

Story for performance #943
webcast from Sydney at 08:08PM, 19 Jan 08



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, 'Dream begins to fade under state of seige', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 19/01/08.

Tags: [animals](#), [desert](#), [security](#), [travel](#), [war](#)
Writer/s: [Shaune Lakin](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Each house was surrounded by chainlink fences, half-a-mile high. The houses hardly looked in need of protection: dried up old weatherboard, and surrounded by bare, dusty ground. It was too dry for gardens or lawns, he supposed.

As they drove passed each one, he became increasingly excited by the idea of coyotes approaching these houses. He imagined that that's what the fences were for: to prevent coyotes stealing children. He really had no idea what they were for, or what they were meant to keep away; they were just so high, maybe fifteen feet high in some cases. And, as he had already thought, he couldn't imagine what they were protecting. The paint had more-or-less peeled off and the weather boards completely warped on every house along the road. He imagined the insides of the houses to be exactly the same: broken pieces of furniture, with the smell of fat clinging to walls that had, as with the outside, become bare. So he imagined coyotes circling chainlink fences.

It was certainly hot, he thought as he considered peeling paint and dried-up ground. So hot there was no one outside. He wondered if the children in the houses had air conditioning or fans to keep cool. Or little wading pools out back they could fill up each day and make muddy. Safe from coyotes. He had no idea, really, what they did in this town.

'Twenty-nine Palms'. It sounded like an oasis, with 29 palm trees surrounding an arcadian pool of cool water. There may have been an oasis, but he couldn't see it. I mean, he couldn't see how an oasis could belong here, with the weather-beaten houses and huge fences. An oasis would have produced something like Palm Springs, surely, with stucco houses and topiary.

They pulled over. He wanted to feel the heat, to see how it compared to earlier in the day. The car tyres sank into the sandy verge. He opened his window first, and felt the heat hit him as if punched by it. He was certain he heard a 'thump' sound as the heat entered the car, and his mouth dried out immediately. Even so, he got out and lit a cigarette from Marianne's packet illustrated with the Native American smoking a pipe. Organic fags.

He stood in the sinking sand, sinking because so hot, he imagined, and watched four planes fly passed. They were fighter planes. He didn't know much about planes, but he was sure they were fighter planes. Well they weren't Dash 8s, and they were flying in formation, which he guessed pilots did in fighter planes. The sound was fantastic, mainly because of how it warped as it moved through the heat. By the time it got to him it was an incredible, piercing 'whir'. And as he drew back on his organic fag, he swore he could taste something like aviation gas, and for the moment of that drag he was completely immersed in

the effect of the combat plane. By the next drag the effect had gone, as with the planes. He could still see them, and of course hear them, but he was no longer enveloped by them. So his next drag—his last, as it was just too hot—was somehow empty. And he wondered, as he flicked his cigarette onto the hot sand, how the coyotes coped with the sound of the planes.

By the time Marianne found a store, the houses were no longer surrounded by chainlink, and the verge had become cement. They both looked at postcards inside. Marianne liked the card showing the scrubby flat landscape leading into the town. He preferred the cards showing the 'Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center'; they were fantastic, and he chose two. His favourite, and the one he'd send Jane, showed an observation tower in front of a high chainlink fence. It was a perfect photograph, especially with all the empty shells and other artefacts he couldn't recognise in clumps on the ground, and the fence, which was the same as those surrounding the houses they passed. He took two of those cards; one for Jane, and one for himself. The other card showed a swimming pool at the Combat Center. All he could do was imagine what it would be like to swim in it on days like today, with a pool full of Marines like those he had seen in *Full Metal Jacket*. Marianne also found an exceptional pen, with a fighter plane that moved along the pen's shaft in clear oil. They both took one.

As he watched the cashier take the money for the cards and pens, he asked about the Combat Center. She beamed 'Oh, it's a real boon for the town. All the families it brings in. Half the town's population is out there,' she said, in the next breath asking him where he was from. 'Do those planes fly over often?' he asked, not hearing her question. 'Why sure,' she offered in a way that revealed her genuine satisfaction with the place. 'All the time. And gun fire. They fire off rounds out there all the time, and we hear it all,' she continued, with a radiant smile. She was sure proud of that soundtrack.

He asked 'Why do all those houses along the highway have such high fences?'

'Oh, the houses on the base, you mean? Why to keep the families safe.' He waited for some more, but none came. He wanted to ask 'From what?', hoping she would say coyotes, but he wasn't certain she had any idea.

Sure enough, when they left the store they heard the sound of shells firing. The street was completely bare of other life, except for the sound of shells. Each one echoed through the air and by the time it hit his ears it was a soft, reverberating 'thwack'. Marianne looked across as she unlocked the car. She had a look on her face that he'd never seen before.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Shaune Lakin.