

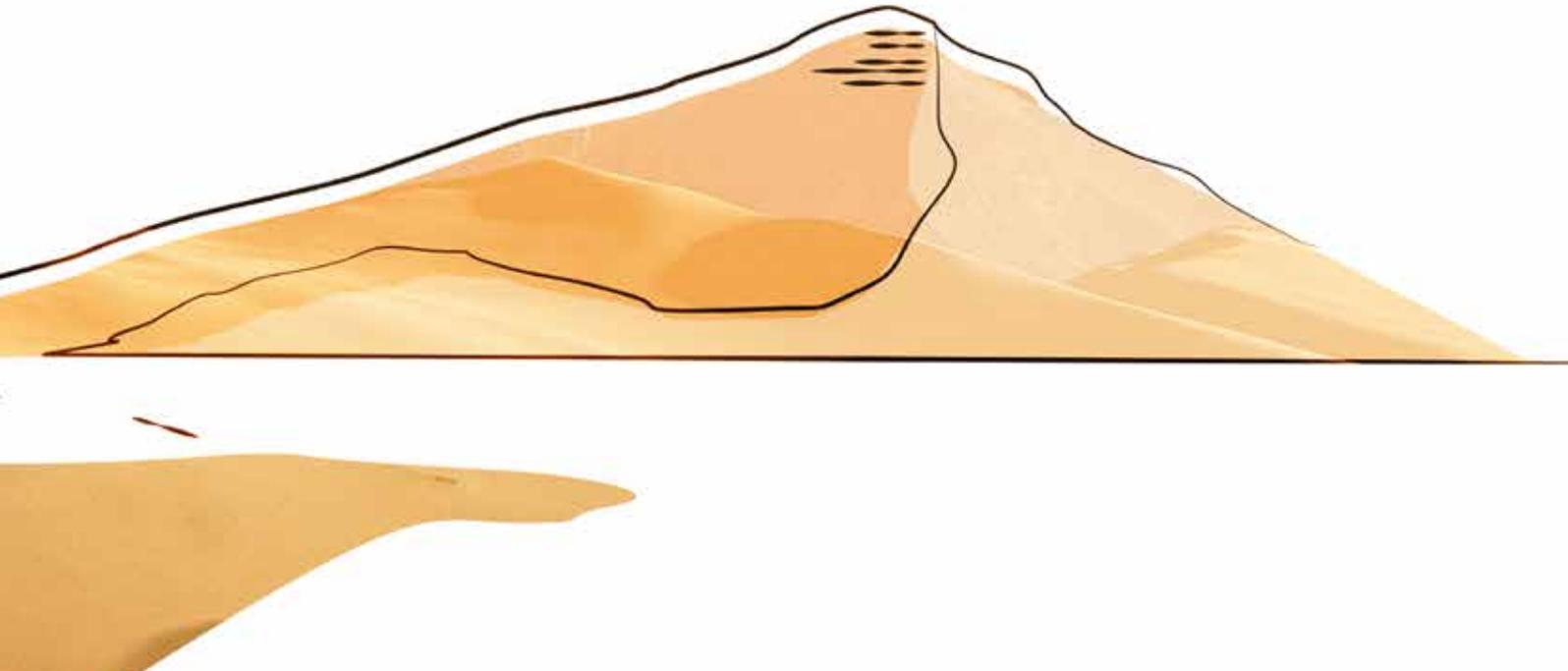


DELUXE



Box of Bones

Stephen Orr



Yes, I've let the place go, but I'll explain. How we last had stock somewhere around, what was it, '85, '86? How, after that, the yards filled with weeds, fell apart (what was the point of welding anything?), so that the productive part of our station ('Trenwood') became febrile, diseased, no longer up to it. But by then it didn't matter, because Mum and Dad had gone, Pop, the lot of them. Just me left, and I had no desire to farm. The two thousand head of Shorthorn, as it'd once been. No desire to hire help, muster twice a year, organise the freight. Make money. What for? The place has been paid off for years.

Then the house. Old. Walls cracked. The screen door banging in the breeze on long, hot afternoons full of flyspeck and the remains of roast beef. Shadows from the pepper tree moving across the porch. In my front window, on my bed, my body twisting like the seized-up cattle crush. Bare boards, worn to the lignin, the old rugs threaded and still sitting (full of mice) in the laundry. See, my world. A kitchen of dreams, cookbooks, recipes I've never made. Nice, how sweet and sour looks in the pictures, although there's always a missing ingredient. So it's just the same muffins, and dumplings, and pork, when we had a few pigs.

Me, sitting in my armchair, reading (over and over) what Dad wrote, of what he remembered. Starting with the blocky letters 'Summer of 1934'. Although he may

have been wrong – more like 1935? Dad was always precise. He had to be. If he was hiring men for the muster, or trucks, or horses to drive the mob, vaccines, food even. See, anything you needed to stay alive, to stay in business, when you lived nine hundred miles from the nearest shop. There was no room for error. Everything had to be added up, divided, overestimated. But let's just say it happened in 1934.

What? Wait. I'm going to tell you. Thirty years of thinking about it, and I've finally picked up a pen, sat down, and started writing. Which is hard. To work out what to say, the words in order, not giving too much or little away. And the question, always the question, about whether there's any point writing things down. Who cares what I've got to say? I'm the end of the line, no sons or daughters or cousins (sorry, there's Max, but he's off with the fairies). The point? Maybe I'm only writing for my own sake? Perhaps that's the only reason people write? You, my audience of zero, can go to hell.

So here I am, sitting at the old dining table where I scratched my name as a kid, and Dad belted me, and Mum stood and said, 'He didn't know.' A life of scratches and tears and old lino. Still there. Where you come in from the kitchen, settle in the old lounge, and look across at the box of bones.

You, my non-readers, are probably asking why I keep them in the lounge. I couldn't really say. They've been there for years – since the stock agent brought them in

from the desert, all dingo-eaten and sun-dried, even then (it had been eighteen months, and no-one had found them, and they'd given up). This collection of bones gathered from the hottest, most distant part of the desert (still our land). Scattered (the agent said) over a square mile by wind, animals, time. This collection of bones I've looked at every day, for all those years. The big ones, and little ones, which is sad. He might have grown up to be an explorer, an engineer, a farmer.

So I write. About this story that defined my family, that haunted it, destroyed it perhaps (although maybe that's too dramatic). This story of Pop, setting out in his old Dodge utility one Sunday morning in 1934. Kissing Nan on the cheek (perhaps, I wasn't there), ruffling Dad's hair and saying, 'I'll be back by three tomorrow.'

Because that's generally how long the trip took. A bore run – a journey of three hundred miles, stopping every half hour to check the dams, the hoses, the pumps, the windmills, the troughs – to make sure water was still flowing, animals still drinking. So long that Pop (who often took Dad) had to stop and sleep the night in the western districts. His old swag, still in the shed, under the billion or so stars we've owned for years.

So there's Pop, loading his swag, water, the trough brush, the tools he'd need to fix the windmills. There he is, smiling, laughing, exploring the food Nan had packed him. He liked to go, I guess, I think, maybe – getting away from the house which, although big, was small in the scheme of the desert, and the land, and the sky that went from one horizon to the other. Liked being by himself, perhaps. His thoughts. His few books (still in the bookshelf, although ruined by sun and sand).

Pop points his car in the right direction and sets off. Almost gets bogged before he's through the gate. Waves back to Nan and to Dad, who's swinging circles from the porch post, whistling, asking his mum what's for tea (her saying, 'Only ever think of your stomach').

Pop driving for three hours, stopping to fill the tank from jerry cans, to check a few bores, tighten nuts and bolts and blades, watch some of the cattle grazing the sparse grasses – hardly any protein, although enough to keep the few animals going.

Meanwhile, Dad (my dad) wandering the sheds and yards, up the hill, where four generations are buried, and where the Norwegian woman would be too, her grave still unmarked to this day. Reading the inscriptions on the headstones (all of which had been fetched from town) about 'Here sleeps blah blah' and 'In the Arms of God ...' Names and dates that probably meant nothing to him. Although he used to tell me that's all he'd do – wander. Climb the piles of old tyres, saw bits of wood and hammer them together.

Pop drove towards Bore No. 47; hoping his old Dodge would make it, his fuel pump would hold out, he wouldn't blow more than two tyres. If he did, it was a long walk back. And even with plenty of water, in that heat, it would take some doing. Some surviving. So you just crossed your fingers and hoped for the best.



Maybe he stopped at the Wilga Caves, with their sooty ceilings and rock paintings. Lots of people did. Drove this far out just to see some scribbled emus and roos, hand splatters. Not much. I saw them once, never bothered again. But as you'll soon see, people came from all over to have a look. London, South Africa, Norway. Fancy that. From all the fjords and icebergs to Trenwood, just to see some crayon marks.

Pop drove for another hour then, looking into the distance, squinted to see two indistinct shapes. No. Surely not. Cattle perhaps? But as he got closer he knew. A kid, a boy, nine or ten, on his knees in the sand. And in front of him, a woman, lying, barely moving. This whole drama taking place beside a car. A car that wasn't up to the job. A city car, with white tyres and chrome and a radio, but not one meant for cattle country. Anyway, that car's still there today. Same spot. No glass or tyres, or anything, just a rusted-out shell, and the birds and dingoes breeding and sleeping or using the shade. This old monument to what happened that day.

Pop pulled up and surveyed the situation and this boy ran over to him and started jabbering in some language he didn't understand (Norwegian, but you've probably worked that out by now). The boy pulled at his sleeve and said, 'Mor, Mor,' and pointed to this woman, who Pop assumed (I assume) was the boy's mother. Pop went over and knelt and saw that the woman was dehydrated, barely breathing, hot all over. He said, 'Where's your



water?’ but the boy didn’t understand. Pop said, ‘*Water?*’ and showed what he meant with a pantomime, but the boy just stood there, confused.

Pop looked in their car. Yes, there was a water container, but it was empty. And yes, the car was bogged, up to its axles. Pop quickly understood all this, but didn’t understand what they were doing so far from anywhere, on the arse end of his property. ‘What yers doing here?’

‘Mor!’

‘More what?’

The kid didn’t make sense, so Pop pushed him away, went to the old Dodge, got some water and brought it over to the woman. He raised her, placed her body against his lifted knee, and tried to give her a drink. But the water just ran out of her mouth, down her chin, onto her clothes (which were unsuitable too, but that could wait until later). He tried for five minutes, but the woman was past drinking, past talking. Pop thought, This won’t end well. He knew when people were too far gone. He’d seen it, not just with stock, but with a man who’d worked for them, and wandered off and got lost after his wife had left him.

The boy was distraught, shouting, then sobbing. By now Pop had had enough and told him to shut up, and he seemed to understand this, and was quiet for a minute as Pop thought what to do. There was no time to dig the car out. No point. So he dragged the woman to his ute, and lifted her onto the tray, and told the boy to

sit beside her. Which he did. They drove towards Trenwood for an hour, two, perhaps more, before the boy started hammering on the cab window, and Pop stopped and got out and checked the woman, and could see that she was dead. But tried her pulse, and got onto the tray and breathed into her mouth (as the boy sat in a corner crying), and pumped her heart like he’d been told by the Flying Doctor, and eventually turned to the boy and said, ‘It’s too late, son.’

No reply.

‘Your mum’s dead.’

Nothing.

Pop wondered what to do. Go back? Bury her? Go home? Yes, that’s all he could do. Go home. And if one of the windmills wasn’t working, and his stock died because he hadn’t got to check, then it would be this dead woman’s fault. For driving into the desert, unprepared, and getting bogged, and making her problem his. He felt annoyed about this. Okay, she was dead, and that was a shame (especially for the kid), but some people refused to think things through, plan, consider how their actions might impact others.

Driving towards Trenwood with the boy beside him and his mum rattling around in the back of the ute, Pop said, ‘Where you from?’

The boy just looked at him, said a few words, and then settled.

Christ, Pop might’ve thought. What am I gonna do with this one?

Then the boy produced a newspaper clipping, with pictures of the caves and the Aboriginal paintings, and pointed them out, and said, ‘*Ab-o-rig-i-ne.*’

‘You were going to look at them?’ Indicating.

The boy didn’t respond. Just bit his lip.

‘What, yer mum’s – she is yer mum? – she’s some sort of scientist?’

The boy shook his head, reclaimed the cutting, folded it and put it in his pocket. Then he said a few sentences, finishing with the word *far*.

‘Eh?’

‘Far!’ Using his own hands to show what might have been a bird flying through the desert, or a dunnart, tunnelling.

‘What, you’ve come far? To see the caves? Well, they’re on my property, and yer meant to write to me first, let people know – you know, the police? Did your mum contact the police? *The police?* Did she tell anyone she was coming?’

No response. Although, for the next hour, as they drove, the boy kept repeating himself, and this word, and refining his pantomime, and slowly becoming more agitated, at one point, grabbing the wheel of the Dodge and trying to turn it around. Pop said, ‘No, don’t, you’ll get us bogged, then we’ll all end up ...’

Until, some time later, Pop drove into Trenwood, and Nan and Dad came running out, looked at the woman in the ute, and the boy, and started asking all sorts of questions. Pop told them what had happened, but that

he couldn't make any sense of what this boy was saying.

So Nan had a turn. She took the boy in, settled him at the table with a glass of barley water, and said, 'What's your name?'

Just harsh, clunkety words, glued together with phlegm. No-one could understand a thing. Nan looked at Pop and said, 'What language is it, do you reckon?'

'Dunno. Wog?'

'He's not Italian. *Are you Italian, son? What's your name?*'

The boy was tired. He drank, but then fell asleep at the table, and Nan carried him into Dad's bed. Laid him out, and let him sleep.

Meanwhile, Pop took the woman from the Dodge, laid her on the porch and called to Nan: 'What should we do with her?'

Nan examined the woman, said how pretty she looked, and how it was a shame, wasn't it, she was dead. Pop said it was her own fault. Fancy coming all this way with so little water. They knew she'd quickly turn, so they decided to put her in a stock trough and fill it, and let the water keep her cold for now. Maybe, later, some relatives would want to claim her.

The boy slept through the afternoon. Nan tried to wake him when they had tea, but he just stirred, mumbled, and continued sleeping. Dad said he watched him for a while, the way he slept with his mouth open, how his nostrils flared, and his eyes flickered like a couple of mixy rabbits. Where, he wondered, had he come from? There were no signs. Just pale skin, burned around the edges, and hair so blond it was probably bleached. Then he felt in the boy's pockets and found a bus ticket, a comb and a half page of writing in this strange language. He had an encyclopedia, so he looked up a map of Europe, but this didn't help. He read a few of the words on the paper: '... vikingene reiste til England ...' But he wasn't sure. Was this some sort of small Viking, washed up on distant shores?

Then, just as they were getting ready for bed, the boy appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. He looked at them, trying, perhaps, to remember where he was, what had happened. Nan said, 'Come over here, sit down, we've got some food for you.'

But he just started talking, and then shouting: 'Min far gikk der andre veien ...'

'Over here, son. We have beef ... you like beef?'

'*Lytte!*'

Pop shepherded him towards the table, sat him down, but he just ranted. He pointed to Pop, then Dad, as if to explain. He stood, walked around the room, pretended to search for something.

Nan placed the dish of food in front of him and said, 'Eat up. You'll feel better.'

The boy took the piece of paper, searched for a pen and started drawing. Him, his mum, complete with long hair, and the dress that had allowed her legs to burn. Then, another figure: a man, taller than them both, with short hair. He showed them and repeated the word,

'*Far! Far!*'

'Jesus,' Pop said. Looking at the boy. 'Yer dad?'

The boy mimed how this man had left him and his mum at the car, and walked into the desert, further away from them, to the west.

Nan was just as shocked. 'He's still out there?'

The boy seemed to sense that they now understood. He pointed to the front door.

'I'm sure he would've found someone,' Nan said.

But Pop indicated the drawing, and how the man was walking in the direction of the setting sun, and said, 'Right, come on.'

Things moved quickly. I'm sure Pop had no desire to return to the desert, but he guessed this man had no water either. He went out to the Dodge, spent a few minutes filling the tank, and then fetching two more jerry cans. Water, some food Nan quickly wrapped in wax paper, then he knelt down, kissed my dad and said, 'Look after your mum.'

The boy got in beside Pop, and they drove off. Through the gates, out into the desert. For three hours, the stock agent reckoned. Before Pop's fuel pump gave up, and they got out and started heading back, but never made it.

Sitting here still, in my box of bones. Once, Mum suggested we should burn them on a fire. If you threw on a roo it would burn hot with all the guts and fat, and the bones would turn to powder, and this little boy (whose name, we found out later, was Geir), would mix with Pop, and we could sprinkle their ashes. Because they'd died together, hadn't they? Walked for two days, and the agent said he'd found Pop a few yards from the road where he'd tried to dig a trench for them to rest in, but hadn't got far before he'd stopped. The agent said there were footprints, going around in circles, but by then the sand had almost reclaimed them. Anyway, when the agent had picked up the bones (the ones he'd found), he'd brought them back in a gunny sack, and Dad had built the box, and put them in, together. And there they'd stayed. Even after the family had written, and asked for them. They'd stayed. As with the mum (Agot) who Nan had buried.

All of this, barely mentioned when I was a kid. Perhaps Mum and Dad didn't like to discuss disasters, as our life turned into one. The weeds. The way the door on the shed banged at night because no-one could be bothered fixing it. ▼

Stephen Orr, a South Australian writer, has published six novels. His latest, *The Hands* (Wakefield Press, 2015), was nominated for the 2016 Miles Franklin Award. In 2017, Stephen was awarded the *Australian Book Review's* Eucalypt Fellowship. His upcoming novel, *Incredible Floridas*, describes the difficult relationship between an Australian artist, working in the 1940s, and his troubled son.
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