PART I

Precursors

> I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no 'I', no 'me'.
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> —Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*

We are camped at Paraluyu in the Tanami Desert, remote from any settlement. Neither of our Aboriginal companions have visited the area for many years, and they are worried that the spirits of the place will not recognize them as kinsmen and thus see them as strangers. As for my wife and I, we are exhausted after driving all day over spinifex and sand, wholly dependent on Zack and Nugget to find the long-abandoned track used by white miners in the 1930s to reach The Granites gold mine. Although an Aboriginal land council has commissioned us to determine which Warlpiri families have legitimate claims to royalties from the mine, we are also hoping to record the experiences of men like Zack and Nugget, who were born and grew up in the desert and occasionally worked at The Granites in their youth.

After clearing a space in the spinifex for our swags and building a windbreak, we kindle a fire, boil a billy, and share a meal of baked beans. The low hill of Paraluyu is a black hole in the moonless sky, the landscape is wreathed in silence.

Although Emma and I sleep soundly, Zack and Nugget do not. As the sun comes up, Zack says he and Nugget were kept awake by strange lights on the horizon and voices in the darkness. They went out and spoke to the geni locii (*mililpa*), identifying themselves and spelling out their connection to Paraluyu. But their doubts have not been assuaged. Zack keeps tugging at his baseball cap and seems impatient for us to be on our way, but no one wants to make the first move.

We sit together, eating damper baked in the embers of our fire, sipping mugs of black tea, and discussing plans. Spreading a

topographical map on the ground, I ask Zack if he can identify some of the places he has been telling me about. But Zack is sceptical of maps. You must walk the country to know it properly, he says. You cannot hope to know it by looking at a map.

Zack is right. My map only confirms our different worldviews, though I do not want to see them as incommensurable, for while Zack calls Paraluyu his father because he was conceived and born there, whites call it Mt. Davidson because the first white Australian to pass this way named it after his father. Objectively, the landscape is, to my eyes, little different from the one Arthur Davidson described in 1900; but whereas the Australian explorer was looking for traces of gold in the quartzite, and dollied or panned samples in his camp at the end of each day, I was beginning to understand the country as Zack did, following his index finger as he traced Dreaming tracks in the brick-red earth and reciting the names of his forebears. When I look up and scan the horizon, I make out the dark tors and blue smudges of places along the rain Dreaming track that ends at Kulpulurnu, more than two days to the north. Likewise, the low hills to the south-south-east are mounds of winnowed husks from wild seed that two sisters left as they journeyed towards Paraluyu in the Dreaming. Whereas Davidson saw 'a lonely looking hill of some prominence' or a 'flat tableland', Zack recalls events that unfolded here eons ago, though speaks of them as if they happened yesterday. The landscape is neither empty nor abstract. For Zack, it is storied. Wherever the totemic ancestors travelled, they left vestiges (*kuruwarri*) of themselves in the ground that can be quickened into life again, impregnating a woman passing that way in search of bush tucker, recalled in dreams, re-enacted in ritual, or recounted in myths. The Dreaming is the ultimate ground of being, though defining it in this way risks intellectualizing what is experienced not as an idea but as a viscerally immediate dimension of one's very existence.

After stamping out our fire and securing our belongings on the roof rack of the Toyota, Zack leads us to the northern flank of Paraluyu. No longer itching to leave, he is eager to show us the flood-out and soakage where his family used to camp.

The dried-up watercourse is lined with wandering wattle and saltbush. According to Zack, it was formed in the Dreaming by two ravenous snakes. Moving stealthily from opposite directions, they fell upon the two Nangala sisters as they were winnowing seed. Zack juts his chin in the direction of two piles of rubble on the nearby slope – the petrified excreta of the snakes, and all that remains of the women they devoured.

We return to the Toyota and head east. Our plan is to retrace Zack's and Nugget's initiatory journeys from Paraluyu to Pirtipirti, about fifteen miles away. Either we can follow the Dreaming track that Zack knows by heart, or we can look for traces of the old miners' track to The Granites. The Toyota jolts and lurches over clumps of spinifex as I struggle to follow Zack's hand signals. Acacia scrub disappears under the bull bars. Saplings scrape along the metal underbelly of the vehicle. The waist-high grass is like bleached hair.

Suddenly, Nugget gestures for me to stop. He has found the track. But which one? I can see no trace of a track, only eucalypt saplings, red dirt, and spinifex. But when I get out of the Toyota and look more closely, it is possible to make out shallow, parallel depressions in the annealed earth.

'Tragedy Track', I mutter to Emma. This was the track Michael Terry blazed with his Morris trucks in the early 1930s, bush-bashing through country that one of his contemporaries described as 'a tragedy of desolation'. From the Lander River, 380 miles to the west, scores of white men came this way during the Depression, hoping to strike it rich.

'That gold bin the white man's Dreaming', Zack says. I want to say it is not mine, but at this moment I cannot say what is.

As the track has been all but obliterated by saltbush and spinifex, I ask Zack and Nugget whether we should try to follow it or plot a different route. Despite all our meandering, they have kept an unerring sense of where we are, and they have a clear picture of how to locate the Dreaming track to the north that will take us to Pirtipirti or back to Paraluyu.

We camp that night under the stars. The Milky Way arches overhead, wheeling on its invisible axis. 'Wulparrari', Nugget says, when I ask him for its Warlpiri name. It is a celestial Dreaming track. The stars are the semen or spoor of the autochthonous beings (*walyajarra*) who once journeyed across the earth and through the sky.

To what source, I wonder, could I refer my life? Does my experience of country and ancestry bear any comparison with what Zack and Nugget have told me about theirs? One thing we all do is transform the dead into moral exemplars. Does Zack agree? 'Yuwayi', he says, and he draws an analogy between Warlpiri 'sacred sites' and the Pool of Remembrance at the National War Memorial Museum in Canberra, and road markers that commemorate the travels of early white explorers in the Northern Territory. I am also reminded of Davidson's bestowal of his father's name on Paraluyu, and the blue plaques placed on houses where famous writers once lived and worked. But where myth departs from history, and Warlpiri differ from whites, lies less

in the way the past is remembered than in the generative power attributed to it. Although we celebrate our precursors and remember their names, we do not actively seek to perpetuate their lives, for we regard history as moving forward and leaving the past behind. Our destiny is not to recapitulate what has been, but to initiate something new. And we even go as far as belittling traditional societies as being outside history and frozen in time.

But surely we can see our predecessors as indigenous people see theirs, not as fated to be surpassed, but as the source of our own possibilities. Warlpiri do not live solely in biographical time; they live genealogically, which is to say they do not see their lives as beginning with their birth and ending with their death, but as extending before and beyond them. This is not an intellectual conceit. It is so deeply felt that knowing one's forebears and fostering the well-being of one's successors is sometimes considered more imperative than one's personal longevity.

It is late when we turn in. I cannot sleep. I keep turning over in my mind the events of the day, and am troubled by how I might identify my Dreaming. Finally, I crawl out of my swag and walk out into the night.

Although our fire is still smouldering, it is so dark that it takes me some time to get accustomed to it. It is then that I see, or think I see, a smudge of light on the horizon. I look away, then back again, thinking it might be the glow from an Aboriginal settlement, though the nearest one is 150 miles away. Suddenly, it becomes clear to me. I am looking at the pale disc of the moon rising. The point of the crescent appears, drawn up like a golden comma from a sea of indigo. Within minutes, the moon is a glowing sliver above the horizon, rising steadily.

I walk back to our camp, astonished that the moon should have risen at the very moment and at the very spot on the horizon where my eyes were focused. Then it dawns on me. My response to Zack's comment about gold being the white man's Dreaming.

If ancestral places are Zack's reference points, mine are surely the writers and thinkers who have marked my passage through life. For as long as I can remember, I have felt bound to acknowledge my sources and influences in the same way that Zack acknowledges his. While some scholars give the impression of having superseded their precursors, I feel so beholden to mine that citing them has become a form of obeisance, and I am convinced that what sometimes seems to be my original discovery is simply the recovery of something old and half-forgotten. In the same way that episodes from the Dreaming return to

consciousness through the nightly dreams of individual Warlpiri, so certain books have brought me to a deeper understanding of myself.

When Walter Benjamin writes that 'books have their fates',[1] he not only recognizes 'their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations'[2] but the mysterious relationships between books and their readers or owners. Accordingly, he speaks of his books, the quotations lovingly copied from them, and the circumstances under which they came into his hands as if his library was a lineage to which he belonged and a family from whom he could not bear to be parted.

This sense of being embedded in a matrix much greater than oneself, encompassing previous generations, significant others, natal places, critical events and even books is sometimes so strongly felt that we speak of it as in spiritual terms. When Warlpiri descry traces of the Dreaming in the landscape or Benjamin, unpacking his library, glimpses fateful connections between his life and his books, we are reminded that we are not only born into the world, but the world is reborn in us.

Perhaps this explains why I read books as Warlpiri read the ground – to grasp something partly within me and partly in the text, but this is only realized when both are brought together. As with books, so too with people and places. How else can I explain my affinity for Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, which I chanced upon in a left-wing bookshop in Auckland's Darby Street in 1960; or my choice of James Joyce's *Ulysses* when the staff of the Alexander Turnbull Library asked me what book I would like as a parting gift in 1962; or my decision in Paris the following year to squander my last few francs on several Livre de Poche editions of Blaise Cendrars' novels; or the impact of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, with its Preface by Anaïs Nin, that I bought in a surgical supplies shop in Villiers Street, London, the winter I worked with the homeless under Hungerford Bridge; or, in 1964, when I found a dog-eared copy of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures Elementaires de la Paranté* during my brief sojourn on a coffee plantation in the Congo, and discovered an anthropologist who possessed a literary and musical sensibility?

Such moments of recognition and connectedness are points of departure for the essays that follow. But they neither comprise a homage to the authors about whom I write, nor an oblique self-portrait. Rather, each testifies to the power of books to transport us, like music, dreams and memories, across space and time, creating a semblance of coherence in our otherwise fragmented worlds.