



Source: 'Guantanamo casts shadow over Bush's Saudi visit', *Telegraph*, London; *Washington Post*, Reuters in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 16/01/08.
Tags: [incarceration](#), [language](#)
Writer/s: [Matias Viegner](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Abraham was in prison wrongly, but none of his rights mattered in the first place. Perhaps he had done some things wrong, but those who put him in prison neither knew very much about him, right or wrongly, nor had any right to put him here. They had no rights in his land. He had none now in this other land, with languages around him he hardly knew. In the prisoners' eyes Abraham felt a burning solidarity. None of them knew each other, but they all knew they might never get out again. The prison was in a hot place, a very hot place, but whether it was on a mountaintop or by the sea he could not say. From the south came the sun, and to the right was sometimes a kind of rushing sound, like trains or water or even wind. Mostly there was silence. No one was allowed to speak, and in any case many of the men in the prison spoke different languages, so words were useless. Even writing was forbidden. Shortly after all pens and all paper had been taken away, everyone had received a deck of cards.

Alone in his cell, Abraham played solitaire. All the men played solitaire, each in some different version, whatever they could remember. Every one a different game: Forty Thieves, Giza, Pyramid, Sea Towers, or Beleaguered Castle. If he could not remember the rules perfectly, he would not play. If he lost too much, or won too often, he chose another game. Finally only one game remained, and he played it hour after hour. This was the game he knew as Australian Patience. Seven tableaux of four cards each, building onto four foundations from the Ace up, with the stock played once and what was not used discarded.

In each cell a man played solitaire. Each one was different. Abraham heard cards shuffling, cards ticked over, counting in other languages. He saw himself, perhaps rightly, as the Ace. Often the lowest card, but sometimes the highest. He saw those who had put him here as the King, and the Jack, sometimes with assistance from the Queen, other times by tricking the Ten, Nine, Eight and all the rest. In certain games the first card out was highest, even if it was a Two, or a Five. Sometimes the allegiances were with colour, red or black, and other times strictly by suit, and very rarely, by number.

Each cell had a high window that admitted only light, and a door with a small window. The doors were diagonal to each other, so each man could see two doors. In the door's window they could see each other's eyes, or eye, one eye, brown or green sometimes. There was just enough space to show a card by its corner. The Five of clubs or the Jack of diamonds. For a time the men signaled each other this way, answering a black King with a red Ace, or a spade with a heart. They learned to carry a signal from one end of the row along thirty cells or more. These were their codes. The cards could spell justice. The King did not always win. One hand could trump another.

The conditions were inhuman in this prison. The food was poor, and the heat never relented, but nothing was worse than the silence. It was this that slowly broke the men, convincing them that time had forgotten them, that the world if it knew of them had given up on ever helping them. One by one the men fell back from the windows. They returned to the floor, one after another, and played alone: Flower Garden, Scorpion, Queen of Italy and Indian Patience.

Abraham narrowed his world into what fitted in his hand. He played the same game over and over until through it he could see the entirety of the world. No card was good or bad on its own, only in its turn. Skillful play would succeed only when conditions favoured it, but conditions which seemed favourable at first might turn on a whim, or damnation be staved off by the very last card. And so Abraham began again. He saw that the cards will come back. Every card will come back eventually. The catch was that it may not come back at the right time, and the right card at the wrong time was as useless as the wrong card at the wrong time. Right and wrong were positions in a universe of chance, but only the determination to play, and play again, could save him. In this universe, even the wrong are righteous and the right are wronged. If you wait long enough, everything comes back and the game begins again.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Matias Viegner.