

Story for performance #961
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Tags: [ghosts](#), [travel](#), [water](#), [Papua New Guinea](#)
Writer/s: [Paul Dwyer](#)

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At dusk we find our friend, the amateur ethnographer from Australia, still blundering around Bougainville, the outermost island region of Papua New Guinea.

[Those who have followed our journey closely thus far will recall the ethnographer is trying to understand the beliefs and attitudes informing a reconciliation process between the ex-combatants in Bougainville's decade-long 'crisis'—a dirty little post-colonial war bankrolled by the Australian government.]

The ethnographer is in the back of a truck, stuck in a queue of vehicles waiting for the waters of a swollen river to subside and allow them to cross. It's at least a 50 metre gap. The rain has only just stopped. The river is still flowing fast.

On the banks are remnants of the minor folly of some Australian engineers. A piece of steel, in a broken concrete pylon in the middle of the crossing, gestures pathetically to the darkening sky: no bridge is going to withstand for very long the regular floods that come down off the mountains.

'Should we be crossing these rivers in the dark?' the ethnographer asks of his companions. 'That village we just passed looked okay—we couldn't find a place to sleep back there?' A soft chorus of reassuring voices in reply: '*Em orait. Yu no ken wari.*'

Ten minutes later, they're in. Sliding left to right on the soft sand base of the river. A dozen people yelling at the driver which way to steer. Water lapping up over the rear wheels, rapidly filling the rear tray of the small truck. Don't stall, don't stall. '*Yu go nau, yu go, yu go go go...*' And they're through. Laughter. Cheers. Drive for twenty minutes. Next river.

It is dark. Torches scan the surface of the water. Bertha explains to the ethnographer that the River Mivo marks the border between Buin and Siwai districts. 'This is the last big river to cross before we stop tonight.' '*Okay, yumi go nau!*' Bernard throws the engine into gear and they launch in. Bags are starting to float around in the back tray but the truck still surges ahead. '*Yu go, yu go...*' Clunk. Wheels spin on nothing. The truck is wedged on top of a boulder. Bernard is suddenly climbing out the window of the driver's cabin, plunging his head underwater, pulling up river stones and chucking them in the back tray to

weight the vehicle down. This is not a good sign.

Bernard's co-driver is wading back and forth, carrying bags from the truck to the far bank of the river. Several times he stumbles and it looks like he will be washed away. Now he is asking for the ethnographer's bag which is twice the size of anyone else's: 'You don't have to carry this one. It's not important. I've got my passport, my wallet and my ticket on me. Don't risk it.' The young man smiles and insists: '*Em orait. Mi karim bag bilong yu.*' He makes it.

He and Bernard start helping passengers across to the far bank. Bertha is there already. They have to pull Rhoda out of the cabin and onto the bonnet of the truck. She is scared but slides down into the water next to them. One step, two, three...Rhoda slips, grabbing onto Bernard who also loses his footing. The ethnographer, alone now in the back tray, watches in horror as Bernard lunges desperately for the 'bull-bars' at the front of the truck. He just manages to hang on and they help Rhoda back onto the bonnet. They throw more river stones into the tray and decide it will be best to wait for help to arrive. Finally, a truck arrives on the far bank and they are winched out of the river. Bernard can't re-start the engine but they are given a lift to their destination.

Now Bertha is talking: 'When I was watching you in the middle of the river from the bank on the far side, I saw a man coming towards me along the road. I called out to him to see if he could help. I approached him but then he was gone and I felt a very cold shiver run through me.' The ethnographer starts to smile, checks himself, looks to see how the other Bougainvilleans are responding to this story. Bertha goes on: 'There is a spirit in the River Mivo who can work mischief when people try to cross into Siwai. We forgot to make an offering.'

Rhoda nods slowly, Bernard laughs. Bertha looks at the ethnographer: 'And what about you—do you believe in ghosts?' 'Well, I suppose,' the ethnographer starts to fudge, 'I suppose they're not a big part of my culture.' Bertha smiles: 'But when the truck got stuck and we started to pray, that was your voice I heard joining in with us, was it not?'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Paul Dwyer.