

*Patterns in the Dust*¹

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The point here is that I'm supposed to write a story. And I think the best way to do it is to re-write *Heart of Darkness* but set it in Central Australia. I see similarities between the Congo Interior and the Outback, in their isolating immensity. There are parallels between Kurtz's Inner Station and the violence of colonial history. That violence, through various guises, has seeped into our present day narrative of space. Stories of mad men hiding out in the vastness of the desert, real and filmic, add a contemporary flavour to Conrad's narrative of rogue agents operating beyond their company's control. The Outback is ripe with pickings for a young writer with a predilection for the uncanny and the bloody.

The mythical fantasy Outback even comes pre-equipped with equivalent antagonists. These characters are on par with Kurtz, and there are also travelers who fit the mold of Marlow.

Mick Taylor from *Wolf Creek* is Kurtz.

Doc Tydon and John Grant of *Wake in Fright* are Kurtz and Marlow respectively.

Douglas Crabbe, a truck driver who deliberately crashed a semi-trailer through a crowded kiosk at Yulara, is another Kurtz.

Joseph Schwab, the Kimberly Killer who shot dead five people without explanation and was later gunned down by police, makes me think of Harlequin. What happened to Harlequin? He kept heading upriver. Made it a fair way, apparently.

I am Marlow.

I'm casting myself as the traveler in this narrative, leaving my natural space and penetrating into the unknown, heading 'up-river', north along the beaten track. Such thoughts do beg the question; is someone out there waiting for me? I'm just a strand in the larger fabric of

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myth, and as I write, so am I written. Events may not be under my control, and I may yet gain the opportunity to have words with Mr. Kurtz.

I remember the desert from a family trip many years previous. Since then I've developed a fixation on Australian serial killer folklore.

Stories of people committing murder in the Outback.

Stories about people, killing people.

People vanishing, being absorbed into the landscape.

I don't want to explain this fascination, and in fact I couldn't. Maybe it has something to do with living near the coast. Against the comfortable grain of familiar existence in Adelaide and coastal Australia in general, the Outback is the other place, a place I can see lurking beyond the city lights if I stand south of the city, somewhere elevated on the right kind of sultry summer night, with the right kind of eyes.

I'm going to go into the desert to try and experience the isolation of the land. I want to understand the psyche of my characters. Conrad had the jungle, and I will have the desert. Marlow had a river, I will have a highway.

To begin, I head north from Adelaide up the Stuart Highway. I pass through the Flinders Ranges, where, incidentally, some of *Wolf Creek* was shot. Into the Outback proper. On to Coober Pedy. I cross the border into the Northern Territory. There's something thrilling about borders. The sand on either side is the same shade, but there's a moment of recognition:

I'm here.

Where?

Uluru. Alice Springs. Barrow Creek. Tennant Creek. Katherine. Turn left. Over the border into Western Australia. Kununurra. Wyndham. By now I'm very close to the region that Schwab stalked, and it's no longer safe to swim anywhere for fear of crocodiles. South to Halls Creek, then further south to Wolfe Creek Meteorite Crater.

West to Broome.

Eighty Mile Beach.

Port Hedland.

Turning inland, Newman.

Plunging into the desert again, Kalgoorlie.

Norseman.

The Nullarbor.

No trees.

The road.

Bitumen.

The sky.

Dust.

Ceduna.

Whyalla.

Adelaide.

Flinders University.

This whole trip as scheduled amounts to 12 500 kilometres. I've allowed three weeks to pull it off. I estimate that I need to cover 625 km a day to make it home in time to attend Semester Two classes. I have that time to soak up the sun and sand and piece together some ideas.

That I'm traveling into isolation to dream of madness is a fact that doesn't escape me. Some have joked, myself included, that I'll never return, never be seen again. In fact, if it gave rise to some Flinders University urban legend... well, it might have served a purpose. That would just be a fresh sacrifice to the Outback myth. British tourists, infants and pretentious writers; no one is safe. There would, perhaps, be no better ending to this narrative than my own death or disappearance, the absorption of my 'self' into the landscape.

Maybe I am Harlequin.

After an evening spent ruining conversation by quoting Richard Milat's chilling observation that 'stabbing a woman is like cutting a loaf of bread' my ever-tolerant friend

Jo has kindly offered to drive me back to the car park where I left my car. When I reach my car something about the vehicle parked next to mine catches my attention and I stop to have a closer look.

It's a Northern Territory license plate. Along its bottom edge it reads: 'NT – OUTBACK'. Even in the evening light I can see flecks of red sand on the edges of the plate. The vehicle itself is a Ford truck. Monstrous in size, it seems to loom over my sedan. I glance at the registration number, but can only make out half of it:

666 ***

I flag down Jo and point it out to her.

"It's happening," she says. "It's all connected."

She drives off, leaving me alone in front of the truck, under a nearly full moon.

Jo and I have spent the evening discussing my trip, my writing. The unexpected presence of the license plate is serendipitous. The desert I've been reading about over the last few months in news stories and history books suddenly seems like a real place. This truck has probably traveled, perhaps regularly, the same highways that I intend to. The license plate even has the word that has been hovering in my psyche since Christmas when I decided I was taking this trip.

'Outback.'

This would be a far more poignant scene if, standing under the moonlight, in the presence of sighing Eucalypts, I were immediately struck by the significance of the license plate; I actually only really understood what an important plot device it was later on, standing in my kitchen, preparing noodles.

And so tonight I'm left with the image of the beast lurking far up the highway and waiting for me in the darkness. He is sharpening his claws and flexing his monstrous tail, breathing steam and chortling to himself. He knows I'm coming.

My housemate suggested that seeing this car was the 'gas-stop experience'.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well perhaps you see that car later on, and realise the killer's been following you for longer than you realised."

Indeed.

Our protagonist, hair closely cropped, is wearing a NIN t-shirt that reads: 'Now I'm nothing'. He is silhouetted against the moon. Reading the license plate over and over, he thinks of the journey ahead of him.

He looks up from this omen to the city lights and beyond to a sprawling and impenetrable darkness. It rests over the land, seeming to trail away towards something unspeakable, something as ancient as the dust and the shadows that shroud it.

A land beyond and outside of our names for it.

Fade out.

Ellipsis.

... Up along the edge of the nighttime desert highway, hundreds of kilometres north of Alice Springs, the motel's air conditioning unit has had its last gasp for the evening, a thirty-three degree winter night. I'm naked, folded into a budget room the size of my car's interior. Sweat is collecting under my balls and is making them stick to a cheap plastic seat. An aggressive and unpleasant part of my being has crawled out from inside me and has clawed its way to my shoulder, a comfortable seat next to my ear, with a clear view of the keyboard and the screen. Tired and cranky from long hours behind the wheel, his neck hurting from sleeping in the back seat of the Statesman every night, lonely and irate, moping in self-absorption, this part of me wants to communicate.

He whispers that I have nothing to say.

Yes, I do.

He laughs and asks what it is.

I open my mouth and he says:

Words?

Yes, I have words to say.

Silence, and then a low chuckle.

What is outside the window?

I hesitate. I speak.

“The Outback.”

That, he caws, is just a word!

I peel myself out of the chair and step away from the laptop. I begin to pace the room. The unpleasant part of my being flutters away from my shoulder and starts circling overhead, near the ceiling. He calls down to me, telling me that the Outback is destroyed the second I bring my gaze to bear upon it.

The carpet is prickly under my feet. The more I listen to him the more my blood boils and my skin starts to itch. He swoops low, reminding me in his throaty rasp that all my experiences are disfigured into words, fallible ciphers. He croaks:

You're trying to write about something real, but you're using words.

Words come from me, not the Outback. But I process the Outback through words.

Cackling from above.

If that is the case, you are definitely not engaging with anything real!

There's a sickening sensation inside me, and to my dismay everything suddenly has meaning. But meaning is constructed of words, so meaning too must originate from me. By implication I can't discover anything other than what hides in me. There's no Outback, only a projection, an abstraction, and even if I could engage with anything resembling the 'real' thing, I couldn't talk about it anyway.

So I'm standing in a motel room, struggling with the revelation that I can't see the sand for the desert, can't quantify the sublime without crushing it under the banal, can only engage with a linguistic model of reality, its double; and I, a writer, am realising that my words only describe a hyperreality, a meta-experience, the intercession of myself between reality and my being, mediation, abstractions conveyed through abstractions, and of course this begs a certain question, but before I can articulate it the aggressive and unpleasant self settles back on my shoulder and rasps, hot breath in my ear, stinking of carrion:

Why bother?

Several minutes later I quit pacing and extinguish the light. I pull a curtain back. From my window I can see across a gravel driveway that separates the budget rooms from the open

camping space, where retired couples park their oversized caravans, or young families pitch tents.

Tonight, the camping space is filled with fifty identical, round brown tents. These are quite economical in that they seem easy to set up and take up very little space, despite fitting two or three campers. The tents have been erected to accommodate the several busloads of young tourists who have just arrived at the campsite, mostly English teenagers as far as I can tell. I watch as groups of them mill about, stumbling back and forth between friends, breaking off to bitch about tent partners.

These young tourists are not an unfamiliar sight. I first spotted them at the King's Canyon tourist resort, and then a day later at Alice Springs and then again at an anonymous petrol stop between Barrow Creek and the Devil's Marbles. Even in such an enormous place as the Outback, for the last week I have been unable to escape them, which leads me to consider that if I travel the same route as they, then I too may be a tourist.

Tonight, much further along the Stuart highway, I've run into them once more at a town named Dunmarra.

Let it be said that over half of the so-called 'towns' listed in touring atlases are not, strictly speaking, towns as such. They're petrol stations with beds and showers and alcohol. At the time I paid for my room, several hours ago, Dunmarra seemed like a distant frontier outpost, the last petrol stop on the edge of a wasteland. Thirty minutes later and the arrival of the Brit teens has transformed Dunmarra's ambiance into a high school party.

Some of the campers are carrying torches, the white beams of which wobble haphazardly between campfires. Caught in the flare of a torch beam I see a group of three girls whose pale skin has never seen the sun properly and is now an angry red. They seem to be waving around mobile phones, perhaps hoping for service. Even in the low light I see board shorts, novelty sunglasses, cans of energy drink, stuffed koalas, t-shirt signing. Each of the young tourists wears a black t-shirt listing their tour's stopover points, emblazoned with a sort of expeditionary catchphrase across the front, 'Central 2010'.

In queue at a restaurant in Alice Springs several days previous: three of the young travelers, two girls and one boy. The girls are wearing denim jeans cut almost to bikini size, sleeves rolled up on their tour tees. Their hair is coloured, their eyeliner making them look like raccoons. I realise how ludicrous it is that they would apply makeup in this heat. The boy is badly sunburned across his thin shoulders, and no wonder, his tour tee is cut into a singlet, exposing underdeveloped muscle tone. All three appear exhausted, pink skin and flushed faces, seemingly unaware of the writer lurking behind them, recording to memory his vivid and lasting impressions of them.

The restaurant: Plush toy equivalents of wildlife native to the Northern Territory, endless racks of postcards, bumper stickers, tea towels, place mats. All of these products are overpriced, aimed at tourists. Novelty stubby holders. Kangaroo and camel jerky.

Necklaces with crocodile teeth. Hats with feathers. A placard over the bar, wedged between posters for Australian breweries, promises 'real' Outback hospitality, plus the best service in the territory. The ubiquitous map of the Top End, with the equally ubiquitous 'you are here' arrow. Distances from point to point. Places of interest.

None of it seems to appeal to them though. They are bleary eyed, especially the young man. I listen to them complain about one of their number:

"... And you just realise it when you're all together in a small space. I hate it."

Tensions mount on Central 2010. A cruel narrative takes form. I picture the interior of their bus during the day, bored and self-absorbed teenagers exchanging furtive glances, ignoring the red sand rushing by outside.

I wonder if any of them have noticed the same unshaven, scruffy writer showing up at the same rest areas as them, checking his luggage while glancing furtively in their direction, always seeming to check one bag in particular, always seeming to fix his gaze on the same young tourists. I wonder if even under the desert sun some of them get cold chills when they notice the same silver Statesman in every town they pass through.

Long miles talking to himself. To the horizon, black smoke; but never a report of fires. Australia's iconic fauna, kangaroos and emus, splattered, bloated and stiff along the highway's edge. These events have taken their toll, and to look at him you could probably guess how many miles he'd come, and what he'd been thinking about.

I'm tired and I'm stressed. I decide that it's time to take a break from myself and my meta-writing. I get dressed and step outside. It isn't much warmer out here than in the motel. I walk towards the highway, past payphones and petrol pumps. Petrol here is \$1.83 a litre. While the campground buzzes with activity and the restaurant seems semi-active, the service station is deserted. There is no movement along the highway. Cicadas chirp, mosquitoes whine, and a variety of nearly undetectable sounds, whispers, mark the transition from day to night.

I approach the road and glance back towards the campgrounds; fires are lit and many of the camping Brit boppers seem to be watching a movie on a large screen. I stand on the edge of the light thrown from their fire and from their projector screen, feeling as though I'm caught along the fault line between two realities.

One of those realities is the isolating and nightmarish Outback that I came out here to find. I get the impression that the reality my inadvertent companions are searching for is something else entirely, the paradisiacal desert of postcards and exotic holidays.

We came to the same place to find two different things.

To my left: screaming teens, a barbecue, even a DJ armed with turntables and a Top 40 playlist. Flailing limbs and raucous, high pitched singing floating through the air:
“...Tonight’s gonna be a good, good night!”

I turn my back to them and face a landscape already shrouded in darkness; the last washed out tones of purple and orange, and a faint gold light in the sky marking the sun’s descent. A pale disc of moon floats up from over the horizon, seemingly carried on the same breeze that brings the scent of the unknown, perfumed night. There’s something intangible giving off an intense energy just beyond the reach of my eyes, past the range of my hearing.

I’m standing right along the highway’s edge, and the thin strip of bitumen acts as a marker, a border separating me from a landscape with its own immense power. It’s an energy that doesn’t clash with my preconceptions, my understandings of it. It simply is, and in the absence of the sun I find that easier to connect with. I can’t see it to ruin it with my gaze of understanding. Perhaps the nighttime desert takes me back to my past life as a primeval being, slithering through the dust, before we had invented language.

I wish that at this point I could successfully rip off Conrad’s line about going up the Congo River and its similitude to a journey back in time. I’m not sure I can properly assimilate it in this context. A highway isn’t quite a river.

Going up the river was like going back in time because it was a journey further and further away from familiarity. Conrad construed history and the unfamiliar as being inextricably combined, both distancing that which he had become accustomed to. He saw the undeveloped jungle as a link to prehistory, pre-civilisation. The river was there long before Marlow, Conrad, or anyone. The highway on the other hand was built.

A highway will never be like going back in time, not until post-civilisation. Until then, a highway will remain an artery beating the pulse of the familiar through an unknown space. The highway is like Stuart’s name and the line he drew across the map, trying to fill in the blank.

I step over the road, towards the scrub, my shirt sticking to my body. The heat of the day is still rising from the bitumen and the sun baked dirt on either side. I look up the highway’s length. It is a grey line vanishing into a solid wall of darkness after less than a hundred metres. The light from the campfires is farther behind me and I turn back to the scrub, stepping away from the highway now, feeling the dirt give a little under my boots. If anyone were watching from the campground, they might see a tall figure disappearing into the night, as though being swallowed.

The musky odour of some creature unseen mixes in with the dry scent of dirt and parched mulga and spinifex. Dead leaves crunch underfoot and I’m treading very carefully, feeling each footstep, holding my hands out in front of me. My eyes adjust to the moonlight and a termite mound previously hidden in shadow gives the impression of having materialised in front of me. I step back, startled. It is several inches taller than me and now that I can see it,

it holds the moon's light. It seems to glow softly. I feel as though I am standing before a monolith, omniscient and silent, unknowable.

I try to imagine the early European invaders' reactions to an unfamiliar land. The trees here shed their bark and shimmer in the heat, glowing white after dark, whispering like ghosts. The swans are black instead of white. The seasons are reversed.

I must control this land. I will civilise this place.

The Outback came into being, a badland, a space where colonial fears were banished, the wild beyond settlement and outside appropriation. That which couldn't be subdued was rejected.

The Outback's the other place. It's everywhere that we are not, always over the hill, beyond the horizon: a narrative, non-existent, myth. Not a place, an idea. But the concept had its origin in the human mind.

This is not us- we are civilised.

But the other is a projection.

The 'Outback' slips away from me now; just a word, like any of the others I choose. This is a moment of recognition, but that description is inadequate for those are still only 'words'. This is all still processed, revised, construed, represented, and then re-represented. Everything I see, placed with intent; a map of reality.

I peel the map back, a scab, but the thing underneath is without form, and cannot be described.

I fall to my knees and slide my hands into the sand, marveling at its warmth. All around me the mulga sighs. A breeze touches my damp forehead and I look back up at the termite mound, now towering over me. In the moonlight I can make out the shapes of trees and other termite mounds, but their borders are hazy, and they seem little more than shadows.

For a few moments all words taste alien and I have trouble wrapping my mouth or tongue around anything other than a grunt, a sigh, a howl. Yes, I am just an animal in an environment. Fucking and killing seem both rousing and banal in equal measures.

Traveling alone means that there is no one to snap me out of my thoughts, so each thought gains its own terrible strength. Thoughts of violence become more potent, sickening in their intensity. Kneeling in the nighttime desert an awareness blossoms inside of me, of my own appalling capacity for action, but after a few moments I start to think whimsically of past lovers and present fantasies before everything melds irrationally and with a terrifying suddenness, and I can no longer separate thoughts of desire from idle daydreams of cruelty.

In the same instant that I'm fantasising about stroking a Swedish backpacker's naked shoulders, the ubiquitous sexual partner in any halfway exotic situation, I'm wondering how much resistance one gets from a bushman's nicotine stained teeth when one taps them with a hammer. Dental records are damning, so they're the first to go. Fingerprints and faces must be skinned, the flesh dried and burned. Hair can blow away and leave a trail so it too goes on the flame. The wallet: each individual identifying card shredded and incinerated, the money pocketed, the leather added to the coals. The body stripped, the clothes torched. The fire must be kept burning high in the fragrant desert night, so that when I tear any tattooed lumps of flesh away from a broken, hemorrhaging corpse, they sizzle and burn quickly, and thoroughly.

The recognisable symmetry of the human form must be destroyed, its distinguishing features obliterated. I'm not so naïve as to think that I could burn an entire body over a campfire, but I suspect that I could ensure that it would be unrecognisable to anyone passing by. The bones can be turned to paste with the same hammer that erased a dental history. The organs stamped into the desert soil and spread over a wide radius.

The art of transfiguring a person into a stain.

One must create the impression that a trail has been discovered, never the body.

These thoughts blend into erotic images of the Swede's blonde hair trailing away over sweat soaked sheets, her blue eyes turned towards me, telling me to come away from the laptop, she's lonely, she's cold.

I'm disgusted, but also kind of bored. I know there's a resilient part of my mind conditioned to condemn such thoughts but it's all just so meaningless at this point in time, and my mind feels hollow. Yes, I'm aware that it's immoral to be toying with these thoughts but I'm too tired to be bothered calling myself out on my depravity and I just roll with it.

I stand. My knees protest and I realise I've been in the scrub for a while. I blink and get my bearings. Turning, I start to backtrack to the highway. Nearly blind in the darkness, I occasionally walk into spinifex spines and jump back, cursing.

Conrad was talking about two things, we presume, in his title; the heart of the so-called 'Dark Continent' and the dark heart of brutality beating a steady pulse beneath the 'civilised' exterior of the modern man. At this point of the narrative I'm supposed to start to become aware of my own heart of darkness, by 'finding myself' in the nighttime darkness of the Central Australian desert. Heavy-handed metafictional techniques and bad similes abound in these parts, like crocodiles. I remember a postcard I drafted while I was still in Adelaide. It's more poetic than the desert inspires me to be, and it seems that the expectations were richer than the outcome.

“Hello! It's very warm here, and though I miss you, I'm comforted by the thought of lying face down in ancient sand, letting the sun brown the back of my neck and breathing in the scent of dried eucalypt and dry dirt. I dream fondly of nothingness. I'm alert to all possibilities. I feel on edge, but never better. Touching the ground here is like running my hand over a live circuit. Everything's alive. Running low on bullets. They're closing in! I look forward to the return to clean sleeping conditions, just as I look forward to the approaching, utterly inevitable comedown, the rehabilitation to society. I'm out on a limb here. I like it. I don't want to return. But apparently I'm supposed to. Do you believe in fate? I do. But I also believe we have to do our level best to achieve desired outcomes. But when you become aware of how blissful it can be, to do nothing, to feel yourself wasting away and not only enjoy it, but appreciate it entirely... all my worries evaporate. Just like everything else I can see. No water out here. Plenty of air though. Shades of blue I didn't know about. And a grain of sand for every person in the world. I miss you. You're in my thoughts, and my dreams. I stopped having nightmares the second I exited the city. Everything I believed is true. This is a journey of discovery, fulfillment, and affirmation. I'm alive. I'm walking along the surface of something that breathes, has an awareness. I'm running out of space on the back of this postcard. Go check your inbox. I have plenty to say.”

I have nothing to say.

I reach the highway and glance back at the darkness, an invisible landscape. I hover over that line in the sand.

High pitched shrieks from the campground; some of the girls running about in the shadows in between tents. Orange light from the fires flicker and play through their swirling hair. As I walk back to my room I pass three of them, all gangly limbs and faceless in this light, hunched forward on their knees in the shadows, peering intently into a darkened space that I think leads to underneath the budget rooms. Wanting to touch base with my human brothers and sisters I say conversationally:

“Hey are you guys looking for big moths?”

As one they turn to look at me and I can't see their expressions. I wonder how I appear to them; a tall figure emerging from the humid darkness without warning and standing above them. Moments turn to dust and scatter in the heat of the night. After a lengthy silence one of them responds.

“No. Toads.”

I don't move.

“Oh.”

When I checked in I was tempted to use an alias. Several nights in various budget motel rooms had alerted me to the fact that no one seemed to ask for identification. At one point I had misquoted the license plate numbers on my car to a clerk, without even meaning to, and nothing had come of it. Perhaps I had entered some consequence-free realm.

Back in my room I'm pacing again, running one hand through my hair and scratching at my new beard. My laptop screen turns to a glowing screensaver and I flick a key irritably. Before long, the screensaver comes on again and I ignore it this time.

I kick my luggage around the room, trying to think of something to say. I come across some hastily scrawled notes from earlier in my travels. I grab one.

'No sense of something gone wrong here. I'm struck by how not unsettling Snowtown is. I felt that here was a town where we expect to find a trace of something eerie, but that expectation alone is all we find. The beast in Snowtown rides shotgun with me down the main drag and then we play hide and seek. Because I want Snowtown to upset me. So I have to deposit that sensation myself. It's nowhere in town.

'Which leads me to realise something about my journey into the Outback. If I'm searching for the mythical Outback, the Outback of madmen, then I'm not going to find anything out there.

I'm going to carry it with me.'

I put the note down, and glance back at the laptop, turn to see myself naked in the mirror, covered in scratches from the last couple of days. I think of the gun, buried in my luggage, and not for the first time I consider that tonight I'm probably the strangest and most dangerous person at the Dunmarra Wayside Inn.

Dimly, I become aware that it's in my power to take the map that you know, and re-arrange it. This is the map that has marginalia next to words like 'Snowtown' and 'Port Arthur'. I could create new territories of violence. I can take the name Dunmarra and punch it into your psyche. This isn't a compulsion to violence, rather a mundane comprehension, and one that makes my stomach turn but in a most un-dramatic fashion.

I step outside into the still warm night and lean forward into a steady lope, disappearing from the halo of fluorescent light, becoming a shadow in a wall of shadow. I retreat across the highway and into the scrub.

No, not really.

As a writer I know that at this point I can do anything I please, safe in the knowledge that I'm secure. If I want to get away with murder, I can arrange it. Idly, I toy with plot developments, and begin to contemplate unspeakable acts, even though none of it really

appeals to me in any way. Right now, surrounded by young people, I find it distasteful. Any fantasy is vaguely appealing from the safety of a comfort zone, but out here, thinking of murder, I feel ill. But I still think that I should probably end this a certain way, with a very specific image.

I walk to the window and pull the curtain back once more, and stare up into the night sky. Across from me all the fires burn low and it's silent in the desert. Light from the full moon bathes my face, and a restless backpacker dreams she sees a spectre. She blinks and the apparition vanishes. Frowning she slides back into a broken sleep. A chill breeze strokes her cheek, reminding her where she is.

The stars are fire in the sky and from somewhere unseen I hear a dingo howling, low and mournful.

Away from the roadhouse, beyond the highway lies a sprawling and impenetrable darkness, but I can't tell if it's Conrad's or my own, or maybe even just the absence of light. The Outback is hiding in the darkness. It's always been the other place; it belongs in the night, hidden, unseen and imagined. If I could dissect the space, I'd extract the labels and tear away the walls of comprehension, leaving only dust, atoms.

But even these are still only words.

I let the curtain fall in place and slide back into the shadows of the motel room, alone and uninspired.

Along the shore of a place called Lake Hart I came across finger drawn lines in the sand; someone had taken the time to leave traces on the landscape. I read messages like; 'Kerstin is in the Outback' and 'Manu Davide and Stefano stay in the OUTBACK'.

I looked up, looked around. I had walked several hundred metres from my car and the parking rest area. Across several sand dunes, past the burned out skeleton of a van and over a train line, swiping at flies the whole way, I set foot on the beach. If I squinted, I could see water off in the distance, but there seemed to be more shore than water and as if in a dream I was standing in a great empty space. The topography had been leveled and I faced a flat and open expanse of land. Great clumps of desiccated salt all around, crunching underfoot. A dry heat, rising off the sand; painfully bright light reflecting from every surface and beads of sweat turning cold under several layers of clothing. A whisper or a sigh goes unheard in the soft desert wind; let it be said that these winds sting, even when they're gentle. Sand was everywhere but not to my surprise. Beyond the lake the colour of the dirt wasn't quite red, but it wasn't brown. There were hues of orange, copper and bronze. Sand scattered into the air, whirling briefly before coming to rest again, dry and warm.

The road stretched out beyond the apex of the horizon and I saw a car, a rental van, travel up its length, glinting, receding until it was merely a point of light itself. It vanished, and everything was still.

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