija country before succumbing to her injuries mid-flight.

Her spirit continued its passage, moving as a shadow across the landscape. She was accompanied by a changing cast of other spirits: at one point they stood together on a rocky outcrop at the edge of Kununurra and watched in the distance as a rainbow serpent in the guise of Cyclone Tracy destroyed Darwin, far to the north-east. She returned to Rover in his dreams to show him the path her spirit had traced, the vast catalogue of ancestral narratives that had unfolded below. She gave him the songs and images for those places and, when he woke, Rover made of them something new.

Much was held in that vision and, as his sequence of dreams played out, Rover transposed them into a dance cycle that focused on his mother-in-law's journey. It wasn't until 1979 that the resulting performance – by then known as the *Guirr-Guirr* – took hold in Warmun, but when it did it held fast: it was soon performed widely. The songs had by then been arranged as verses; the images were translated into paintings, the first of them created by others under Rover's careful direction.

Those first works were simple, but for that reason they were all the more striking. They showed the iconic Kimberley landscape as short sequences of planar symbols, isolated on single-colour backgrounds and outlined in white dots. For paint, the artists used locally sourced ochre, ground up and mixed with water. Glue would later be used as a binder, but at first it was spinifex gum, even kangaroo blood. Within the *Guirr-Guirr*, the paintings were intended as little more than props: objects to be deployed as part of the performance's narrative cycle; a visual accompaniment to the pattern laid out by the songs.

They were revealed at key moments, held aloft by dancers: *this* place, the paintings intoned, *this* ancestral being.

Similar images could be seen in caves throughout the region – Tony would later be shown a handful of them, glowing like icons on dusty rock faces – where the simplicity of them made immediate sense: they had to be

seen in the half-light and understood readily. In the firelight of ceremony, things were essentially the same: simplified images moved faster through the darkness, lodged more readily in the minds of viewers.

To those who would one day look back on the movement's beginnings it would seem a foregone conclusion that such paintings had so quickly become items of desire for white collectors. They were as beautiful as they were pragmatic. Materially, they embodied the place where they had been made with near-brutal precision. In those years Warmun was still new, much of it still under construction: a new pocket of housing, a health clinic, a community store; all this was being built as the early paintings of the movement were being realised. It is no surprise that the early works made use of whatever detritus could be found around the community's dusty streets, or salvaged from the local dump: an irregular offcut of particle board, or a repurposed plywood packing crate. These were the substrates that carried the first paintings. They were later deemed 'masterpieces' in the white art world, but the material they were made on would always reflect their origins.

As he worked with Freddie in Ivanhoe, Tony soon learnt that, for this reason, it didn't matter what a painting had been made on – canvas or not – to Freddie it was always a 'board'.

'I'll start a new board now,' Freddie would say by way of direction and Tony would set up another canvas. He would prime it with a base coat colour and then mix Freddie's paint to the right consistency.

Then Freddie would begin.

He'd start with a thin brush dipped in black, carving the canvas into sections with an arcing line, or mapping out a series of near-perfect ellipses. Tony would watch as a resolved composition was laid down in minutes.

'How many boards have we done now?' Freddie might ask after a few days in the studio had elapsed and Tony would count the finished works, one by one.

Boards.

Simply by way of naming, the history of the movement was always close.

•

Rover himself didn't begin painting until 1982, but when he did he soon became known as the movement's figurehead. As a painter he had a way with space; like Freddie after him, he could construct a near flawless composition with a few judiciously chosen lines.

But he also had the character for fame: he clearly enjoyed moving in the white world. When he represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1990, he was mobbed by art world enthusiasts as he moved through the Giardini: everyone wanted a piece of the Aboriginal painter from Australia. Rover, an amiable character with a ready smile, welcomed the attention as if it were nothing.

Tony had first seen Rover's paintings in the late 1980s, at Deutscher Fine Art in Melbourne's Fitzroy. At first he was simply enthused but by the time he attended Rover's 1994 survey at the National Gallery of Australia he was a convert. For Tony, Rover's practice was one of near sublime beauty. There were fields of open colour cut through by lines of ragged dotting; the surfaces were dusty and tactile, in themselves a gentle revelation. He read the accompanying narratives – the Dreaming stories or histories that each of the works depicted – but, like so many Westerners, he readily saw in Rover's work the eloquence of the best late-American modernism, which he then loved. The paintings tugged at his existing passions, but directed him elsewhere; he found them hard to shake.

A local economy was soon sparked alongside the fledgling movement – it grew in step with the broader market. By the time Tony and Freddie met in Melbourne in 1996 art dealers were clamouring not only for Rover's work, which was seen as a finite resource now the much-celebrated artist was rumoured to be unwell, but for anything by the small group of artists who had quickly risen around him: Queenie McKenzie, George Mung Mung, Jack Britten and whoever else was poised to follow. As long as the collectors kept buying, the dealers and other speculators, it seemed, kept arriving.

Freddie was a generation younger than the others and was enterprising. Not only was he willing to travel, but he was able, at some level, to negotiate the many demands of the painting business. He had known Rover for much of his life and had watched closely as the older man's star had risen.

The two had travelled to Melbourne, where Freddie had worked as Rover's offside for a controversial art middleman in the Dandenong Ranges. Once Tony and Freddie had built a level of trust, Tony would ask about those painting sessions and Freddie would offer tantalising details: how it had been cold up there in the hills; how they had laboured on large-scale works; how trucks had arrived and the canvases were stacked inside and driven away.

Although in later years it would often be claimed that Freddie had been exploited in Melbourne, that his trips there had brought him unwittingly into the Aboriginal art industry's more shadowy byways, the truth was more complex. Stories of Aboriginal artists being led astray by white profiteers played well, but Tony would come to understand Freddie as a kind of adventurer: his forays to the city were marked by new experience, by stories he could take back to country.

It was also clear that he'd looked at what was then available to him and weighed his options. Back in the Kimberley, Freddie had painted for the independent art business that then operated in Warmun, as well as for the community art centre in Kununurra, but found each wanting. Gija had a name for the kind of income one could make that way: 'finger-money', so called because it was too little to even reach your pocket. Freddie had chosen to travel with Rover just as he'd later chosen to work with Peter Harrison: each experience had been worth it, regardless of whether or not he'd ultimately been paid finger-money there as well.

Part of this simply came down to an exposure to new ideas and materials. More recently Harrison had brought Freddie down to stay with an artist called John Bursill in rural Victoria, at a place called Diamond Creek. Bursill was a fellow painter and had introduced Freddie to colour, then nearly unheard of among East Kimberley artists. Freddie had taken to it well. His recent paintings were bright: fields of yellow, red and magenta, threaded through by winding black pathways. They didn't possess the calm authority of a good work by Rover Thomas, but they were unmistakably Freddie's.

It was this body of work that Freddie continued in *Ivanhoe*: bright, arresting images constructed of interlocking organic shapes.

One new board followed another.

At times Freddie would push a tendril of road or river into an open expanse of colour and Tony would be reminded of the renowned mid-century Catalan painter Joan Miró.

That's what painting was: a chamber of echoes.

3.

At the beginning of his career as an art dealer Tony quickly became known for two things: being almost impossibly young and having what was known as a 'good eye'. In the art world, this latter quality is a much discussed but poorly understood asset: it refers not only to simple discernment – to good taste and an accurate feeling for the whims of fashion – but to the ability to see an artwork and 'read' it with some accuracy.

Tony's love was painting and he could readily visit a painter's studio, view works there, and hone in on the best of them. This was rarely the largest, or the one that might hang perfectly above a client's couch, or even the most conventionally successful. Invariably, it was the work that proved the breakthrough, the one the artist had struggled with. A work like that might not be resolved, but it suggested what was to come, how the artist might from this point move forwards. For that alone it was valuable.

He had opened his first gallery when he was only twenty-two, still in his final year of a painting degree at the Preston Institute of Technology. It was 1981 and the Australian art world was markedly provincial. He leased a series of interconnected rooms – one large, the others smaller – above an antiques shop in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, that had until recently been a Macedonian nightclub. The area was still more than a decade away from its eventual gentrification: street drinkers hung out there; there were housing commission towers just across the road. He reclad the walls, painted them white and named the gallery Reconnaissance. He sat there late at night in the newly illuminated space planning an ambitious program.

Some who knew him in the early days would recall him as an outsider – to one friend he was 'always so idiosyncratic in everything he did, even

then ... always a little bit lonely' – but his commitment to art pulled him through. There was an appealing subtlety to the way he spoke about the work he represented, something that put him at odds with the tide of postmodernist theory then rising through the art scene. By contrast there was something old-fashioned about Tony's belief in the human potential of art, especially painting, almost as if the great modernist romantic tradition – seeded in Europe, then transported across the Atlantic where it found late form in American abstraction – had for him never ended.

Reconnaissance soon became known for considered exhibitions by up-and-coming figures, a number of whom would go on to forge long-term careers. Younger artists visited and dreamt of showing there. Although it was a commercial enterprise, the surrounding milieu was scattered liberally with aspiring poets and performance artists. This combined with Tony's youthfulness to lend the venture an anarchic touch: to some, it seemed almost punk. But if the gallery made a lasting mark, it was due less to Tony's work with the local scene and more to his far-reaching focus. Soon after opening, he took the first of what would become many trips to New York and returned with exhibitions of the artists he met there.

The gallery was the subject of an article in *The National Times* just eighteen months after it opened. Tony had only recently returned from his first visit to New York, and the accompanying photograph captured him standing in front of a painting by the American Richard Bosman, a second wave pop artist whose show he'd secured there. His arms are crossed; he stares at the camera with his mouth firmly set. A collar and tie peek out from the top of a rough-knit wool sweater. By now, he's already set the local scene briefly abuzz by exhibiting a suite of prints by Andy Warhol, and although Bosman will never reach Warhol's heights, he is at this moment a rising star in the New York art world.

Tony explains to his interviewer that he's spent much of the gallery's first months living on a dollar a day: 'Marlboros every couple of days, a burek for breakfast'. He says he allows for no luxuries, that he owns only three sets of clothes he keeps clean enough to get by. He paraphrases the American painter Jackson Pollock as a means to criticise the very notion of Australian art, which he finds promising, but limited. He tells the interviewer he sleeps in a tiny room beside his office, where he often

sits up at night, alone, wondering if it's all worth it. His ambition usually convinces him that it is.

'Love of art has wrecked my personal life,' he says.

For one so young, it's an impressive performance.

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The first New York trip had been productive, but it was on Tony's second visit, when he walked into McKee Gallery – a well-respected space on East 57th Street – that he made the most lasting of his New York connections.

The gallery's director, David McKee, shared Tony's belief in the kind of experience art engendered: he represented a range of acclaimed artists, among them the recently deceased Philip Guston, a searching and forceful painter who was among the few of his generation who truly saw what painting might be in the aftermath of abstract expressionism. Tony had adored Guston's work since he'd first encountered it at art school and had sought out McKee Gallery for that reason. A friendship developed: over the following decade, as Tony continued to fly back and forth across the Pacific, it was through McKee's support that he secured his best exhibitions.

Tony would be remembered by some as a haphazard businessman more at home in the studio than the office, but by the time he had opened and closed his second gallery – an eponymously named space that he immaculately fitted out in Melbourne's Clifton Hill – his program had made an impact. Along with the early shows by Warhol and Bosman that had graced the walls of Reconnaissance, he had exhibited prints by Roy Lichtenstein and had consigned from McKee a group of luminous works on paper by Guston: a crowning achievement for an Australian gallery. In Clifton Hill he'd similarly interspersed a range of local artists with a handful of Americans, key among them the critically acclaimed McKee Gallery artist Harvey Quaytman, whose geometric paintings were known to be subtle and precise in equal measure.

But no matter how enthusiastically the exhibitions were received, the gallery business was tenuous: Tony had invested heavily in fitting out the Clifton Hill space, and when he lost the lease at short notice it hit

hard. What would prove to be his final show as a dealer came in 1992: an exhibition of the New Yorker Jake Berthot at a project space in Sydney. He left Melbourne soon afterwards, near penniless, and at the encouragement of a friend moved to the coastal New South Wales city of Wollongong, and eventually into a rental property pressed between the Illawarra escarpment and the sea.

It was there, subsisting on welfare, that he first attempted to rekindle his original passion and began to make his own paintings. He was chased by depression that would at times confine him to bed for days. Such darkness had already come to pattern his life, but it now threatened to overwhelm him. Painting demanded long hours alone, grappling with uncertainty, and at times it only made things worse. He fell into a self-lacerating routine of destroying everything almost as soon as he made it. Only a few works would survive, scattered between friends and supporters who made minor purchases or ended up with gifts.

He painted one on a small square of cardboard packaging, the text of which remained just visible beneath the painted surface. It's abstract: a warm red cradles a blue rectangle; a wash of magenta veils much of the right-hand side. Another from the same period was dashed off on a rough sheet of wood veneer. Loose black lines cut through fields of brushed white; a doubled half ellipse rises near the centre of the composition. Tony ripped the veneer from the wall of his house, and at the time thought of it, with its ragged, uneven edges, as a kind of suburban bark painting.

This second work is from 1992 – four years before Tony and Freddie first meet – but like others from the same period it effortlessly reaches forward to the Kimberley and touches the paintings Tony will one day help realise there.

4.

It didn't take long for Freddie to invite Tony to the Kimberley. Tony's life was still provisional, at times maddeningly so, and he was more than open to the suggestion – they had two studio sessions together in Melbourne, after which he booked a ticket to Darwin and then on to Kununurra.

His visit hinged on the kind of haphazard arrangement that he would soon understand as integral to Gija life. He and Freddie had spoken on the phone before his departure and agreed to meet outside the BP service station at the town's edge, but when he arrived it appeared Freddie had forgotten. Tony sat on the grass median strip each morning for two days until Freddie finally drove past in his flash-looking red Toyota LandCruiser. Peter Harrison had bought Freddie the vehicle as payment for his most recent painting trip and had shipped it north.

Now, it was overflowing with a retinue of family; Freddie – clearly surprised to see his Melbourne friend – looked momentarily guilty.

Ah! Tony!

Freddie disappeared quickly with an assurance he would be back, and when he returned the LandCruiser had emptied. Tony jumped in, and from that moment Freddie's time was his.

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First, Freddie took Tony to Frog Hollow, the outstation just past Warmun where Freddie then lived with his second wife, Berryline Mung. It was a tiny place, little more than a scatter of houses set out among trees above a bend in a creek.

Along with a group of family, they had then gone to a favourite camping spot of Freddie's on Lissadell Station. They piled together into the LandCruiser, threw in mattresses and swags, and held on as Freddie steered the vehicle down the highway, and then along a series of increasingly rough dirt roads.

The country opened up vast around them; a feeling Tony would soon know well.

They eventually parked next to a fallen tree, and Freddie lit a fire among the dry wood at its base. It burnt all night as the Kimberley stars turned slowly above.

Those moments were magic: Tony felt accepted among his new friends, loved how they conversed together in Kriol and Gija. He lay there on his swag listening, taking it all in. He would later recount that it was this night, as he sat with Freddie's family under the stars, that

Freddie first raised the idea of the two of them working together to start a painting group.

It was also on this trip, during a visit to the Argyle Dam at the top of the Ord River, that the subject of Freddie's painting earnings was first raised in detail.

Freddie had pulled up at the lookout and shown Tony the view.

Beneath the water lay Miriwoong country, Freddie explained, referring to the language group whose ancestral lands clustered near Kununurra. All the sacred sites there were now held in stasis, unceremoniously removed from the cycle of Law that was intended to keep that country strong. Argyle Downs Station lay there too: the first of the region's pastoral leases drowned to make irrigation a reality. The old homestead had been saved, though. It had been taken apart, stone by stone, and reassembled on higher ground. It was now a tourist attraction, part of what drew the mobs of retired travellers who crowded the lake's shore with their caravans and air-conditioned four-wheel drives.

Freddie often returned to Argyle Downs in his paintings: sometimes he showed it beneath the dam; other times, as it once was. As with so many of the places he painted, he'd ridden that country over and over again before the dam was constructed; in a painting he could still mark the original site of the homestead with precision. Tony had watched him do that in the Ivanhoe studio. Now he was here, looking out across that same country, long-flooded: the peaks of high hills had become islands, the water that spread between them was vast.

The way Freddie told it, the money he received in return for his work could be okay – maybe a few thousand dollars in cash, perhaps even as much as ten or eleven, but he claimed that his most recent trip had resulted in a pittance: an envelope containing just \$300. There was surely truth to this, but Tony also knew that in addition to expenses like accommodation, food and travel, Freddie had received the LandCruiser too. What ultimately concerned him was that Freddie was essentially being paid a wage to paint, rather than a percentage of each painting's value: a system that made it near-impossible for Freddie to understand how much his work was worth.

Although the practice was then common in the world of Aboriginal art, it was otherwise almost unheard of: at his own gallery, for instance, Tony

had never directly commissioned work for cash payment. Even what he knew of government-funded community art centres – the much celebrated lifeblood of the entire movement – made little sense to him: after paying a commission to the gallery dealer *and* a further cut to the art centre, the artist was left with only thirty or forty per cent of the commercial value of their work. It seemed a tiny amount, especially when it was the white dealer who was receiving the lion's share.

At his galleries he'd followed the well-established method of receiving bodies of work on consignment, taking a forty per cent commission on each sale, and then returning the rest directly to the artist. It was this model that he explained to Freddie that day as they sat at Argyle Dam and looked across the water. He also made a proposition: if Freddie came to paint with him in Wollongong, he would arrange a proper gallery exhibition so Freddie could see the consignment practice in action.

That's how Freddie's brief but productive arrangement with Watters Gallery in Sydney came to be. Tony had known its co-director, Frank Watters, for years: at first by reputation (as a young dealer, he had always been slightly awed by the older man), and later as a friend and supporter. In Wollongong, Frank had helped him on a small exhibition he put together for the Ivan Dougherty Gallery at the University of New South Wales, and had soon invited him to spend weekends at his country retreat, a rustic mud-brick house in the bush near the small town of Cassilis. Frank, a slim-framed man whose skullcap beanie and round-lensed glasses were near iconic in the Sydney art scene, had an early feel for the avant-garde and, although the leading edge of contemporary art had long been redrawn by other galleries, Watters remained an institution. If the gallery had ever shown Aboriginal art, Tony didn't know about it. This was the context he wanted Freddie's work to be seen in.

Freddie travelled to Wollongong and painted with Tony in his rental house. Tony ordered the best acrylic paint he could find, choosing much the same palette Freddie had used in Melbourne: the bright colours – the purples, the yellows, the fields of red – were a far cry from much of the work Freddie would become known for, but it was a good start. As they worked, Tony continued to explain to Freddie how the consignment system worked. He had already secured the show with Watters and could

now use that as an example. Watters would take thirty-three per cent, slightly less than most dealers: a standard practice for the gallery. Freddie would, in addition, reimburse them for expenses: his airfare from the Kimberley to Sydney and back again, the cost of canvases, paint and other supplies. Tony, who was still on welfare, had negotiated his own small cut from the gallery's commission.

They made less work than Freddie had made in Melbourne – Tony wanted quality, not volume – and when it was finished, Frank Watters was enthusiastic. Freddie titled each of the paintings for sites they depicted, among them Violet Valley, Red Butt, March Fly Creek. They were priced between \$3000 and \$12,000: not too much, but enough to flag to collectors that Freddie was worth paying attention to.

The gallery delivered well on their end of the arrangement: the show grossed just over \$100,000. Less gallery commission and expenses, Freddie walked away with close to \$60,000. Compared to his experiences in Melbourne it was, as Freddie later put it with characteristic restraint, 'a lot better'.

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The money made a difference, of course, but what cemented Freddie and Tony's friendship had come the year before.

It had occurred in Melbourne, during one of those long, slow afternoons that are carried by happenstance late into the night. The city was in the throes of the annual Melbourne Cup carnival; Tony knew that Freddie liked horses and offered to take him to the big race, thinking they might simply lose some money together and then get drunk.

But for Freddie the races were deadly serious: the annual race meets in the Kimberley town of Wyndham had been a regular feature of his youth, and he knew the energy and rhythm of the racetrack well. On arrival at Flemington Racecourse, he and Tony went to the mounting yard and watched as the course clerk led the horses around, one by one. When a small chestnut gelding appeared, Freddie immediately picked it as the winner. His reason was simple: whereas the majority of the others had seemed unsettled among the distractions of the day, this horse was notably

calm. Tony shook his head at the logic of it: it was exactly the kind of observation a career stockman like Freddie would make.

The horse's name was Saintly and at Flemington that year he won the Cup by an easy margin. Tony had followed Freddie's lead and put money on the horse: not a lot, but enough to add a brightness to proceedings and put a grin on each of their faces. Afterwards, they sat drinking at the track until the surrounding scene took on the slightly darker edge that can often cut through events like that, once excitement sours into daytime drunkenness and the many losses of the day sink in.

Tony had said, 'Do you want to get out of here?' and Freddie had said yes, that there was money to be spent.

In the city they visited a saddler, where Freddie bought a saddle to take back to Frog Hollow and give to his son Shaun, whom he adored. They then went to Lygon Street, one of Tony's old haunts, and ate and drank at a restaurant table on the pavement outside. The image of Freddie sitting there with his stock hat cocked on his head and the burnished leather form of the saddle draped over the chair next to him was pure gold: Tony would remember it always.

In later years, when the practices of some operators in the Aboriginal art industry were drawn into question, it was with that kind of memory in mind that Tony would sometimes attempt to complicate such judgement. Sure, it was hard to justify a business model that saw the artist underpaid – he had encouraged Freddie to push against exactly that – but it was also true that if he'd never travelled to Melbourne to paint, Freddie's world would have remained coloured by his immediate environment alone. Without someone like Peter Harrison, Tony and Freddie would never have met, and none of what followed would have been possible.

5.

On his initial visit to Warmun Tony was horrified by the place. It was during his first trip to the Kimberley in 1997, when he'd camped with Freddie and his family at Lissadell Station. He'd stayed the previous night

at the Turkey Creek roadhouse and in the morning crossed the highway and walked into the community.

He was, of course, drawn by the promise of art. Rover Thomas's success had already placed Warmun at the epicentre of East Kimberley painting; Tony's visit was in that light not unusual. But although it was common for tourists to drive in on their way to Purnululu National Park, or for independent art dealers to make their way to the community unannounced, it was almost unheard of for an unknown white to appear on foot.

Much of the infrastructure Tony passed was rundown and blasted-looking, almost as if an apocalyptic event had moved through and this was the aftermath. Young Aboriginal men watched his passage in silence from the shadowy verandas of wrecked houses. Tony moved through Warmun's dusty streets that morning with a sense of gathering dread: he felt like an intruder, and realised he probably was.

Even after he'd been in the Kimberley for several years, a visit to Warmun would fill him with that same feeling. It wasn't that it looked worse than the smaller outstations he would soon become familiar with – they too were places of obvious poverty – but more that Warmun, a metropolis by comparison to those thin scatters of tin houses in the bush, felt harder, less welcoming. As with too many of the Aboriginal settlements that dotted the northern reaches of the country, the title 'community' seemed at best a kind of wishful thinking; at worst, it could appear a means to veil the reality of Aboriginal life from outsiders who were likely never to visit. 'Community' did nothing to capture the bleaker qualities of such places: the young men hunched and seemingly aimless in the heat of the day; the women and men one would see with ravaged faces; the way so many of the local whites carried themselves with a sense of arrogant paternalism.

Nothing prepared someone fresh from the city for the reality of that. Tony's mind was left spinning; he couldn't quite make sense of what he was seeing. At one level, he never would. But even if the full picture remained elusive, history imparted a certain context: as he slowly learnt Warmun's origins he wasn't surprised to find it had been established as a refugee camp in all but name, that its very existence spoke of the dispossession that had wrested the Gija so violently from the surrounding country.

First, the cattle stations had been established, and the old ways that had sustained Aboriginal people for generations were fatally altered, and then broken. Many of the Elders who now called Warmun home had been raised as indentured labour in the pastoral industry: their lives had been inextricably bound to those whites who had taken the Gija's ancestral country by force barely a generation before. Stories of murder and massacre threaded through their oral histories, but by the mid-twentieth century a life of uneasy reciprocity had been established. Aboriginal family groups had by then gathered at each of the stations and while the men and women worked, their old people and children had a permanent camp and access to rations.

Although the stations embodied brutal change, life there had followed a pattern that made some kind of sense. As each year's wet season made regular work impossible, the people would be released from their duties, and they would walk back to their ancestral places and gather for ceremony. Children would learn how to sustain themselves in country; youths would undergo initiation. On the stations the Gija were paid with nothing but rations – bags of flour and sugar and salt, sticks of tobacco – but in coming decades they would look back on those days with an unmistakable nostalgia.

This wouldn't be because station life had somehow been idyllic, or even fair – at its height, the era was a period of violence and authoritarian control by any reasonable measure – but simply because Aboriginal people's separation from country would soon be far more pronounced.

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In the late 1960s, the Federal Pastoral Award was enforced in the northern cattle industry, which meant for the first time that station owners were required by law to pay their Aboriginal workers. They instead opted to let the vast majority go: in an industry that had in large part been driven by free labour, there was little else to do. The development came in step with other changes – the use of helicopters for mustering, for instance – but when a disastrously timed drop in global beef prices soon followed it left the pastoral economy in freefall.

Nor was welfare available to unemployed Aboriginal workers who remained on the stations. In the Kimberley, where many pastoralists were either unwilling or unable to continue supporting the family groups who had come to depend on them, this meant the families were forced to move to regional centres like Wyndham, Halls Creek and Kununurra where makeshift camps could be constructed on Crown Reserve Land. The edges of those towns soon became home to clusters of humpies and hastily built tin shacks. Warmun was intended to not so much replace what people had once had on the stations, but to funnel them away from such camps.

The site that was chosen for the future community was a place already known by settlers as Turkey Creek. It too had a history: Gija and Miriwoong people had always met there for large seasonal gatherings, but it wasn't until the discovery of gold led to the construction of Halls Creek to the south in the late 1880s that it became a place of any importance for whites. Pat Durack of Argyle Downs bestowed its European name in 1887: he travelled through the area and shot a turkey there. Wyndham, first established the year before, lay to the north and boomed with the Halls Creek gold rush. When it was found that the quickest route between the two towns led through Turkey Creek it quickly became a staging post for travellers who arrived on horseback or foot, and later by camel and donkey.

There was briefly a hotel there, as well as a butchery; it was soon earmarked for a telegraph station, and when that was constructed in 1897, a postmaster, telegraph operator and lineman were all installed there. This was a period of intense upheaval in the immediate region. The pastoralists were still then carving up the surrounding land, imposing new boundaries across the many ancestral pathways and intersecting language groups that already lay there. As the European occupation of Gija country took an ever more secure hold, conflict increased. Cattle-killing rose in frequency; whites rode the stations gripped by a fear that made either pre-emptive or punitive violence all the more easy to justify. Stockmen riding the boundary lines of newly established pastoral leases were known to carry revolvers in their belts, and .32 rifles within easy reach under their saddles. There were stories of murder by gun and poison, of violence breaking out over access to country, even access to Aboriginal women.

It was technically illegal for settlers to take independent action, but in the absence of any real legal consequence there was little to deter the more mercenary among the settler world. As it had been elsewhere, ‘frontier justice’ was tacitly approved by the authorities: this was simply how the colony expanded its boundaries. Francis Connor, the East Kimberley’s first member of the Legislative Assembly, outlined the stakes of the conflict in an 1893 speech: although he predicted that the ‘dispersal’ of Aboriginal people might not be broadly popular, the issue, for him at least, was clear. It was, he said, ‘simply a question of whether the natives are to have this country, or the whites’.

Even when the tide of opinion began to shift, it remained unlikely that perpetrators would be punished for murdering Aboriginal people. In 1901 PC James Campbell Thomson made the mistake of investigating reports that stockman Thomas McLaughlin from Texas Downs Station had shot and burnt two Aboriginal men 30 miles to Turkey Creek’s east. Thomson visited the site of the fire and saw human remains among the ashes but when he tried to bring McLaughlin to justice the region’s well-oiled culture of silence ground into action. McLaughlin ran Thomson off Texas Downs at gunpoint; thinly veiled threats followed. This practice was pronounced enough to have a name: in a world where police were expected to enforce pastoral expansion at any cost, Thomson was ‘blackballed’ – ostracised – by the settler community.

It was in this same year that a police station was established at Turkey Creek, in the same building as the telegraph station. By this time a small group of Aboriginal people were already congregating around the tiny settlement, drawn by the promise of rations, which the postmaster had established for the old, the infirm and the very young. Others benefitted too: they augmented their bush diet with European food received in exchange for labour or other transactions. The new police presence also saw an aggressive surge in the arrests of Aboriginal people. It followed an established colonial method in which adult men were most often the target; as they were either killed or gaoled, women and children were then left vulnerable, and thus more amenable to moving onto the stations and providing the basis of an indentured workforce. Prisoners from the greater region began to be funnelled through Turkey Creek on their way to the

Wyndham gaol. Following the passage of the 1905 Aborigines Act, police there also became responsible for identifying and removing mixed-race Aboriginal people from the stations.

By now, battered humpies had spread out below the telegraph station, which had been built high on the hill and raised on concrete pillars so it could look out across the immediate area. Behind its windows sat the white administrators of colonial expansion.

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Among the whites who then lived at Turkey Creek was Mick Rhatigan, a man who had already built a formidable reputation in the wider region as a police constable. He arrived in the settlement in the 1890s with his wife Kate to take up the position of telegraph lineman.

In a place where it was not unheard of for policemen to be disciplined for not shooting Aboriginal people during punitive dispersal expeditions, Rhatigan was spoken of approvingly as ‘uncompromising’. From his earliest days he was known as a brutal enforcer: a perfect shot with a rifle who had already been responsible, in the language of the day, for ‘cleaning up the blacks’ along the Osmond River. Only two years before moving to Turkey Creek, Rhatigan, along with Sergeant Jack Wheatley, had been implicated in one of the most vicious recorded massacres in the region’s history: twenty men, women and children killed in response to cattle-spearing on Ivanhoe Station. Two weeks later Rhatigan and Wheatley’s party arrested twenty-five women, thirty children and twelve men, chained them neck-to-neck and marched them for the remainder of their patrol: a meandering 400 kilometres that eventually took them to Wyndham where fourteen so-called ‘prisoners’ were gaoled.

When the postmaster departed Turkey Creek in 1903 Rhatigan took over rationing duties. The old people would line up and he would hand out the flour, sugar and tobacco. The role clearly did little to soften him: more than a decade later, in 1915, Rhatigan was implicated in another massacre, this time at a place called Mistake Creek. The region’s culture had by then shifted, but true change was only incremental: Rhatigan was arrested, but any charges were soon dropped and he returned

to work. He would live another five years in Gija country until his death in 1920.

None of this history was secret. The Gija knew where the murders and massacres had occurred. Tony would soon come to understand that they knew those places in the kind of inchoate, bodily way that anyone would know the sites in which their father was shot to death, or their grandmother burnt, or their infant siblings bludgeoned with a stick as a means for the whites to save their ever-finite ammunition ('expended 40 rounds of Winchester ammunition' a constable's report from those early years might dutifully record, carefully accounting for every precious shot). Accompanied by Gija, Tony would see the massacre ground at Bedford Downs, where people were poisoned and burnt; the boab tree at Mistake Creek where a group of Gija were cornered in a shallow valley and shot; the cave across the sandy river bed at Chinaman's Garden where an old man had hidden while the remains of his murdered family members were disposed of below. He would learn that such sites exuded a kind of power equal in intensity to the many places across the Kimberley at which ancestral presences can still be felt, that colonial atrocities entered that same space, were carried by the same traditions of oral history from one generation to the next.

In the company of people who knew those stories, Tony would feel something of the terrible hold such sites could still enact upon the victims' descendants. It's not just culture that ties Aboriginal people to place, he would realise, but history too.

Only then would his initial response to Warmun become clearer. What shocked him was not how people lived, but the weight of the history that hung over them as they struggled to find traction in the colonial world.

6.

When award wages were enforced in the 1960s, the wave of Aboriginal workers and their families leaving the stations surged over the years that followed. The scatter of semi-permanent tin humpies at Turkey Creek soon expanded. The people squatting there were permitted to draw water from

the bore and tank next to what was now the post office alone; the police had relocated to Halls Creek in 1950. Kate Rhatigan had lived there for seventeen years after her husband's death and was remembered as a kind woman who had raised Gija children as her own, but Rhatigan's kin had by now long gone.

In the late 1970s, Warmun entered the more familiar, bureaucratic phase which had long rusted into place by the time of Tony's first visit in 1997. It was officially named, and officially recognised, as a 'permanent community' for the purposes of Department of Aboriginal Affairs funding; a grant was soon secured to construct the first of the houses there: simple tin-clad structures. Another bore was sunk and a communal vehicle purchased. As one decade carried into the next, the familiar infrastructure of a remote Aboriginal community was erected: a small store, a health clinic, a school run by Catholic nuns. Soon there was a mechanic's workshop and an old people's home; later came an organisation that administered funding to the outstations that would spring up over the coming decade. The post office, which was the community's oldest building, was set aside as housing for white advisors.

Government funding to the community emphasised private sector commercial activity, but although the local skill base was still firmly rooted in the pastoral industry, the surrounding area was far too small to establish a working station. Nor did local skills necessarily run to the management and development of a pastoral business. With the exception of community liaison and trainee positions, Warmun was soon largely run by whites. Small-scale projects intended to sustain independent income were established in the early years – a market garden and a chicken run among them – but little took hold. Children drifted in and out of school; Elders moved to the old people's home. For much of the younger generation of men and women a pattern was soon set in motion. They shuttled between Warmun and the Kimberley's far-flung network of towns, many among them gripped tight by a toxic mix of grog and welfare.

All kinds of whites found their way into the community. Many were altruistic – simply seeking to help establish the place, to keep it running – but others were far more self-interested. If Tony hadn't yet heard the common northern dictum to describe them – mercenaries, misfits and

missionaries – he soon would. It rang true, but the neat demarcation between the terms overlooked their often tangled nature: Tony would understand in coming years that it was not uncommon to encounter a long-term interloper who somehow embodied all three.

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On that first day, the sun was already hot as Tony made his way down what served as Warmun's main street, past the school and the store, and the offices of the Balangarri Aboriginal Corporation. The road dipped before him over a causeway that cut across a dry creek bed and then curved up a short, steep hill. There were white painted boulders placed at seemingly random intervals along the road's edge.

As he approached the old police station, he knew nothing of its history. It was notable for the simple fact that its construction was so markedly different to the houses and administrative buildings that lay dotted beneath it. Even though it was raised from the ground on its wide concrete pillars, it somehow managed, with its enclosed veranda and small windows, to appear squat, even mildly menacing.

The building was now the home of a local business called Narrangunny Art Traders – the reason for Tony's visit. It was one of a number of loosely interconnected places at which artists like Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie still painted. Many of the most striking works Tony had seen at Kimberley Art in Melbourne had carried the Narrangunny Art Traders imprimatur – not only those by Rover and Queenie, but works by lesser-known figures like George Mung Mung and Jack Britten.

The enterprise was little more than a painting wholesaler, and only superficially related to the network of community-based government-funded art centres that already supported remote art in other regions of northern and central Australia. It was run by a white couple called Maxine Taylor and Terrence Brooks, who was known as 'Serge'. The two were long-time bush residents who had taken the reins at the Turkey Creek roadhouse in 1995. It was there they first began to commission paintings and offer them for sale to passing tourists. By then, Peter Harrison at Kimberley Art had already put in place a structure designed to tap the growing market

for East Kimberley painting. It was a streamlined arrangement: Harrison would send art materials to an ex-policeman who worked for the Warmun community council; the former policeman would organise for canvases to be painted and then ship them south where Harrison would sell them.

In 1996, Maxine and Serge moved from the roadhouse to the old post office, where they readily took over the supply end of the chain. They quickly gained the trust of older, more 'saleable' painters like Rover in a simple and reliable fashion: Maxine was a good cook and the old people were often hungry. In the coming days, Tony would see this in action: he too was fed a good meal – perfectly cooked roast beef – and understood why the artists came back for what they called 'number one tucker'.

Tony stayed at the roadhouse for several nights, and during his visit, the couple seemed to warm to him. Serge was a laconic, straight-talking northerner of the kind Tony would soon come to know well. He had once worked in the meatworks in Wyndham and, as he and Tony talked, it became clear he'd turned to the art business for a simple reason: there was easy money to be made.

'What's this shit, this *minimal* shit, that people down south like?' he asked Tony one afternoon (or something like it).

They were inspecting a beautifully simple painting by Rover. As the renowned master had grown older he'd taken to leaving larger and larger expanses of his paintings free of anything but fields of roughly brushed ochre. Some of his works at the time were simply traced around the edges of each canvas: compositions increasingly restrained by physical limitation, by his inability, after suffering a stroke, to comfortably reach into the centre.

Serge's question was not without its insight: it was true that these works were partly popular for the fashion in which they echoed Western precedent, particularly the school of colour-field painting that had driven to acclaim figureheads of late-modernism like the American Mark Rothko. Most with even a passing interest in art knew Rothko's shimmering fields of subdued colour, and it was his name that was most often evoked for white viewers confronted by Rover's work for the first time.

If Tony didn't already know the story about Rover's visit to the National Gallery of Australia, he soon would. There, on an immaculate white wall,

hung one of Rothko's iconic paintings, known interchangeably as *1957 #20* or *Black, Brown on Maroon*. It was a striking work, one of the gallery's crowning jewels: earthen-toned horizontal bands floating over a blood-red ground, all of it brushed in thin layers of oil pigment to a perfectly matt finish.

'Who's that bugger that paints like me?' Rover asked the curator accompanying him, Wally Caruana.

Rover, it seemed, recognised the simple, graphic charge in Rothko's work: it was by the same means that his own images were projected into the world around them. In his own way, Serge was similarly identifying what carried so much Aboriginal painting into the white art world: it looked like Western art; the core difference of it was wrapped in familiarity.

As Serge continued to go through Rover's recent paintings, expressing his disbelief at the more minimal among them, he clearly expected Tony to share in his disdain. If anything, this man who'd once slaughtered Kimberley cattle for a living couldn't believe his luck.

Not long after, Serge took Tony to collect Rover.

Rover was by then much diminished – he would die less than a year later – but he was still responding to the demand for his paintings. On the trip back to Warmun he sat up front with Serge, while Tony looked on from the back seat. Serge passed Rover a beer, which the old painter drank warm. He then expertly flicked the empty can out of the window, only to have it violently rebound into the cabin: he hadn't wound down the glass. The three of them laughed about that, and although Tony would later sit with Rover and watch the old man trace the bones of a new composition across an otherwise blank canvas, it was this story he would recount most readily: the old painter, the rebounding beer can, the highway flinging past.

But although Serge and Maxine treated Tony well during his brief visit, he could never quite ascertain the outline of their business model. He would always associate them with a story that he would soon hear through Freddie, who had often painted for the couple but didn't trust them. The story was that when Maxine paid the artists, she would do so from the window of the old police station, hanging out and scattering notes over the yard below.

She'd call out like a crow: 'Waak, waak, waak' and the painters, many of them among the most respected Elders of the Gija world, would have to peck around in the dirt there, gathering up whatever money she had deemed their labour to be worth.

As Warmun's history became clearer to Tony, the absolute perversity of this scene was unavoidable: Maxine paying the old painters in the same spot where the killer Mick Rhatigan had once doled out rations.

•

There were a group of artists at Narrangunny Art Traders who were obviously regulars: on the first morning of Tony's visit they were spread out around the old post office, working cross-legged on the ground.

Jack Britten was there, a solid, severe-looking man bent over a distinctive painting of the Bungle Bungle Ranges. Beside him was another old man, then known in the art world only by his first name, Birribi, which he signed 'Beerbee'. He was working on a painting of hills, simple and unadorned.

Others were there too, but it was Hector Jandany who stood out.

He was still then often called Hector Chundaloo, and Tony recognised him immediately from a photograph he'd seen in a National Gallery of Victoria catalogue. It had been published to coincide with a 1993 survey of Kimberley art titled 'Images of Power' and showed Hector standing with a group of fellow Warmun artists: Britten, Queenie McKenzie and a beautiful old man called Henry Wambini to whom Freddie had already introduced Tony at Frog Hollow.

In the photograph the others appear resigned to the intrusion, but Hector is a natural. He takes the camera's gaze and makes with it something beautiful: his body seems to twist up through the frame; he leans in close to Wambini, but loosely gestures in the other direction. The effect is coy, slightly wry, more than a touch flamboyant. His eyes are hidden behind circular-lensed sunglasses, a near-perfect counterpoint to his patterned short-sleeved shirt and striped pants.

The photograph flagged Hector as an eccentric among his countrymen, and now, as they met, Tony wasn't disappointed. Hector was wearing a dressing-gown over his clothes, a flourish that Tony soon learnt the artist

favoured. In a place where the older men almost exclusively wore battered wide-brimmed stock hats, Hector preferred terry-towelling fishing hats with a tiny brim. Sometimes they would be dog-chewed and frayed, but on Hector even the most far gone would appear somehow princely.

It was Hector who welcomed Tony as he approached the painters for the first time, and then went about telling him what he needed to hear to feel comfortable in a place so foreign. It was a role in which Hector had long excelled – this practice of taking whites under his wing and explaining to them the local world – and Tony soon became his newest project.

Without fanfare, it was Hector who would soon offer him a skin name, Jungurra. With that, he identified Tony as his brother: ‘Ngaji’ in Gija.

7.

Later, as Tony recalled those early years in country, when his head had been swimming with new ideas, it would be Hector’s voice he would often hear. Sometimes, he could still feel the old man’s firm hand clasping his shoulder or his leg as the two of them talked.

When Tony returned to the Kimberley for another visit, several months after his first, he found himself on the veranda of Hector’s house in Warmun’s ‘bottom camp’. He camped there in a swag, and each evening Hector would set out to educate him about the local world. Sometimes Hector would corral a group of young Gija men into listening, but just as often it would simply be the two of them.

The old man was a generous guide. Often he began or ended at points of contact, moments where Gija ideas passed, however imperfectly, into the world brought about by the settlers.

‘That Ngarranggarni,’ Hector might say, gesturing vaguely across the ranges that lay visible over the community’s low rooftops. ‘He man, that Ngarranggarni. He like a Jesus: might be him Jesus.’

The Ngarranggarni was the animating spirit of Gija country: that’s what Hector explained to Tony in his famously digressive, elliptical fashion. It was the Law that Gija were bound by, but it also seemed to be like time

itself: the space in which the ancestral present lived on with all that had ever happened, or would happen. Even what was happening around them as the two men spoke there on the veranda was somehow part of it.

'Gardiya' was another word that Hector quickly introduced. This was the Gija name for white people, and the old man spoke it often. 'Kartiya' it was spelt further south, in the desert, and when Tony learnt this he imagined the word spreading between language groups, adapting ever so slightly to new tongues as it announced the coming of the settlers. Gardiya was a subject that Hector constantly parsed. It described a world of hidden motivations: an enduring, unsolvable mystery defined by way of difference alone.

Individual gardiya could be figures of ridicule or fear. *'That gardiya,'* Hector might say, referring to a specific figure from the past or present, someone whose world had collided with his own and created a tangle of crossed intentions that required scrutiny.

That gardiya at the Balangarri Corporation was always talking about money.

That other gardiya was good; that one couldn't be trusted.

Back in the station days, *that* gardiya had chained Hector's grandmother to a tree while she was pregnant with his mother, and beaten her.

Often, it could be used far more generally: 'You gardiya' would simply mean Tony and his kind. 'Gardiya' alone was broader still: it could be deployed as a means to capture the whole carapace of European law that had enacted so much change over the old man's lifetime.

This was the real issue that Hector kept returning to: gardiya had imposed laws that had nothing to do with the Ngarranggarni, yet Gija were compelled to follow them. Gija had experienced gardiya law as destructive rather than generative: it wanted to take everything into its belly, to smother it all.

As they sat there in the evening, the lowering light pushing the shadows long, proof of the brutal effectiveness of gardiya law lay all around. The very community, whose fortunes rose and fell with faraway acts of government, spoke of its power.

Tony would never master the intricacies of Gija language, but listening to Hector he soon began to build an understanding of Kimberley Kriol.

'Bat, bat, bat,' Hector would say mid-story, pushing the word out in quick succession.

This was a marker of time passing, a narrative quickening that linked continuity without having to dwell on unnecessary detail.

'La', used often, was another linking word: something like 'at', or 'on', or 'to'. Understanding it depended on context, which in turn depended on how closely Tony was following Hector's circuitous ruminations.

'Mefella' was a group in which Hector was counting himself; 'meself' was he alone. As he spoke he would often point or gesture, his hand tracing clipped arabesques in the air before him.

Some words were holdovers from the station times, when Hector had first learnt English as a child. These could be old-fashioned. 'Killer' was beef, and came from the days in which a single beast was selected from a mob of cattle and dispatched to eat: a 'killer'. Words could equally betray their childhood origins: Hector referred to his late mother as 'Mummy'. She had been raised by Kate Rhatigan when Warmun was still Turkey Creek. His mother's mother, the one who'd been beaten, was 'Granny'.

'Nalija' was tea, which was served in huge enamelled mugs, one of the very few household possessions that were jealously guarded. In the early days it was often Tony's job to steep the handful of teabags in a pot of hot water. Once he had, he and Hector would sit side by side with the heavily sweetened brew cradled before them.

In those moments Hector would repeat one assertion again and again. It went something like this: 'If gardiya and blackfella got together, they might be learning one another, teaching one another.'

It was an idea Hector was uniquely qualified to discuss: he had dedicated much of his life to this space between gardiya and Gija, this interface that, for him, promised the only solution to the mess that had been made of the Gija world.

In recent decades, a similar idea had risen across Aboriginal Australia. Like others, Hector called it Two Way.

It was a simple philosophy. Hector was a devout Catholic who had not only readily accepted the Church's teachings, but identified in them the pattern he already knew from the Ngarranggarni. Like so many Aboriginal people subject to the Church's intrusions, he felt Catholic doctrine only

sought to explain the same animating force that plotted out the lives of his people and always had done.

In 1979, just after Warmun had come into official existence, Hector played a central role in establishing the local school, which they had called Ngalangangpum, a name that meant, quite simply, 'mothers and children'. An attempt to develop a mixed curriculum there had first carried forth the idea of Two Way. Before this, Gija children had travelled to Halls Creek, Kununurra or Wyndham for school, but senior figures like Hector were concerned by the lack of Gija content, by the way in which children would return to Warmun with no language but English. They wanted greater control over what the younger generation were taught.

Catholic nuns of the Josephite order were recruited from Kununurra to deliver the non-Gija lessons, but in the absence of any real infrastructure the school was at first an informal place. Initial lessons took place under a bough shelter the community had constructed for the purpose; later they moved to the shade of a large white-trunked eucalyptus, before a more permanent building was secured.

Each morning, Elders like Hector would arrive early, and before the European lessons in reading and writing and arithmetic commenced, they would teach Gija words and songs. Hector was among those who used painting as a teaching tool. As with the other artists in the community who were just then working towards the invention of East Kimberley art, Hector would transcribe his images onto whatever was at hand: a sheet of cardboard, perhaps, or a plywood offcut.

When the teaching was done, these images were hung in the classroom. Hector made no distinction in terms of content; he would paint both Catholic and Gija icons: each served a purpose in ceremonies that although distinct, were also not. He once depicted himself in a painting as Jesus, struggling under the weight of the cross as he moved through an unmistakably Kimberley landscape. When the priest arrived from Halls Creek to deliver regular sermons to the community, it would often be Hector who stood there and offered a Gija translation for those who gathered. He was known to make ready comparisons as he went: the story of Easter and the resurrection of Christ he would present in Gija terms: 'reincarnation' rather than 'resurrection'. It was a simple thing, but, as

Tony now learnt, that's what Two Way was: a search for those points of connection that might help elaborate an exchange on something at least approaching equal terms. This idea that Tony was already building towards with Freddie – this painting collective – needed to develop across the same ground: that's what Hector's discussions would circle back to.

Two Way, he would say again and again, that's how it needed to work.

8.

Now, in the red LandCruiser with Freddie, Tony was heading for Chocolate Thomas's house. It was Freddie who had suggested the visit: he and Chocolate were old friends and had once worked together on Old Greenvale Station. Freddie's intention was simple: he was taking Tony to see Chocolate's paintings in the hope Chocolate might join the painting group.

Tony had already met Chocolate – he'd recently travelled to Old Greenvale with Chocolate and Freddie – and knew him as a friendly man who spoke, like many Gija, with a declaratory abruptness. His name came from his station days, but although it seemed a perfect emblem of the casual racism Gija had been born into, the truth, as Tony had already learnt, was different. As a child, Chocolate had crept into the station cook's pantry and gorged himself on the supply of cooking chocolate: his resulting nickname had stuck fast. Now he was one of the few Gija employees at the diamond mine, a position that had clearly brought him some level of wealth: he often drove a near-new Toyota and wore fresh-looking shirts.

Tony and Freddie pulled up and, after an enthusiastic greeting, Chocolate ushered his visitors across his barren front yard. Even in a community full of rundown, broken infrastructure, the house would stick in Tony's memory. It was a mess: 'diabolical', he'd later claim. Dust and grime caked the place; foam mattresses lay about the dirt yard in various states of decay. Inside, the windows were covered with cloth; it was dark, the air heavy with burnt cooking grease. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Tony made out paintbrushes and tins of dried ochre paint among the debris.

Chocolate brought out his paintings, and the visit grew awkward. Tony read them in an instant and his heart sank: they were standard examples of East Kimberley art, far from special. But in the clutter of the kitchen, Tony made out another stack of painted boards.

Even in the gloom they showed promise. He stooped down and picked one up.

‘Are these yours, Chocolate?’ Tony would recall asking.

Chocolate explained that they weren’t, that they were by an old man called Gooomji, or Paddy Bedford, who was staying with Chocolate’s family.

‘He’s out the front now,’ Chocolate said.

One work was painted on what appeared to have recently been a cupboard door, the white Laminex surface of which now served as a blank ground for a hill painted roughly in black and red ochre. A long range-like form extended across the top of the composition. It was smudged and dirty but there was a lightness to it, a clarity. There was also a similar painting on cardboard, this time a muddy red: what appeared to be another horizontal sequence of hills. There was a second work on a cupboard door, marked by a distinctive series of vertical lines.

The largest painting was on a sheet of plywood almost a metre across. It had a black ground over-painted with a sequence of red forms, each of them outlined in white dotting. In one corner there was an organic, starburst-like shape: what appeared to be a dotted flower, but which probably wasn’t.

Tony felt a rush of excitement.

The works struck him as anarchic in the best of ways: dashed off, but somehow perfectly resolved. He was reminded of the early, prized works that had defined the contours of the entire East Kimberley movement, the rough ochre paintings on boards prepared for Rover Thomas’s *Guirr-Guirr* by artists like Paddy Jaminji. He’d seen work from that period at Kimberley Art in Melbourne, and knew it well.

Chocolate explained that Bedford had painted the boards as a teaching device, a means to simply show Chocolate what to paint in preparation for Freddie and Tony’s visit. This idea drew Tony immediately: the disconnect from the market, the fact they’d been made at a step removed. He felt he could work with it.

Afterwards they had simply been discarded there in the kitchen – more refuse added to the thick drift that surrounded them. As a kind of origin story, it was near flawless.

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Seeing the paintings returned Tony to one of the things he'd loved about his life as a dealer – that all-too-rare moment of aesthetic revelation upon which something new might be built. And although he recognised in those boards the vernacular of artists like Rover or Paddy Jaminji, the feeling of discovery took his mind elsewhere.

In New York, he had once visited Jake Berthot's studio. Berthot, then in his fifties, was not a recognised master in the league of Philip Guston, but he was nonetheless respected as a painter's painter. His work had been shown in the Venice Biennale, and collected by New York institutions as esteemed as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney; Tony was preparing to exhibit it back home in Sydney in what would be his gallery's final exhibition.

David McKee, Tony's gallerist-supporter in New York, had organised the visit. He described Berthot as a kind of authentic throwback from another age; in Tony's memory McKee's words were something like, 'a reincarnated version of an eighteenth-century backwoodsman'. It made sense: Berthot was tall and ruggedly handsome. As soon as Tony met him, he felt comfortable in the older man's presence. But he wasn't relaxed: as he sat in the studio he recognised he was in the company of someone whose reservoir of knowledge was far deeper than his own. Tony weighed carefully everything he said, especially when it came to painting.

Berthot was then working on his 'lozenge' paintings – abstract canvases in which sombre-coloured brush marks teased out central lozenge shapes – and he showed Tony examples. Although out of step with current trends, it was clear they were the real deal. Tony had seen them in reproduction and assumed that in the flesh they would be thickly painted, rugged like Berthot himself, but although they were physical, in places Berthot had employed soft washes of oil paint. The lightness of that was surprising. There seemed to be a lesson in it, one about balance and counterpoint.

The lozenge paintings were great, but it was another work that stood out. Tony had seen it on the studio wall when he first walked in and it had caught his eye. Berthot said he had been looking at it for weeks beforehand, trying to figure out how to finish it: only the night before had he brusquely covered its surface with a rough web of calligraphic black marks.

Tony was entranced by the painting. Berthot, surely sensing his visitor's excitement, explained that it was called *At Noontide*, after a chapter in Nietzsche's philosophical work of fiction, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. At the height of the day, Zarathustra falls asleep beside a gnarled tree and dreams for what seems an eternity, only to wake and discover the sun has not moved at all.

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In Warmun, Tony stepped from the darkness of Chocolate's kitchen to find Paddy Bedford waiting on the veranda with Freddie.

He would recall the old man was dressed in a short-sleeved shirt, once white but now grime-covered, untucked over loose-fitting pants. He didn't quite yet have a beard, but it appeared days since the whiskers had been cut from his face. He had on a wide-brimmed stock hat, but no shoes, just his bare feet in the dust.

Tony tells him that the works he's just seen are 'masterpieces', explains to him what Freddie and he are doing. He invites the old man to join them in Kununurra, and within days that's exactly what he does. When he one day looks back over the nine years that follow, it will seem to Tony that from that point onwards they were always together.



Pindan Avenue

1.

‘That old man’s going to be the next Rover.’

That’s what Tony told Simon Georgeff, a young man from Melbourne who was letting him stay at his rented house in Kununurra. Tony and Freddie had just returned from meeting Paddy in Warmun and Tony’s excitement was clear.

It wouldn’t be the last time he made the comparison, nor would Simon be alone in hearing it. In fact, Tony evoked Rover’s name enough in the early years for it to begin to appear as much a challenge to himself as a measure of Paddy’s talent. When he stopped making the statement it was simply because it was no longer necessary: under his management, Paddy would rise almost impossibly fast.

Simon’s house was on Pindan Avenue, and was a peaked-roofed, fibro-clad construction perfectly in keeping with the region’s simple architecture. It sat in the middle of a large and unkempt suburban block, raised slightly off the ground. There was a tiny veranda at the front; two steps led up from the dusty yard. Inside there was little more than a kitchen, a bathroom and two bedrooms. The owner had left one room locked: he’d stacked an assortment of belongings inside. What little he’d left in the rest of the house served as Simon’s meagre furniture: there was a reclining chair in the front room beside an old piano; a table in the kitchen.

Although Simon, at twenty-one, was significantly younger than Tony, the two of them got on well. They’d met through one of Tony’s oldest Melbourne friends, the gallerist William Mora, who at times sold paintings to Simon’s father, an occasional collector. A quiet evening in Kununurra would see the two sitting on the front veranda as they shared a bottle of black sambuca between them. For some reason that was their drink of

choice, and as they systematically worked through a bottle, Tony would tell stories.

There were the trips to New York, the money that had passed through his hands as a dealer, the famous artists he'd met along the way. He vividly described a visit he'd taken to Andy Warhol's studio, and told of how he was introduced to a group of the New York graffiti artists who, in the 1980s, had briefly stormed the art world. He even almost met the most famous of them, Jean-Michel Basquiat, but had to catch a plane home. To Simon, an aspiring writer who had grown up between Melbourne and the west coast of the United States, all of that seemed worldly: a life of incident and intrigue of the kind he imagined for himself. The fact it seemed so far from the relative privilege of his own world only added to the appeal.

Over the past eighteen months Simon had made his own inroads into Kununurra. After dropping out of a university degree in Melbourne, he'd ended up in the Kimberley almost by chance. At first he worked for a local Aboriginal art dealer – an ex-manager of the local community art centre, Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, who had cut out on his own – before taking a role as interim manager of Marralum, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program on a nearby community. He had sat out there through the wet season, watching as storms rolled across the landscape. In the months before Tony's arrival, he had been spending his time with the teenagers and young men he'd met there. They were Miriwoong and Gajerrong, the language groups on whose country Kununurra now lay, and had opened for him a window onto town life: smoking weed in the reserve, drinking moselle in the park, wandering drunk beneath the stars. Simon had embraced it all. He even had a joey kangaroo that he kept as a pet and which he'd often carry about town in a backpack.

Before Tony's arrival Simon's house was one among a shifting network that his young friends wandered between. They would stash smoking paraphernalia there, fearful of the ever-present eyes of the local police, and turn up unannounced to get high in the lounge room as they played American rap like Cypress Hill and NWA over Simon's stereo. There was an appealing sense of camaraderie among the group: Simon loved the toughness of them, but also the fact they could be demonstrative in a way he wasn't used to. A new friend might take him by the shoulders, look him

in the eye and say, 'We're brothers. It doesn't matter about our skin.' It had sparked a sense of loyalty he would carry for years.

On arrival, Tony unwittingly changed things. For starters, he brought Gija people into the social mix. Not only were they a different language group, they were for the most part old men rather than the young men and teenagers Simon had come to know. First among them were Freddie and his high-spirited, gravel-voiced offsider Churchill Cann. Both remained bound to the station days and the pattern of Law that they still understood as the animate force of their ancestral country, a far cry from the appropriated black American culture that had captured the younger generations. Freddie and Churchill listened to classic country and western like Slim Dusty with a sense of reverence; rap was the anathema of everything they'd lived.

Freddie was a dedicated drinker, but Churchill even more so. He drank with almost comedic abandon. With him onsite, the social scene stepped up a notch. It was true that evenings could be quiet – the black sambuca, the front veranda, the long conversations – but often they spiralled. Like Simon, Tony had already enthusiastically stepped into this side of local life. During one of his earlier visits, he had spent a run of boisterous nights at the Gija town drinking camp, a semi-permanent gathering of swags and blankets in a bushy vacant lot near the centre of town. He remembered it fondly. The apparent roughness of the drinking camp veiled something more complex, even unexpectedly mannered: Tony would go on to claim he learnt as much there as he did anywhere in the Kimberley. Now, with Churchill and Freddie as their initial guides, he and Simon were soon regulars at the Animal Bar, a markedly unadorned place attached to the proudly three-starred Hotel Kununurra.

It was only a short walk – just a couple of blocks through the centre of town, past the Tuckerbox supermarket and down Konkerberry Drive. The bar's name was the kind of racially charged colloquialism that was constantly slung around the town, but Aboriginal people had clearly embraced it. They drank there almost exclusively. Inside it was all concrete floors and plastic chairs; the tables were bolted down. Glass in any form had long been banned; beer or rum and coke were served in cans, spirits in plastic cups. It was one of only a handful of places in which local Aboriginal

people seemed to fully let themselves go: if one was game, a night at the Animal Bar could be ridden like a wave.

Whites, for the most part, frequented the other side of the hotel bar, which was dubbed, far more innocuously, the Green Room. Tony had drunk there too, not long after he arrived in Kununurra, but had found the experience deeply unsettling. It was a place of rancid superiority, openly racist. Rough whites sat in the shadowy interior simmering over their pints: men with thin ponytails and tattoos and darting eyes, older women who appeared scorched by the northern sun.

But the Animal Bar was different. Drinks were more expensive there than the Green Room, but if you factored in the raw humanity of the place, it was more than worth it. Stray whites were likely to be directed next door, but with Freddie and Churchill vouching for them, Tony and Simon were welcomed. They chased shots of tequila with cans of beer. To Simon it quickly became a 'wild west type place' where anything was possible: he found he could as easily fall into a sprawling all-night pool tournament as get punched in the face, or that a woman would grab him for a flailing dance, 'jealousing' her boyfriend who sat glowering across the crowded room.

All of it felt taboo, as if their presence were a transgression of the way in which the town had organised itself along clearly marked colour lines. Some of Tony and Simon's best nights were spent there, and, once they were done, and could barely see straight, they would stagger out to make the short walk home. Under the night sky the town took on a certain unrestrained beauty. The moon, when it rose full, seemed to hang so heavy in the sky that it appeared reluctant to let go of the horizon at all. Here and there, other figures moved beneath the streetlights. Unwieldy clumps of bougainvillea tumbled over fences, dense with sprays of pink and white and red. Walking home charged with booze could draw forth a feeling of contentment in both men.

At first, Simon had broken into the locked bedroom and set a spare mattress for Tony amid the clutter, but the switch to the air-conditioner had proven elusive and the room was sweltering, near impossible to sleep in. Churchill's nightly ritual made it harder still: he would often arrive back at the house late and cook a meal of fried kidneys and freshly chopped chilli.

The fatty aroma would drift heavily through the whole house. Seeking respite, Tony dragged his mattress to the garden and set it out alongside a cyclone-wire fence the property shared with a childcare centre. It was quieter, cooler: he could sleep there relatively undisturbed. After a night's drinking, he would sometimes wake late, long after the sun had cleared the horizon. Next door, white mothers would already be dropping their children off for the day. The barbed glances he would receive through the fence only emboldened his resolve to go as deep as he could into the Gija world.

Churchill slept wherever he could. One morning, Tony, Simon and Freddie found him passed out in the front yard, a dead snake beside him in the dust. For a moment they thought Churchill had been bitten and was dead too. But he was only sleeping and soon awoke.

He was as perplexed by the scene as anyone.

The mystery of the snake was never solved, but the story that followed wrote itself: the snake had bitten Churchill and then succumbed to alcohol poisoning.

2.

Other artists would soon make themselves known to Tony and Freddie, and the painting group would expand organically, but initially it was Freddie who put his energy into the project: the first paintings made at Pindan Avenue were his. They were destined for a solo exhibition with William Mora in Melbourne and the deadline was tight. Tony set up a trestle table in the front yard and ordered stretched canvases and large white buckets of milled pigment from the best suppliers in Melbourne.

No colour this time, just the subdued ochre palette of the Kimberley.

Without fail, Freddie would rise early. He would begin work while the sun was still low. The table was just outside Simon's window and each morning Simon would hear the sharp hiss of a beer can being opened.

Freddie would drink it, open another, and pick up his brush.

He would work methodically until the sun was high in the sky and the heat made it impossible to continue. He would then wander off into town to spend the day with a revolving cast of family and hangers-on, arriving

home in the evening to cook a steak, retreat to his swag, and prepare to do it all again the next day. In this way he painted the entire exhibition in less than two weeks.

Simon became friendly with Churchill immediately, but his relationship with Freddie was slower to progress. Freddie often appeared reticent to engage, and it was only when Simon realised his ambitions as a writer and published an article in Melbourne's *Sunday Age* that relations between the two seemed to thaw. The piece detailed Freddie and Tony's project. After talking to them both, Simon framed it in terms of social justice: theirs was a stand against the more rapacious interests of the Aboriginal art industry, a struggle for something approaching economic independence in a context where this was too often denied. Simon's article offered them a platform to argue that consignment sales were the way forward, the means by which to bring the Aboriginal art industry in line with its white counterpart.

By then, Simon had lived with Freddie long enough to know something of his character. To Freddie's evident pleasure he didn't gloss his portrait: he wrote of him as a 'raging bull', someone who could knock a door from its hinges in a drunken rage. But it was a nuanced picture too: just because Freddie was part of the Kimberley's hard-drinking culture didn't mean he understood the inequalities of the Aboriginal art market any less. Simon was careful to underscore that Freddie's work with Tony was marked by an undeniable pragmatism.

He interviewed Freddie on the veranda at Pindan Avenue and Freddie recounted how he and Tony had met in Melbourne, how they'd visited the Argyle Dam and looked across the flooded country as Freddie first discussed his earnings in Melbourne in detail. He spoke about 'Old Frank Watters' and how Watters had delivered so well with the exhibition in Sydney.

In the article, Simon carefully burnished the rough edges from Freddie's Kriol-inflected English: 'It doesn't matter where you go – Fitzroy Crossing, Derby, Broome – all those Aboriginal artists, they don't get much money. They think five hundred dollars is big money. They don't know how much their painting is worth. But I found out.'

•

Word of Freddie and Tony's intent to build something different appeared to move quickly through the Gija world. Rusty Peters, a tall and slender man aged in his early sixties, arrived at Pindan Avenue soon afterwards. Simon had already met him at an opening at William Mora's that he attended with his father: it had been Rusty who had invited him to visit the Kimberley in the first place.

Tony knew Rusty too. They had crossed paths at the drinking camp, which was presided over with some flair by Rusty's brother Rammel. During the short period Tony spent there, Rusty had at times stayed too, usually after putting in a day's work at Waringarri Aboriginal Arts. He was a striking figure, stooped from an old station accident that had left him with a rolling, painful-looking gait, a testament to poorly healed bones. His face was framed by long hair, his eyes bright and dark. Although quiet, he wasn't shy. When he spoke it was in a deep, mumbling baritone; his laugh, when it came, convulsed his thin frame.

All this Tony would come to love, but at first Rusty was an enigmatic presence. He didn't yet paint in any meaningful way – at Waringarri he was simply paid a small wage to mow the grass and pack paintings for transport – but as he folded himself into a plastic chair on the veranda at Pindan Avenue it became clear that he too was interested.

A large, wryly humorous woman called Phyllis Thomas was there soon after. She lived for the most part with her husband Big Joe at Crocodile Hole, the tiny outstation towards Warmun, and arrived much like Rusty: unannounced, but confident. She settled herself in the front yard and fixed Tony with a steady gaze. ('What now, Jungurra?' she'd often say to him with an elaborate sigh.) Goody Barrett, a warm and good-natured woman in her sixties who Tony had first met at Hector's place in Warmun, also expressed interest. Like the other women she dressed in long floral skirts: a holdover from the Catholic-inflected conventions of the station days.

Goody and Phyllis would both prove a pleasure to work with, and would each in their own way come to shape Tony's time in country, but it was Peggy Patrick, a woman who carried herself like a queen through the surrounding milieu, who quickly became the group's matriarch.

Such a role was far from uncommon – older Aboriginal women often found themselves caring for large mobs of grandchildren and

great-grandchildren – but Peggy added her own distinctive touch. She would as readily appear trailing a wayward linguist or anthropologist as she would a swarm of kids. Aged somewhere in her late sixties, she had travelled widely and now moved among whites with a striking confidence, aware of the power she wielded. The patterned bandanna she often wore knotted about her forehead added a rakish touch that suited her to a tee; earth-mother and raconteur in near-equal measure.

Simon wouldn't stay much longer in the Kimberley, but he grew to know each of the new arrivals who added to the unfolding scene at Pindan Avenue. Although he would recall them all with a certain fondness, it was Hector to whom he was drawn most strongly. Hector had appeared not long after Tony, and although he eventually began painting too, he at first simply continued the informal induction he'd set in motion for Tony in Warmun. In Kununurra, he readily embraced Simon as well: another willing pair of ears, another project.

Simon was entranced by Hector, and soon took to recording the long conversations the two of them would share. He transcribed them in thick blocks of unedited English, Kriol-heavy and near impenetrable.

On tape, Hector's voice would fade in and out as the surrounding world stirred around them: a passing car, a crow's sudden lamentation, indistinct yelling from the street.

Given the ceremony of the recorder, Simon would most often be the one to begin: 'Good morning Mr Chundaloo.'

Hector would look at him and smile.

'Hello, Mr Simon,' he'd say.

Sometimes Hector would playfully repeat the title: 'Mr, Mr, Mr Simon.'

Then he would be off.

As he laid out moments from his life he jumped backwards and forwards in time, just as he'd done with Tony when the two had first sat talking together in Warmun. He would speak of his ancestors and forebears in the same breath in which he would address his concern for the Gija youth he saw falling through the cracks in the world around them.

Only occasionally would he pause briefly, look quizzically at Simon, and make sure he was following.

'You like'im, that English? Pidgin English, Mr Simon?'

Simon had only to offer the most minimal of prompts. 'When you were a little boy, did the old men teach you Law?' he once asked as they sat together.

'Not little boy time,' Hector explained. 'Big man time, like you.'

'Magic one, all the old people, plenty magic one,' Hector said.

He explained how the old people used to look at his generation, raised either in Turkey Creek or on the stations, and tell them they appeared sick. If they wanted to be healthy they needed to walk their country, looking for bush tucker. They had to feed themselves.

Another morning, Hector began with life on the stations and how he'd first learnt to speak English.

'I'll tell you a story about when I was a young boy,' he said.

'Then – when I first go to the stock job, working the cattle, when I was teenage – I didn't know about proper speaking English language. I didn't know. And manager – gardiya – he used to belt me, make me listen, teach me how to talk English language.'

He explained that he'd mastered horse-work by the same means: the station manager hanging over him, ready to 'belt' him as he learnt to saddle a young colt and break it in. He'd climb on its back only to be bucked off time and time again.

'Hard time I had, from white people,' he said, 'hard time.'

Station labour provided Hector a near-constant theme. He told Simon of driving cattle from station to port, of how he had watched over them through the night and, if they broke away from the mob, chased them down on horseback. He spoke of pushing them as a mass across the river, of how crocodiles waited there in the deep water.

Later, he explained that he had not only become a clever horseman, but an expert farrier.

'Not too tight'im shoe la foot,' he'd say.

'If a horse got no shoe, he can't gallop. He hurt'im la foot. You must put a shoe on him: then he can run like a motorcar.'

All this work was done for next to nothing.

'I bin just working for piece of bread and slice of meat,' Hector explained to Simon more than once. 'We used to have that for tucker: breakfast or dinner like that.'

Shadows lay thick in Hector's memory, but at first he only hinted at them.

'Granny brother and cousin brother all bin get killed,' he said one morning.

'Might be gardiya bin kill'im – we don't know what – but they been put'im longa hole now, old people, you know?'

Statements like that would hang there, context unspoken, until the conversation simply followed its meandering path elsewhere.

'How do you say rain?' Simon asked later.

Hector told him, offering up the correct word in language, before immediately expanding on it by explaining how to say 'rain is falling down'.

Then he offered the word for lightning and a storm that had been brewing around them broke in torrents; the sound of heavy rain washed over the recording.

•

When Paddy arrived from Warmun it was with little fanfare. He was dropped off by family and brought with him nothing but the clothes he was wearing. Hector knew Paddy well; when Paddy set up to paint in the front yard, Hector joined him.

The two old men sat directly on the dirt, their legs crossed. Tony carefully arranged everything around them, made sure the 'studio', such as it was, ran smoothly. He moved quietly, topping up paint and refreshing brush water as he went. If the old men spoke it was usually softly; at times they would pass a joke from one to the other, but painting, for the most part, was a serious enterprise.

PB's first works at the house were bracingly simple. Tony provided him with board, rather than canvas, which he had cut to roughly the same size as the largest of the works he'd found in Warmun. The paintings that followed expanded from those raw beginnings. Paddy depicted country as loosely organic circles, bordered by black, and linked together by roughly brushed grounds. Beside Hector's paintings, which were often symmetrical and exacting, PB's appeared almost clumsy, but the tenor of his voice

was clear immediately. His compositions at first jostled together almost unthinkingly: it could seem as if forms risked being pushed from the edge of a painting entirely, that only by attenuating them, or pulling them out of shape, did PB manage to fit them in.

Freddie also played with the edges of his works – the long lines of riverbeds or roads that he extended off a picture's edge readily pulled a viewer's eye beyond what was depicted on the canvas alone – but there was a quality to his paintings that could appear overly calculated, as if he knew exactly what he was doing and was leaving little to chance. Years later, Tony would argue that by this measure Freddie had been the most accomplished among the painters, and at one level it was true: there was an undeniable confidence in how Timms resolved many of his works. But what PB lacked in polish, he made up for in character. As he sat there in the dirt of the front yard, it was clear his paintings had an immediacy that was impossible to rehearse.

One work followed another: a group of bulbous forms, a tentative line, ragged outlines of white dots. In coming years PB's paintings would become more and more refined, but even as his compositions emptied towards nothing, these early qualities would carry through.

By measure of his early practice, Bedford's first work on canvas was a huge step forward. Its subject was the Emu Dreaming, and the country he painted – black and red hill-forms gathered around a prominent vertical division – was laid down as a stage for the ancestral drama that animated its surfaces.

The same place cradled the historical narrative of the Bedford Downs massacre, a story that Tony would soon learn in all its terrible detail, but at first PB left this aspect unspoken. He showed the emu ancestor untethered by frontier history: a forlorn figure stuck in a deep cleft at a place Gija called Garnannayien, a rocky peak on his father's country known to Europeans as Mount King. Paddy would later speak in detail about the mountain to the linguist Frances Kofod, about how it was a dangerous place that cried out across the landscape each time someone from that country died. An answer would come from another mountain on Texas Downs in the north-east: two sites, both fraught with spiritual danger, calling to one another across Gija land.

The emu was naively rendered, but it was nonetheless perfect: its long neck drooped downwards towards dangling feet; a mass of ranges pressed in around it. He drew it all together on a yellow ground, each form picked out by its ragged border of white dots. He explained that the bird had been journeying with Birnkirbal, the ancestral bush turkey, who abandoned him and later established the Law of night and day across Gija country.

Paddy's painting money would later be used to charter a helicopter to the site, and from above he would see that country laid out just as he knew it, the fissure in Mount King forming its cleft of shadow in the sunlight.

•

Simon, who was continuing his practice of recording audio, soon got his hands on a video camera and began to film the old men talking. In the months that followed he and a girlfriend, Sally Law, who would visit from Melbourne, would gather together footage and edit a short, elegiac film from the material. In one scene, PB would explain what it was for him to paint.

Simon had already heard Hector talk about this in detail – for Gija of his generation, painting was the equivalent of school, one of the ways in which stories had been passed down the line: the paintings Hector had seen in caves as a young man had been integral to his Gija education. He'd even gone as far as explaining that 'If I didn't know painting, I should be dumb'.

For PB, painting carried similar weight: it was a means to assert his identity, to underscore his knowledge of place, which in turn seemed to carry a direct correlation to his authority in the Gija realm. By then, Paddy was only a year into his practice, but he already knew exactly where he stood.

'You know, my mother was a painter, and my painting is different from all the other painters,' he begins as Simon films.

His voice, which Simon knew well by then, is worn with age, but it remains lively; like Hector's, his English is declaratory, peppered with Kriol.

'I run my country, for countryside. All the names in my painting, all the country, mine. From my mother, and from my father, and for uncle, grandpa, granny: all them fellas.

'Nothing left now, only myself,' he says. 'That's what I run that painting for: for the olden times, for my grandchildren, for my mother and my father.'

And then, as if in summary: 'For country.'

Later, Simon's camera captures Paddy and Hector sitting quietly alongside a waterhole. Fresh spear grass forms a green wall behind them; kids can be heard splashing in the water just beyond the shot. The conversation has shifted to far broader concerns.

Hector sits at the front, looking downwards pensively; the tiny brim on his terry-towelling fishing hat only just shades his eyes. Paddy sits directly behind his old friend. He wears his stock hat. A sleeveless shirt, once white, is gathered by only one button at the centre of his chest. He tilts his head back and takes a drink from a two-litre bottle of bright orange soft drink.

Hector is the first to break the reverie.

'I bin running around, all around here, when I bin grow up,' he says.

'When I bin like them kids there' (he gestures beyond the frame) 'me and Goovoomji be running around. They bring Goovoomji from Violet Valley. He met up with me.'

At the mention of his Gija nickname Paddy cuts in.

'We never bin to school,' he says abruptly.

He looks down, away from the camera. He's now taken his hat from his head, uncovering his thick mass of grey curls, and has donned a pair of sunglasses with clear plastic frames. As he continues, a lit cigarette hangs precariously from his lips.

'All the old people bin taught us the proper way, you know?'

His voice rises a touch, thins out as it does.

Beside him, Hector grunts his approval: he knows the theme well.

'Well, we believed!' Paddy says. 'That's why we followed the Law from the old people.'

'They go gardiya way now,' he adds, referring to the children off-camera. 'They go gardiya side now.'

Hector takes up the same thread: 'I'm very sorry for them. My way, you know?

'I don't know what's going to be happening. I keep thinking about this country: Halls Creek, Turkey Creek, Kununurra. Nothing! I can't see anyone believing in Ngarranggarni.

'Why these young people can't come up and believe?' he asks softly. 'Why?'

Later still, Hector continues along the same path alone: 'Well, all these young people be dying now,' he says.

'What's wrong? *I* should be dying, I'm an old man. In Warmun, too many young people there died in the cemetery. Even Kununurra: too many young people died in Kununurra, in that cemetery over there, back of the hill.'

He describes his habit of visiting the graves there, how he sings what he refers to as 'Aboriginal corroboree' for them. 'Dead bodies,' he says.

As the film draws to a close, Hector puts what must be a great fear bluntly: 'When we die – all the Ngarranggarni man – well, you can't see Ngarranggarni man anymore.'

His point was clear. In Hector's conception it was he and Paddy, and others like them, who were the Ngarranggarni men. They understood the Law of the place they lived, knew how it required constant maintenance in the spiritual realm.

You had to be aware of the many demands of country to thrive there. The many problems that gardiya had brought to the Gija world were only underscored by their ignorance of this fact.

Everything in that country had been granted a brain by the Ngarranggarni. Hector had already explained this on Simon's recordings. The Ngarranggarni had taught Hector how to use his own brain, he'd said. It had taught him how to talk, how to dance, even how to paint.

Even a fish had brains. The proof of this lay in the fact that it wanted to touch the fishing line in the first place, that it could get hooked.

Even the smallest fish was an offering from the Ngarranggarni. White people might throw it back, but a Ngarranggarni man like Hector knew that no matter its size you had to cook it on the fire and eat it.

That was the Law.

‘When you chuck him away, the Ngarranggarni will punish you,’ Hector explained. ‘You’ll feel sick.’

Hector clearly sensed what all the old people feared the most: without this knowledge – this pattern of thought that kept the Gija safe in the place that sustained them – the lives of the young people were already lost.

3.

Others soon joined Paddy and Hector in the dust at Pindan Avenue. In her spare moments, fleeting as they were, Peggy Patrick now took up a brush and Tony attended to the first paintings she made with the new group; a young ‘understudy’ of Hector’s called Dougie Macale, who was in his forties, also began to paint in those early moments. Churchill continued to come and go, so too did Freddie.

Tony set up a speaker on the veranda and put on music.

He played a range of CDs, but a number hit high rotation: looking back, those front yard studio sessions were soundtracked by a set of distinctive voices, many of them Aboriginal.

There was Archie Roach’s acclaimed album *Charcoal Lane* and its soft title song about street drinking around Melbourne’s Fitzroy; in another track, ‘Native Born’, Roach sang of the famous Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira, and the Aboriginal loss of country. Classic country and western like Slim Dusty got a good run, as did Paul Kelly, the quintessential Melbourne singer-songwriter. Kelly’s 1992 collaboration with Kev Carmody, ‘From Little Things, Big Things Grow’, even became something of a studio anthem: the song’s subject – the Gurindji people’s struggle for land rights at Wave Hill Station – was as well known in the Kimberley as it was elsewhere. The Gurindji had pushed against the pastoral invaders and won. Gough Whitlam, the boss for all gardiya, had stood there with Vincent Lingiari, a man whose family ties extended to Gija country, and passed the old stockman a handful of soil. He’d given the place back.

From little things, big things grow: the resonance in the title alone wasn’t lost. Tony played the song over and over with absolute sincerity. As far as he was concerned, they were building something big.

Simon would later recall the sense of joy that carried through those days, the feeling of momentum that had so clearly captured the group. He would listen as Tony spoke to the artists about the white art world, repeating much of what he'd already explained to Freddie: the benefits of the consignment system seemed a near-constant theme. Freddie's success with Watters remained the touchstone. Using that example, Tony would explain money, what commissions meant, how it was better to offset short-term gain with a long-term vision.

He also began to spread the word. Not long after Paddy began to paint, Tony reached out to two art collectors he knew in Sydney, Colin and Elizabeth Laverty. He'd first met the couple through Ray Hughes, the flamboyant Sydney art dealer, and had liked them immediately. He'd still had his Melbourne gallery then and over the years that followed they'd rarely been out of touch for long. He called from Kununurra and attested to the project's promise, and then followed up with two letters. He included photographs of paintings that he and Simon took on the street at the front of the house, leaning each board or canvas against a street-light and cropping the image as close to the edge of the work as possible.

Aren't the Paddys fantastic – he's over 80 years of age, he wrote in the first letter. Into that envelope he slipped images of those first boards of Paddy's he'd found in Warmun.

Colin and Liz were widely known as serious collectors who knew what they liked. But more than that, they were the rare kind who would support an artist over their career regardless of whether their work fell out of broad favour or not. Colin, a famously gentle man, was a doctor and medical researcher who went on to found a successful network of pathology labs. Art was an abiding interest: by the time he married Liz in 1982 he'd parlayed an early enthusiasm for colonial paintings of sporting themes into a passion for modern Australian art, especially abstraction: a large Tony Tuckson was an early collection standout, as was a black 'door' painting by the Melbourne artist Peter Booth.

Liz took to art with a passion that rivalled her husband's, and the two went about building one of the largest private collections in the country. Many of the artists whom they collected in depth Tony knew and respected. Among them was the unique and undersung landscape painter

Ken Whisson, an Australian who had laboured for much of his career in a tiny live-in studio in the Italian city of Perugia. Whisson was a mainstay at Watters Gallery; following Freddie's first show there, Frank Watters had staged a two-person exhibition featuring Whisson and Freddie. It was the kind of thing that happened all too rarely in an art world where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art was often kept apart, but it had worked a dream: Whisson's uncertain, brushy lines offset perfectly the confidence with which Freddie cut through his works with simple arcing divisions. Many who saw that show remembered it always.

By the time Tony contacted the Lavertys from Kununurra, they had long achieved a similar bringing together of previously separate art worlds. A decade earlier, in 1988, a chance encounter with a group of canvases from the Western Desert had extended their focus to Aboriginal art. Those works, so complex and intricate in design, had convinced them to move quickly: they'd soon established themselves as the most dedicated and serious among the fast-growing ranks of Aboriginal art enthusiasts.

Visitors to their impressive Balmain home would see everything at once: groupings of fine porcelain ceramics by Gwyn Hanssen Pigott counterpointed by incised artefacts from the desert; elegant wooden assemblages by the sculptor Robert Klippel offset by the painterly canvases of Anmatyerr artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye – the so-called 'impossible modernist' who'd stormed the Australian art world in the 1990s and in her wake set the blueprint for so much of the remote painting that followed. There were photographs and drawings, woven baskets and editioned prints. International artists jostled for space among the many Australians represented. Once, when the Lavertys visited New York, Tony introduced them to his old friend David McKee, the gallerist. They returned home with two sublimely restrained abstractions by Harvey Quaytman, one of the American painters Tony had once shown in Melbourne. As distinctive as they were, Quaytman's works sat effortlessly in the collection, just like everything else.

Who better, Tony was thinking, to own the very first of Paddy's works?

He soon followed his first letter with the second, and included more photographs, each of them carefully numbered.

I think everything here is pretty good, he wrote. Paddy's energy is enormous and Hector and I told him to have a rest – he's very happy painting from early morning to dusk.

The photographs had been taken on an overcast day, and he made sure to apologise for the washed-out colours: *the richness in some of the paintings [is] lost, but these are good enough to get a general impression, he wrote.*

The yellow in PB.9 is flattened out and the red in PB.8 is much richer in reality. PB.7 is Paddy's first canvas – isn't it stunning!

Here Tony included a photo of the emu painting in progress – the image was taken from above, looking down on Paddy completing the final passages of dotted outline across the otherwise finished work.

Paddy sits directly on the ground, the corner of the canvas propped on one knee, his leg folded and tucked in towards his body. His other leg extends outwards, his bare foot resting casually in the dust, the stained cuff of his workpants rolled up well past his bony ankle. Flattened cardboard boxes are laid out beneath the canvas – a fruitless attempt to keep the working area free of dirt – while a scatter of makeshift studio paraphernalia is arrayed within easy reach: repurposed tin cans bristle with a forest of various-sized paintbrushes; a two-litre cordial bottle holds clean water.

Paddy is caught in full concentration, a slender brush clutched in his right hand. He's wearing a short-sleeved shirt, light blue. He wears no hat; his hair is a white tangle; his face, looking downwards, is lost in shadow.

The painting itself is a blast of colour and form: graphic, immediate, even wild.

Washed out or not, it looks astonishing.

•

It made perfect sense that the Lavertys would be excited to hear of the project that had drawn Tony away from the city art world: by the time he reached out to them, they were seasoned travellers in remote Australia.

Liz liked to tell people that they collected 'from the heart', that they had no education in art at all. But the assessment downplayed their influence, consciously or not: a sale to the couple was a boon for any artist, and they were treated well wherever they went.

Mostly they flew in a chartered light plane from community to community. Their friend Helen Read, an ex-nurse with a pilot's licence who had harnessed the Aboriginal art boom into an art-tourism venture, would usually be in the pilot's seat. Adventure played its part: as they went, tracts of country the couple had never seen spread out beneath them; they would land on dusty bush airstrips and be met by art centre coordinators in rundown LandCruisers. In preparation, the best artworks would have already been set aside; artists would be eagerly waiting to meet their well-heeled city visitors.

In this way the Lavertys made strong connections as far afield as Maningrida and Yirrkala in Arnhem Land, and Milikapiti on the Tiwi Islands. The art centre at Balgo, a community that lay where the Kimberley's arid far south gave way to the Tanami and the Great Sandy Desert, was a particular favourite. The couple's attraction to a place like that was partly aesthetic – Balgo painting was famously colourful and expressive – but they knew well that it was largely impossible to separate art from the relationships it brought with it. In Balgo, Liz would sit with Eubena Nampitjin, a community matriarch and acclaimed artist, and listen as the old lady quietly sang to her the circuitous songs associated with each of her luminous canvases. To Liz, that kind of thing was 'fabulous'.

Such trips had already taken them to the Kimberley a number of times. Rover featured prominently on their walls at home: they'd flown into Warmun on one of their art tours and purchased work from Serge and Maxine. They'd met the artists there, including Hector, who they'd warmed to immediately and whose work they'd also collected. When they received Tony's letters they set to planning another visit with some excitement, but first they took his word that Bedford was worthy of their attention: they purchased the four boards sight unseen.

Paddy was still entirely unknown. In coming years, single canvases of his work would sell for as much as \$300,000 on the secondary market, but the Lavertys got in early: they paid only \$800 for the painting on cardboard, \$1000 each for the two on cupboard doors. For the red landscape forms painted on ply against a black ground they paid just under \$2000.

Tony bundled them in cardboard, wrapped them in packing tape and wrote the Lavertys' Balmain address in block letters across the front.

He sent them off, confident in the knowledge that this package would be the first among many.

4.

One day, sitting on the tiny veranda, Hector told Simon about alcohol, about how it was a weapon that gardiya had cleverly wielded against Aboriginal people.

To Hector, history's timing proved his theory. As equal wages were enforced on the stations in the late 1960s, the Aboriginal role in the pastoral industry was removed with a suddenness that bordered on violence. The right to vote, which followed soon after, brought with it the right to drink.

Welfare replaced work; as the population of communities like Warmun grew, drinking became a way of life for many. Hector had watched as towns like Halls Creek and Kununurra swelled with itinerant Aboriginal drinkers. By the 1990s alcohol-related death had soared.

Hector saw the pattern in this: 'That gardiya bin sort of "Ah! Blackfella getting money. We'll have to put him in the pub";' he explained to Simon.

'Too many trick, that gardiya, but we understand.'

Hector explained he'd spent two years on the grog but, unlike most of the other male painters, he gave it away. For him, drinking was now a rare occurrence. In the time Tony knew him, he could count on one hand the number of occasions he saw Hector drink.

When he did, his amiable character could shift. Once, early on, Tony had to pull Hector bodily from the country club – a white enclave at the centre of Kununurra – after the old man had consumed too many white wines and begun to hurl abuse at the other patrons. 'White cunts!' he yelled as he struggled with Tony at the door. As shocked as he was, Tony loved him for it.

Another time, during a visit to Darwin, Hector was less explosive, but his anger was just as clear. They were visiting Leon Stainer, an acclaimed bush printmaker who would soon work with each of the artists, and were sitting on the veranda. Again, it was white wine – if he drank, this seemed

Hector's drink of choice – and after being uncharacteristically quiet for a period, he leaned into Tony and gestured towards the street in front of them. It was a humid afternoon, but groups of pedestrians were filing past, all of them white. Hector said that if he had a rifle he would shoot every last one of them.

The only other time that Hector drank, to Tony's knowledge, was at one of the Pindan Avenue parties. They were regular occurrences: the painting sessions would extend for a few days and then something would happen – perhaps someone would arrive with money, or a payment would come through – and people would turn up until the place was bursting at the seams.

The resulting scene was invariably hectic and unruly. Simon, who felt some responsibility to keep the house in order, would try to enforce a no party rule, only to break it soon after. Revelry, joyous and loud, would extend until well past midnight, when people would either crash at the house, or wander off to continue drinking in the reserve. Sometimes, Tony would wake and there would be fifteen people sleeping on the floor.

It was on a night like that which Hector found himself a bottle of wine and a wineglass. He sat in his regular seat on the veranda, taking tiny sips and theatrically washing each around in his mouth before swallowing. 'Tasting it, Ngali!' Tony would recall him exclaiming.

Hector was wearing his old dressing-gown and, as he performed his elaborate ritual, he asked Tony to sit on his lap, which Tony happily did.

That night Hector's anger was forgotten. He simply drank and laughed, and Tony laughed too. Around them, other Gija, drunk themselves, were expressing concern at Hector's increasing inebriation, which only made Hector laugh more.

'Uncle, Uncle,' people cried out. 'You shouldn't be drinking so much! Don't drink any more wine, Uncle!'

It was funny because they were drinking too. Everyone was, but the idea of Hector joining them was unimaginable.

Parties like that were fuelled by either beer – 'green cans' or 'red cans', depending on one's allegiance to Victoria Bitter or Emu Bitter – or cheap casks of moselle or port. The more reflective soundtrack of the painting sessions would be replaced by something more energetic, more

consuming: *The Best Of Creedence Clearwater Revival* was a favourite among the Gija and would often be played on repeat at increasing volume.

From there, the night would spiral into a joyous mess: bodies coming and going; people yelling Kriol phrases that to the increasingly drunk ears of Tony and Simon would sound like a foreign language until it didn't. Tony came to regard the parties at Pindan Avenue in a similar fashion to the Animal Bar – evidence of the town's beating heart – except for the key difference that everybody knew each other. He learnt to let himself go, to simply let the unfolding character of the night carry him.

Sometimes, drunken arguments spilled over into fights; other times, it might be raucous dancing to a song that struck a chord. Everything was open and raw. Tony soon understood that this was the way that people laid themselves out for their countrymen and -women to see. When the grog was flowing, there was no shame, just unbridled joy punctuated by flashes of expulsive anger, by tears and yelling and laughter. The problems that attended drinking were obvious, but there was nonetheless an undeniable immediacy to it, a sense of camaraderie of the kind Simon had already recognised with his young Miriwoong and Gajerrong friends. Someone might grab you by the shoulder and hold on for half an hour.

The kinship system placed everyone in relation to one another, identified them by skin name, and dictated not only what responsibilities flowed from one person to the next, but what relations were right and wrong. It also opened an avenue by which Gija women could drunkenly toy with their white guests. They were openly flirtatious with Tony and Simon, jokingly or otherwise.

'Oh, I'm your wife!' a woman might yell in Tony's ear after grabbing him for a dance around the living room. 'I'm a proper wife for you!'

In the thick of the moment it was hard to argue: the very designation of 'husband' and 'wife' seemed here a fluid, malleable concept. More often than not whether someone was the 'right' or 'wrong' match could be safely taken as shorthand for their sexual availability. Tony simply embraced it all in real time. He was on their turf, he reasoned: he quickly realised the best thing would be to welcome everything with open arms.

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As fun as they were, the parties at Pindan Avenue took their toll. Tony could easily lose a day nursing a hangover and would despair as he felt the rhythm of the studio slipping away. The artists were affected too, especially Freddie.

Tony had been disappointed by the first paintings Freddie had done at Pindan Avenue. There was something lacking in the works, as if they'd been somehow depleted by the social demands that attended them. Freddie was often painting hungover, so it was no surprise he wasn't working to the best of his ability. Tony would watch him at the trestle table, laying out a composition, or working on infill with an open green can at his side: it could all seem lacklustre, almost meaningless.

In this way the problem of town life became clear: no matter the joy of having people around, it was impossible to escape the grog and everything that came with it. Plus there was a healthy stream of demand that followed the artists when they were easily accessible. Freddie, who had established himself faster than the others, bore the brunt. Tony learnt immediately that it was known by the harmless-sounding term 'humbug', a catch-all phrase deployed across Aboriginal Australia that referred to anything from lighthearted badgering for money or drink to more forceful expressions of kinship reciprocity. For better or for worse, it was this that bound the Gija together so tightly. At Pindan, Freddie's son 'Baldhead' Patrick was relentless if he suspected Freddie had money and was holding out. He would be at the house constantly, cajoling his father to reach into his pocket. When Freddie did, he might only have a couple of hours of peace before Patrick was back. He couldn't say no. It didn't take Tony long to understand where Freddie's initial windfall from Watters had gone.

Freddie proved he could make paintings in the face of that kind of pressure, but whether or not he could reach his full potential was another thing entirely. When more money started to come in, as Tony knew it would, he wasn't sure what would happen, nor how its effects could be managed.

In the second of his letters to the Lavertys he hinted at how difficult the project was: *very skeletal operations at present*, he wrote.

To this he added a line that would prove prescient. The old men had recently taken him to Wyndham, the long-declined port town 100 kilometres to Kununurra's west. Before the Ord River was dammed

in the 1960s and Kununurra had boomed around the newly fertile agricultural land brought forth by irrigation, Wyndham had been the bustling heart of the Kimberley pastoral industry. Cattle had once been mustered across vast tracts of country, at first to be slaughtered at the meatworks, now shuttered, which had until the 1980s provided the town its economic engine. They were now shipped out en masse through the Cambridge Gulf.

Freddie, Rusty and Hector had driven Tony to the top of The Bastion, a huge hill that looked out over the town, with its central street of dilapidated timber-clad colonial buildings and its rough-as-guts pub. Beyond that, a network of five rivers threaded their way inland from the gulf. If one wanted to get a sense of how vast that country was, or feel the energy that rose from it in waves, there were few better vantage points. You could also see the small blocks of land that led into town, scattered alongside the highway, quiet and contained. It was that kind of place where Tony pictured the painting project taking root.

I need to get that property outside Wyndham, he wrote to the Lavertys. It was almost an afterthought, something he slipped in before signing off.

Towards the end of his time in the Kimberley, he would do exactly that, and relocate everything to the outskirts of that tiny rundown town. But first it was the artists who led the way: they understood the challenges of town better than anyone, and it seemed to Tony that by the time he saw the problem, they were already working on a solution. Peggy, Phyllis Thomas and Rusty began to arrive unannounced at Pindan Avenue. They would collect Tony, and maybe Hector and Paddy as well, and leave Kununurra's tight grid of streets behind to spend the night at Ivanhoe Crossing. It wasn't far, but it was far enough for the quiet of the Kimberley to press in. It was below the diversion dam, and a favoured fishing spot for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. There were wide beaches of coarse river sand where swags could be laid out around cooking fires.

Some nights the women would sing into the darkness, and if they were there, Hector and even Paddy would join them. Sometimes there would be stories. Tony would simply listen.

It was there that Peggy and Phyllis began to speak about Crocodile Hole, which they called Rugun, and how that place – a secluded community

set alongside a permanent waterhole – would offer them the quiet they needed to really make things work.

It took Tony a moment to realise it, but when he did, it became clear. The project Freddie had invited him to the Kimberley to help build was now laid out before him. Everything was in place; the artists had made themselves known. Hector had already named the group during a discussion on the veranda at Pindan Avenue.

‘Jirrawun,’ he’d said.

He explained the word to Tony in the simplest of terms: it meant ‘one mob standing together’. It was perfect.

