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The journey across the back Ivanhoe way to Lake Mungo seemed endless, the dirt road stretching to the huge horizon, occasionally entangled with mallee trees but mostly saltbush and spinifex infinitely repeated. Emus, the same colour as the grey brown metallic vegetation rocked across the road, elegant and dinosauric. Deep silence; interspersed with familiar birds, the magpie softly echoing, a chainsaw crow; clouds of galahs. Our shadows when we stopped briefly an hour before sunset were hugely long. We seemed to be eaten up by the contrasting intensity of the light. Every tiny pebble and grass stem threw its own dark shadow, crisply delineated. Countless lit-up shapes and shadows were held beneath the great bowl of the sky, cloudless with an almost palpable luminosity: light like a solution of some kind.

All along the road into Hay the previous night a sprinkling of glass and plastic bottles had caught the low raking light of the just-setting sun to glitter like a myriad of little lights, a ritual trail of human thirst. The road gives the landscape movement and direction; when you step away a hundred metres or so, the only indication of direction is the sun. The low bush encloses you. The line of the road and its fences and telephone poles is our understanding of space and perspective inscribed into the landscape: there is a destination, gathered into the vanishing point on the horizon which keeps drawing us forward, keeps us moving.

The gathering of thirty artists arrived at dusk at the little circle of cabins at Mungo Lodge, more than a hundred kilometers from the nearest town. After sunset, the Milky Way spilled across a perfectly black sky set with tiny radiant points and smudges among the great gems of planets. The constellations emerged in a geometric order. Subtleties of brilliance can be discerned here, from faint to flaming, because there is no reflected light from the city, reflected light that dims all but the brightest stars. A crescent moon sailed high then sank late at night in an extraordinary golden boat shape above the feathery trees. The Polish artists say that only in Australia is the new moon on its back; in their home the crescent moon is vertical. Wlodek told me 'We are very happy to be here. Nowhere in Poland is the road so straight'.

Up at dawn, this time the sky looked clear in the east, but when I got to the lookout to paint the early light over the lakebed a band of indigo cloud kept being pushed up ahead of the sun. Our faces burn with the sun while the icy wind pierces through our clothes. We all wear an extraordinary assortment of odd garments and hats to protect ourselves from the combined elements of translucent sunlight and the Antarctic wind.

We walked at dusk under a pale sky to the labyrinthine gardens of spinifex just up the road. The tight spiky plant dies away in the centre, while new plants form a ring around the outside in perfect spirals. As the light got dimmer, I became suddenly aware that I didn't know the

direction of the cabins, that all the patterns of the bush were repeated indiscriminately. Was I going in the right direction? Deep silence all around, spirits watching. There is no perspective, or direction, except the sun, and the step of the human body crunching over the ground, enhancing the feeling of being watched. Feet crunch because everything that drops on the ground remains entire through the extreme dryness—turds, scats, burrs like tiny grenades, dry sticks, spinifex spines, feathers, even wallabies preserved as taut skin and white bone.

Ken showed us how to throw the curved South Coast boomerang in the ground between our huts. I went up to have a go—on the third time the boomerang whirled back and hit me on the cheek—such a blow from the sky, like a judgment.

We walked to the archaeological sites of dry lake with John Handy, the guide from the Barkundji people, who seemed gently mocking, intimating that information freely given is not valued, and facts have to be needed in advance rather than spoken to an unready audience.

The country encompasses death. Bones, pieces of fur and feathers lay everywhere beside the road. Arid lands are a metaphor for vulnerability, for exposure of the inner self even with its dirt and bones. Memories of distant time are littered over the surface. As clouds form in the distance their shadows over the great expanse cause an illusion, a mirage of a reflective and watery lake. It is the effects of light that constantly alter perception. Great crows called and wheeled around us, emphasising the silence. It was as though the light had a sound, a hum of its own.

Kay found an antbed fireplace, dotted with the minute bones of extinct animals; a fragile skull brought to the light by the wind lifting the sand. It looked insignificant, like the remnants of a fire a few years old, rather than its true age of many thousands of years. The friction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal understanding of the archaeological past may be because these eroded dunes around the dry lake are really the place of inner vision, the spiritual centre, a parallel country quite outside systems of measurement and analysis.

To recover the past, observed Freud, is to embark on a process like that of the investigation of the psyche. Sifting fragments of memories, he said, is like disinterring ruins of buildings and cities from the ground. The scattered remains of the ancient past at Lake Mungo differed from the ruins described by Freud, and are almost invisible to the unobservant eye, as mere traces of bone, shell and fire. Such modest signs offer a precious glimpse of another mode of experience for artists living for a time outside familiar places, struggling with the workings of fate and loss.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Diana Wood Conroy.*