IN ALICE SPRINGS — a grid of scorching streets where men in long white socks were forever getting in and out of Land Cruisers — I met a Russian who was mapping the sacred sites of the Aboriginals.

His name was Arkady Volchok. He was an Australian citizen. He was thirty-three years old.

His father, Ivan Volchok, was a Cossack from a village near Rostov-on-Don, who, in 1942, was arrested and sent with a trainload of other Ostasbeiter to work in a German factory. One night, somewhere in the Ukraine, he jumped from the cattle-car into a field of sunflowers. Soldiers in grey uniforms hunted him up and down the long lines of sunflowers, but he gave them the slip. Somewhere else, lost between murdering armies, he met a girl from Kiev and married her. Together they drifted to a forgetful Adelaide suburb, where he rigged up a vodka still and fathered three sturdy sons.

The youngest of these was Arkady.

Nothing in Arkady's temperament predisposed him to live in the hugger-mugger of Anglo-Saxon suburbia or take a conventional job. He had a flattish face and a gentle smile, and he moved through the bright Australian spaces with the ease of his footloose forbears.

His hair was thick and straight, the colour of straw. His lips had cracked in the heat. He did not have the drawn-in lips of so many white Australians in the Outback; nor did he swallow his words. He rolled his is in a very Russian way. Only when you came up close did you realise how big his bones were.

He had married, he told me, and had a daughter of six. Yet, preferring solitude to domestic chaos, he no longer lived with his wife. He had few possessions apart from a harpsichord and a shelf of books.
He was a tireless bushwalker. He thought nothing of setting out, with a water-flask and a few bites of food, for a hundred-mile walk along the Ranges. Then he would come home, out of the heat and light, and draw the curtains, and play the music of Buxtehude and Bach on the harpsichord. Their orderly progressions, he said, conformed to the contours of the Central Australian landscape.

Neither of Arkady's parents had ever read a book in English. He delighted them by winning a first-class honours degree, in history and philosophy, at Adelaide University. He made them sad when he went to work as a school-teacher, on an Aboriginal settlement in Walbiri country to the north of Alice Springs.

He liked the Aboriginals. He liked their grit and tenacity, and their artful ways of dealing with the white man. He had learnt, or half-learnt, a couple of their languages and had come away astonished by their intellectual vigour, their feats of memory and their capacity and will to survive. They were not, he insisted, a dying race – although they did need help, now and then, to get the government and mining companies off their backs.

It was during his time as a school-teacher that Arkady learned of the labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as 'Dreaming-tracks' or 'Songlines'; to the Aboriginals as the 'Footprints of the Ancestors' or the 'Way of the Law'.

Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes – and so singing the world into existence.

Arkady was so struck by the beauty of this concept that he began to take notes of everything he saw or heard, not for publication, but to satisfy his own curiosity. At first, the Walbiri Elders mistrusted him, and their answers to his questions were evasive. With time, once he had won their confidence, they invited him to witness their most secret ceremonies and encouraged him to learn their songs.

One year, an anthropologist from Canberra came to study Walbiri systems of land tenure: an envious academic who resented Arkady's friendship with the song-men, pumped him for information and promptly betrayed a secret he had promised to keep. Disgusted by the row that followed, the 'Russian' threw in his job and went abroad.

He saw the Buddhist temples of Java, sat with saddhus on the ghats of Benares, smoked hashish in Kabul and worked on a kibbutz. On the Acropolis in Athens there was a dusting of snow and only one other tourist: a Greek girl from Sydney.

They travelled through Italy, and slept together, and in Paris they agreed to get married.

Having been brought up in a country where there was 'nothing', Arkady had longed all his life to see the monuments of Western civilisation. He was in love. It was springtime. Europe should have been wonderful. It left him, to his disappointment, feeling flat.

Often, in Australia, he had had to defend the Aboriginals from people who dismissed them as drunken and incompetent savages; yet there were times, in the flyblown squalor of a Walbiri camp, when he suspected they might be right and that his vocation to help the blacks was either wilful self-indulgence or a waste of time.

Now, in a Europe of mindless materialism, his 'old men' seemed wiser and more thoughtful than ever. He went to a Qantas office and bought two tickets home. He was married, six weeks later in Sydney, and took his wife to live in Alice Springs.

She said she longed to live in the Centre. She said she loved it when she got there. After a single summer, in a tin-roofed house that heated like a furnace, they began to drift apart.

The Land Rights Act gave Aboriginal 'owners' the title to their country, providing it lay untenanted; and the job Arkady invented for himself was to interpret 'tribal law' into the language of the Law of The Crown.

No one knew better that the 'idyllic' days of hunting and gathering were over – if, indeed, they were ever that idyllic. What could be done for Aboriginals was to preserve their most essential liberty: the liberty to remain poor, or, as he phrased it more tactfully, the space in which to be poor if they wished to be poor.

Now that he lived alone he liked to spend most of his time 'out bush'. When he did come to town, he worked from a disused newspaper shop-floor where rolls of old newsprint still

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clogged the presses and his sequences of aerial photos had spread; like a game of dominoes, over the shabby white walls.

*One* sequence showed a three-hundred-mile *strip* of country running roughly due north. This was the suggested route of a new Alice to Darwin railway.

The line, he told me, was going to be the last long stretch of track to be laid in Australia; and its chief engineer, a railway-man of the old school, had announced that it must also be the best.

The engineer was close to retiring age and concerned for his posthumous reputation. He was especially concerned to avoid the kind of rumpus that broke out whenever a mining company moved its machinery into Aboriginal land. So, promising not to destroy a single one of their sacred sites, he had asked their representatives to supply him with a survey.

Arkady's job was to identify the 'traditional landowners'; to drive them over their old hunting grounds, even if these now belonged to a cattle company; and to get them to reveal which rock or soak or ghost-gum was the work of a Drearntime hero.

He had already mapped the 150-mile stretch from Alice to Middle Bore Station. He had a hundred and fifty to go.

'I warned the engineer he was being a bit rash,' he said. 'But that's the way he wanted it.'

'Why rash?' I asked.

'Well, if you look at it *their* way,' he grinned, 'the whole of bloody Australia's a sacred site.'

'Explain,' I said.

He was on the point of explaining when an Aboriginal girl came in with a stack of papers. She was a secretary, a pliant brown girl in a brown knitted dress. She smiled and said, 'Hi, Ark!' but her smile fell away at the ghastly stranger.

Arkady lowered his voice. He had warned me earlier how Aboriginals hate to hear white men discussing their 'business'.

'This is a Pom,' he said to the secretary. 'A Pom by the name of Bruce.'

The girl giggled, diffidently, dumped the papers on the desk, and dashed for the door.

'Let's go and get a coffee,' he said.

So we went to a coffee-shop on Todd Street.

(In my childhood) I never heard the word 'Australia' without calling to mind the fumes of the eucalyptus inhaler and an incessant red country populated by sheep.

My father loved to tell, and we to hear, the story of the Australian sheep-millionaire who strolled into a Rolls-Royce showroom in London; scorned all the smaller models; chose an enormous limousine with a plate-glass panel between the chauffeur and passengers, and added, cockily, as he counted out the cash, 'That'll stop the sheep from breathing down my neck.'

I also knew, from my great-aunt Ruth, that Australia was the country of the Upside-downers. A hole, bored straight through the earth from England, would burst out under their feet.

'Why don't they fall off?' I asked.

'Gravity,' she whispered.

She had in her library a book about the continent, and I would gaze in wonder at pictures of the koala and kookaburra, the platypus and Tasmanian bush-devil, Old Man Kangaroo and Yellow Dog Dingo, and Sydney Harbour Bridge.

But the picture I liked best showed an Aboriginal family on the move. They were lean, angular people and they went about naked. Their skin was very black, not the glitterblack of negroes but matt black, as if the sun had sucked away all possibility of reflection. The man had a long forked beard and carried a spear or two, and a spear-thrower. The woman carried a dilly-bag and a baby at her breast. A small boy strolled beside her — I identified myself with him.

I remember the fantastic homelessness of my first five years. My father was in the Navy, at sea. My mother and I would shuttle back and forth, on the railways of wartime England, on visits to family and friends.

All the frenzied agitation of the times communicated itself to
me: the hiss of steam on a fogbound station; the double clu-unk of carriage doors closing; the drone of aircraft, the searchlights, the sirens; the sound of a mouth-organ along a platform of sleeping soldiers.

Home, if we had one, was a solid black suitcase called the Rev-Robe, in which there was a corner for my clothes and my Mickey Mouse gas-mask. I knew that, once the bombs began to fall, I could curl up inside the Rev-Robe, and be safe.

Sometimes, I would stay for months with my two great-aunts, in their terrace house behind the church in Stratford-on-Avon. They were old maids.

Aunt Katie was a painter and had travelled. In Paris she had been to a very louche party at the studio of Mr Kees van Dongen. On Capri she had seen the bowler hat of a Mr Ulyanov that used to bob along the Piccola Marina.

Aunt Ruth had travelled only once in her life, to Flanders, to lay a wreath on a loved one's grave. She had a simple, trusting nature. Her cheeks were pale rose-pink and she could blush as sweetly and innocently as a young girl. She was very deaf, and I would have to yell into her deaf-aid, which looked like a portable radio. At her bedside she kept a photograph of her favourite nephew, my father, gazing calmly from under the patent peak of his naval officer's cap.

The men on my father's side of the family were either solid and sedentary citizens –lawyers, architects, antiquaries –or horizon-struck wanderers who had scattered their bones in every corner of the earth: Cousin Charlie in Patagonia; Uncle Victor in a Yukon gold camp; Uncle Robert in an oriental port; Uncle Desmond, of the long fair hair, who vanished without trace in Paris; Uncle Walter who died, chanting the suras of the Glorious Koran, in a hospital for holy men in Cairo.

Sometimes, I overheard my aunts discussing these blighted destinies; and Aunt Ruth would hug me, as if to forestall my following in their footsteps. Yet, from the way she lingered over such words as 'Xanadu' or 'Samarkand' or the 'wine-dark sea', I think she also felt the trouble of the 'wanderer in her soul'.

The house was full of cumbersome furniture inherited from the days of lofty ceilings and servants. In the drawing-room, there were William Morris curtains, a piano, a cabinet of porcelain and a canvas of cockle-pickers by Aunt Katie's friend A. E. Russell.

My own most treasured possession, at the time, was the conch shell called Mona, which my father had brought from the West Indies. I would ram my face against her sheeny pink vulva and listen to the sound of the surf.

One day, after Aunt Katie had shown me a print of Botticelli's Birth of Venus, I prayed and prayed that a beautiful blonde young lady would suddenly spew forth from Mona.

Aunt Ruth never scolded me except once, one evening in May 1944, when I pissed in the bathwater. I must be one of the last children anywhere to be menaced by the spectre of Bonaparte. 'If you ever do that again,' she cried, 'Boney will get you.'

I knew what Boney looked like from his porcelain statuette in the cabinet: black boots, white breeches, gilded buttons and a black bicorn hat. But the drawing Aunt Ruth drew for me – a version of one drawn for her, as a child, by her father's friend Lawrence Alma-Tadema – showed the furry bicorn only on a pair of spindly legs.

That night, and for weeks to come, I dreamed of meeting Boney on the pavement outside the vicarage. His two halves would open like a bivalve. Inside, there were rows of black fangs and a mass of wiry blue-black hair – into which I fell, and woke up screaming.

On Fridays, Aunt Ruth and I would walk to the parish church to make it ready for Sunday service. She would polish the brasses, sweep the choir stalls, replace the frontal and arrange fresh flowers on the altar – while I clambered into the pulpit or held imaginary conversations with Mr Shakespeare.

Mr Shakespeare would peer from his funerary monument on the north side of the chancel. He was a bald man, with upturned moustaches. His left hand rested on a scroll of paper, and his right hand held a quill.

I appointed myself the guardian and guide of his tomb, and charged G.I.s threepence a tour. The first lines of verse I learned by heart were the four lines engraved on his slab:

Good frend, for Jesus sake, forbeare
To digge the dust encloased here
Bleste be ye man yt spares thes stones
And curst be he yt moves my bones.

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Long afterwards, in Hungary, where I had gone to study the archaeology of nomads, I had the luck to witness the opening of a Hunnish ‘princess’s’ grave. The girl lay on her back, on a bed of black soil, her brittle bones covered with a shower of gold plaques, while across her breast, with wings outspread, lay the skeleton of a golden eagle.

One of the excavators called to some peasant women who were haymaking in the field nearby. They dropped their rakes and clustered round the gravemouth, crossing themselves fumble-handedly, as if to say, ‘Leave her. Leave her with her lover. Leave her alone with Zeus.’

‘Curst be he ... ’ I seemed to hear Mr. Shakespeare calling, and for the first time began to wonder if archaeology itself were not cursed.

Whenever the afternoon was fine in Stratford, Aunt Ruth and I — with her cocker-spaniel, Amber, straining at his leash — would go on what she said was Mr Shakespeare’s favourite walk. We would set off from College Street, past the grain silo; past the foaming mill-race, across the Avon by footbridge, and follow the path to Weir Brake.

This was a hazel wood on a slope that tumbled into the river. In springtime, primroses and bluebells flowered there. In summer it was a tangle of nettles, brambles and purple loosestrife, with the muddy water eddying below.

My aunt assured me this was the spot where Mr Shakespeare came to ‘tryst’ with a young lady. It was the very bank whereon the wild thyme blew. But she never explained what a tryst was, and, no matter how hard I searched, there were neither thyme nor oxlips, although I did find a few nodding violets.

Much later, when I had read Mr Shakespeare’s plays and did know what a tryst was, it struck me that Weir Brake was far too muddy and prickly for Titania and Bottom to settle on, but an excellent spot for Ophelia to take the plunge.

Aunt, Ruth loved reading Shakespeare aloud and, on days when the grass was dry, I would dangle my legs over the riverbank and listen to her reciting, ‘If music be the food of love, ... ’ or ‘Full fathom five thy father lies.’

‘Full fathom five ... ’ upset me terribly because my father was still at sea. I had another recurring dream: that his ship had sunk; that I grew gills and a fishy tail, swam down to join him on the ocean floor, and saw the pearls that had been his bright blue eyes.

A year or two later, as a change from Mr. Shakespeare, my aunt would bring an anthology of verse especially chosen for travellers, called The Open Road. It had a green buckram binding and a flight of gilded swallows on the cover.

I loved watching swallows. When they arrived in spring, I knew my lungs would soon be free of green phlegm. In autumn, when they sat chattering on the telegraph wires, I could almost count the days until the eucalyptus inhaler.

Inside The Open Road there were black and white end-papers in the style of Aubrey Beardsley which showed a bright path twisting through pine woods. One by one, we went through every poem in the book.

We arose and went to Innisfree. We saw the caverns measureless to man. We wandered lonely as a cloud. We tasted all the summer’s pride, wept for Lycidas, stood in tears among the alien corn, and listened to the strident, beckoning music of Walt Whitman:

O Public Road ...
You express me better than I can express myself
You shall be more to me than my poem.

One day, Aunt Ruth told me our surname had once been ‘Chettewynde’, which meant ‘the winding path’ in Anglo-Saxon; and the suggestion took root in my head that poetry, my own name and the road were, all three, mysteriously connected.

As for bedtime stories, my favourite was the tale of the coyote pup in Ernest Thompson Seton’s Lives of the Hunted.

Coyotito was the runt of a litter whose mother had been shot by the cowboy, Wolver Jake. Her brothers and sisters had been knocked on the head and her own life spared to give sport to Jake’s bull-terrier and greyhounds. Her picture, in chains, showed the saddest little dog-person I ever saw. Yet Coyotito grew up smart and, one morning, after shamming dead; she bolted for the wild: there to teach a new generation of coyotes the art of avoiding men.
I cannot now piece together the train of associations that led me to connect Coyotito's bid for freedom with the Australian Aboriginals' "Walkabout. Nor, for that matter, where I first heard the expression 'Walkabout'. Yet somehow I picked up an image of those 'tame' Blackfellows who, one day, would be working happily on a cattle-station: the next, without a word of warning and for no good reason, would up sticks and vanish into the blue.

They would step from their work-clothes, and leave: for weeks and months and even years, trekking half-way across the continent if only to meet a man, then trekking back as if nothing had happened.

I tried to picture their employer's face the moment he found them gone.

He would be a Scot perhaps: a big man with blotchy skin and a mouthful of obscenities. I imagined him breakfasting on steak and eggs – in the days of food-rationing, we knew that all Australians ate a pound of steak for breakfast. Then he would march into the blinding sunlight – all Australian sunlight was blinding – and shout for his 'boys'.

Nothing.

He would shout again. Not a sound but the mocking laugh of a kookaburra. He would scan the horizon. Nothing but gum trees. He would stalk through the cattle-yards. Nothing there either. Then, outside their shacks, he'd find their shirts and hats and boots sticking up through their trousers ...

Arkady ordered a couple of cappuccinos in the coffee-shop. We took them to a table by the window and he began to talk.

I was dazzled by the speed of his mind, although at times I felt he sounded like a man on a public platform, and that much of what he said had been said before.

The Aboriginals had an earthbound philosophy. The earth gave life to a man; gave him his food, language and intelligence; and the earth took him back when he died. A man's 'own country', even an empty stretch of spinifex, was itself a sacred ikon that must remain unscarred.

'Unscarred, you mean, by roads or mines or railways?'

'To wound the earth', he answered earnestly, 'is to wound yourself, and if others wound the earth, they are wounding you. The land should be left untouched: as it was in the Dreamtime when the Ancestors sang the world into existence.'

'Rilke', I said, 'had a similar intuition. He also said song was existence.'

'I know,' said Arkady, resting his chin on his hands. "Third Sonnet to Orpheus."'

The Aboriginals, he went on, were a people who trod lightly over the earth; and the less they took from the earth, the less they had to give in return. They had never understood why the missionaries forbade their innocent sacrifices. They slaughtered no victims, animal or human. Instead, when they wished to thank the earth for its gifts, they would simply slit a vein in their forearms and let their own blood spatter the ground.

'Not a heavy price to pay,' he said. 'The wars of the twentieth century are the price for having taken too much.'

'I see,' I nodded doubtfully, 'but could we get back to the Songlines?'

'We could.'
My reason for coming to Australia was to try to learn for myself, and not from other men's books, what a Songline was — and how it worked. Obviously, I was not going to get to the heart of the matter, nor would I want to. I had asked a friend in Adelaide if she knew of an expert. She gave me Arkady's phone number.

'Do you mind if I use my notebook?' I asked.

'Go ahead.'

I pulled from my pocket a black, oilcloth-covered notebook, its pages held in place with an elastic band.

'Nice notebook,' he said.

'I used to get them in Paris,' I said. 'But now they don't make them any more.'

'Paris?' he repeated, raising an eyebrow as if he'd never heard anything so pretentious. Then he winked and went on talking.

To get to grips with the concept of the Dreamtime, he said, you had to understand it as an Aboriginal equivalent of the first two chapters of Genesis — with one significant difference.

In Genesis, God first created the living things and then fashioned Father Adam from clay. Here in Australia, the Ancestors created themselves from clay, hundreds and thousands of them, one for each totemic species.

'So when an Aboriginal tells you, "I have a Wallaby Dreaming," he means, "My totem is Wallaby. I am a member of the Wallaby Clan."'

'So a Dreaming is a clan emblem? A badge to distinguish "us" from "them"? "Our country" from "their country"?' 'Much more than that,' he said.

Every Wallaby Man believed he was descended from a universal Wallaby Father, who was the ancestor of all other Wallaby Men and of all living wallabies. Wallabies, therefore, were his brothers. To kill one for food was both fratricide and cannibalism.

'Yet,' I persisted, 'the man was no more wallaby than the British are lions, the Russians bears, or the Americans bald eagles.'

'Any species', he said 'can be a Dreaming. A virus can be a Dreaming. You can have a chickenpox Dreaming, a rain Dreaming, a desert-orange Dreaming, a lice Dreaming. In the Kimberleys they've now got a money Dreaming.'

'And the Welsh have leeks, the Scots thistles and Daphne was changed into a laurel.'

'Same old story,' he said.

He went on to explain how each totemic ancestor, while travelling through the country, was thought to have scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the line of his footprints, and how these Dreaming-tracks lay over the land as 'ways' of communication between the most far-flung tribes.

'A song', he said, 'was both map and direction-finder. Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across country.'

'And would a man on "Walkabout" always be travelling down one of the Songlines?'

'In the old days, yes,' he agreed. 'Nowadays, they go by train or car.'

'Suppose the man strayed from his Songline?'

'He was trespassing. He might get speared for it.'

'But as long as he stuck to the track, he'd always find people who shared his Dreaming? Who were, in fact, his brothers?' 'Yes.'

'From whom he could expect hospitality?'

'And vice versa.'

'So song is a kind of passport and meal-ticket?'

'Again, it's more complicated.'

In theory, at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualise the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that, in which every 'episode' was readable in terms of geology.

'By episode', I asked, 'you mean "sacred site"?'

'I do.'

'The kind of site you're surveying for the railway?'

'Put it this way,' he said. 'Anywhere in the bush you can point to some feature of the landscape and ask the Aboriginal with you, "What's the story there?" or "Who's that?" The chances are he'll answer "Kangaroo" or "Budgerigar" or "Jew Lizard", depending on which Ancestor walked that way.'

'And the distance between two such sites can be measured as a stretch of song?'
'That', said Arkady, 'is the cause of all my troubles with the railway people.'

It was one thing to persuade a surveyor that a heap of boulders were the eggs of the Rainbow Snake, or a lump of reddish-sandstone was the liver of a speared kangaroo. It was something else to convince him that a featureless stretch of gravel was the musical equivalent of Beethoven's Opus iii.

By singing the world into existence, he said, the Ancestors had been poets in the original sense of *poiesis*, meaning 'creation'. No Aboriginal could conceive that the created world was in any way imperfect. His religious life had a single aim: to keep the land the way it was and should be. The man who went 'Walkabout' was making a ritual journey. He trod in the footsteps of his Ancestor. He sang the Ancestor's stanzas without changing a word or note — and so recreated the Creation.

'Sometimes,' said Arkady, 'I'll be driving my "old men" through the desert, and we'll come to a ridge of sandhills, and suddenly they'll all start singing. "What are you mob singing?" I'll ask, and they'll say, "Singing up the country, boss. Makes the country come up quicker."'

Aboriginals could not believe the country existed until they could see and sing it — just as, in the Dreamtime, the country had not existed until the Ancestors sang it.

'So the land', I said, 'must first exist as a concept in the mind? Then it must be sung? Only then can it be said to exist?' 'True.' 'In other words, "to exist" is "to be perceived"?' 'Yes.'

'Sounds suspiciously like Bishop Berkeley's Refutation of Matter.'

'Or Pure Mind Buddhism,' said Arkady, 'which also sees the world as an illusion.'

'Then I suppose these three hundred miles of steel, slicing through innumerable songs, are bound to upset your "old men's" mental balance?'

'Yes and no,' he said. 'They're very tough, emotionally, and very pragmatic. Besides, they've seen far worse than a railway.'

Aboriginals believed that all the 'living things' had been made in secret beneath the earth's crust, as well as all the white man's gear — his aeroplanes, his guns, his Toyota Land Cruisers — and
HE LAND CRUISER bumped and lurched along a double rut of dust, the bushes brushing the underside of the chassis. Alan sat front with Timmy, with his rifle upright between his knees. Marian followed hard after, with the ladies. We crossed a Andy gully and had to change to four-wheel drive. A black horse reared up, whinnied and galloped off.

On ahead the country was open woodland. The trees made ark stripes of shadow over the grass and the ghost-gums, at is orange hour of the evening, seemed to float above the ground, like balloons that had let down their anchors.

Alan raised his hand for Arkady to stop, whipped the .22 rough the window and fired into a bush. A female kangaroo and young broke cover and leaped away in great lolloping bounds, their haunches white against the grey of the scrub.

Alan fired again, and again. Then he and the man in blue jumped out and sprinted after them.

'Giant red,' said Arkady. 'They come out for water at sunset.'

'Did he hit her?'

'Don't think so,' he said. 'No. Look, they're coming back.'

Alan's hat showed up first, above the level of the grass cads. The man in blue's shirt was ripped at the shoulder, and e was bleeding from a thorn scratch.

'Bad luck, old man,' said Arkady to Alan.

Alan re-cocked the rifle and glared from the window.

The sun was touching the treetops when we came to a wind-pump and some abandoned stock-pens. There had been settlement here in the old days. There were heaps of rotted grey timbers and the wreck of a stockman's house. The wind-pump spurted a steady stream of water into two round galvanised tanks.
A flock of galahs sat perched around the rim of the tanks, several hundred of them, pink-crested cockatoos which flew up as we approached and wheeled overhead: the undersides of their wings were the colour of wild roses.

Everyone in the party surrounded a drinking trough, splashed the dirt from their faces, and filled their water-cans.

I made a point of avoiding Marian, but she came up from behind and pinched me on the bum. 'Getting to learn the rules, I see,' she grinned. 'Madwoman.'

The country away to the east was a flat and treeless waste entirely lacking in cover. Alan kept raising a finger to a solitary bump on the horizon. It was almost dark by the time we reached a small rocky hill, its boulders bursting with the white plumes of spinifex in flower, and a black fuzz of leafless mallee bush.

The hill, said Arkady, was the Lizard Ancestor's resting place.

The party split into two camps, each within earshot of the other. The men settled themselves and their swags in a circle, and began talking in hushed voices. While Arkady unpacked, I went off to hack some firewood.

I had lit the fire, using bark and grass for tinder, when we heard the sound of pandemonium from the women's camp. Everyone was shrieking and howling, and against the light of their fires I could make out Mavis, hopping this way and that, and gesturing to something on the ground.

'Take no notice,' said Arkady. 'They're only showing off. All the same, I think I'll sleep on the roof of the Land Cruiser.'

'Chicken!' I said.

For myself, I rigged up a 'snakeproof' groundsheet to sleep on, tying each corner to a bush, so its edges were a foot from the ground. Then I began to cook supper.

The fire was far too hot for grilling steaks without charring hem: I almost charred myself as well. Alan looked on with masterful indifference. None of the others gave one word of thanks for their food, but kept passing back their plates for more. Finally, when they were satisfied, they resumed their conference.

'You know who they remind me of?' I said to Arkady. 'A boardroom of bankers.'

'Which is what they are,' he said. 'They're deciding how little to give us.'

The steak was charred and tough, and after Hanlon's lunch we had very little appetite. We cleared up and went to join the old men's circle. The firelight lapped their faces. The moon came up, We could just discern the profile of the hill.

We sat in silence until Arkady, judging the moment, turned to Alan and asked quietly, in English, 'So what's the story of this place, old man?'

Alan gazed into the fire without twitching a muscle. The skin stretched taut over his cheekbones and shone. Then, almost imperceptibly, he tilted his head towards the man in blue, who got to his feet and began to mime (with words of pidgin thrown in) the travels of the Lizard Ancestor.

It was a song of how the lizard and his lovely young wife had walked from northern Australia to the Southern Sea, and how a southerner had seduced the wife and sent him home with a substitute.

I don't know what species of lizard he was supposed to be: whether he was a 'jew-lizard' or a 'road-runner' or one of those rumpled, angry-looking lizards with ruffs around their necks. All I do know is that the man in blue made the most lifelike lizard you could ever hope to imagine.

He was male and female, seducer and seduced. He was glutton, he was cuckold, he was weary traveller. He would claw his lizard-feet sideways, then freeze and cock his head. He would lift his lower lid to cover the iris, and flick out his lizard-tongue. He puffed his neck into goitres of rage; and at last, when it was time for him to die, he writhed and wriggled, his movements growing fainter and fainter like the Dying Swan's.

Then his jaw locked, and that was the end.
The man in blue waved towards the hill and, with the triumphant cadence of someone who has told the best of all possible stories, shouted: 'That . . . that is where he is!' The performance had lasted not more than three minutes.

The death of the lizard touched us and made us sad. But Big Tom and Timmy had been in stitches since the wife-swapping episode and went on hooting and cackling long after the man in blue sat down. Even the resigned and beautiful face of old Alan composed itself, into a smile. Then one by one they yawned, and spread out their swags, and curled up and went to sleep.

'They must have liked you,' Arkady said. 'It was their way of saying thanks for the food.'

We lit a hurricane lamp and sat on a couple of camping-chairs, away from the fire. What we had witnessed, he said, was not of course the real Lizard song, but a 'false front', or sketch performed for strangers. The real song would have named each waterhole the Lizard Man drank from, each tree he cut a spear from, each cave he slept in, covering the whole long distance of the way.

He had understood the pidgin far better than I. This is the version I then jotted down:

The Lizard and his wife set off to walk to the Southern Sea. The wife was young and beautiful and had far lighter skin than her husband. They crossed swamps and rivers until they stopped at a hill—the hill at Middle Bore—and there they slept the night. In the morning they passed the camp of some Dingoes, where a mother was suckling a brood of pups. 'Ha!' said the Lizard. 'I'll remember those pups and eat them later.'

The couple walked on, past Oodnadatta, past Lake Eyre, and came to the sea at Port Augusta. A sharp wind was blowing off the sea, and the Lizard felt cold and began to shiver. He saw, on a headland nearby, the campfire of some Southerners and said to his wife, 'Go over to those people and borrow a firestick.'

She went. But one of the Southerners, lusting after her lighter skin, made love to her—and she agreed to stay with him. He made his own wife paler by smearing her from head to foot with yellow ochre and sent her, with the firestick, to the solitary traveller. Only when the ochre rubbed off did the Lizard realise his loss. He stamped his feet. He puffed himself up in fury, but, being a stranger in a distant country, he was powerless to take revenge. Miserably, he turned for home with his uglier, substitute wife. On the way he stopped to kill and eat the Dingo puppies but these gave him indigestion and made him sick. On reaching the hill at Middle Bore, he lay down and died . . .

And that, as the man in blue told us, was where he was. Arkady and I sat mulling over this story of an antipodean Helen. The distance from here to Port Augusta, as the crow flew, as roughly 1,100 miles, about twice the distance—so we calculated—from Troy to Ithaca. We tried to imagine an Odyssey with a verse for every twist and turn of the hero's ten-year voyage. I looked at the Milky Way and said, 'You might as well count the stars.'

Most tribes, Arkady went on, spoke the language of their immediate neighbour, so the difficulties of communication across a frontier did not exist. The mystery was how a man of Tribe A, living up one end of a Songline, could hear a few bars sung by Tribe Q and, without knowing a word of Q's language, would know exactly what land was being sung.

'Christ!' I said. 'Are you telling me that Old Alan here would now the songs for a country a thousand miles away?'

'Most likely.'

'Without ever having been there?'

'Yes.'

One or two ethnomusicologists, he said, had been working on the problem. In the meantime, the best thing was to imagine a little experiment of our own.

Supposing we found, somewhere near Port Augusta, a song-an who knew the Lizard song? Suppose we got him to sing his verses into a tape-recorder and then played the tape to Alan in Kaititj country? The chances were he'd recognise the melody at once—just as we would the 'Moonlight' Sonata—but the meaning of the words would escape him. All the same, he'd listen very attentively to the melodic structure. He'd perhaps even ask us to replay a few bars. Then, suddenly, he'd find himself in sync and be able to sing his own words over the 'nonsense'.

'His own words for country round Port Augusta?'
animal gestures. Once, in the Sahel, I had watched some dancers mime the antics of antelopes and storks. But that was not the memory I was looking for.

Then I had it.

``Lorenz!'