



# OYSTER

ovel by

*Janette Turner Hospital*

# O Y S T E R

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Janette Turner Hospital

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# OYSTER

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**We have just enough religion to make us hate, but  
not enough to make us love one another.**

*Jonathan Swift*

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# *P*ROLOGUE

here we butt against another  
dimension . . .

the track we leave  
declares no entry or passage  
disappears despite our desire  
to stake a claim

Kevin Roberts, *Red Centre Journal*





If rain had come, things might have turned out differently, that is what I think now; but there were children in Outer Maroo who had never seen rain. We prayed. We cursed. We studied the hot empty sky and imagined clouds. We waited. We waited for something to happen, for anything to happen, we were avid for some event to unfold itself out of the burning nothing to save us. We were waiting, as the desperate do, for a miracle.

Unfortunately, we got it.

Then, within the space of a few months, there were more transients than there were locals, and the imbalance seemed morally wrong. There were too many foreigners in Outer Maroo.

There was also, and still, the drought. More than that, perhaps the worst thing, was a sort of mephitic fog, moistureless and invisible, that came and went like an exhalation of the arid earth itself. We gave it a name. We thought, I suppose, in some primitive way, that if we mocked it, it might decamp and leave us alone. Old Fuckatoo, we called it.

The Old Fuckatoo is roosting again, we would say, pressing handkerchiefs against nose and mouth.

The Old Fuckatoo could brood, close and suffocating, for days, then it might lift a little, depending on the sway and twist of convection in the desert air. Mostly, when it nested and tucked us under its fetid wing, the stink of dead cattle would predominate; or else that particular rank sweetness of rotting sheep. On certain days, when hot currents shimmered off Oyster's Reef, we could detect the chalk-dust of the mullock heaps, acrid; or, from the opal mines themselves, the ghastly fug of the tunnels and shafts. Sometimes there was almost nothing, just the blankness of the outback heat, and this felt like a grace newly recognised. On other days – there was no escaping it – an altogether more disturbing trace prevailed, some terrible and indefinable emanation that suggested . . . but no one wished to think about what it suggested.

Some, in retrospect, claimed it was moral decay; though it was probably the simple stink of fear.

By cunning intention, and sometimes by discreet bribery (or other dispatch) of government surveyors, Outer Maroo has kept itself off maps, and yet people do stumble into town. A man, let us say, may find himself west of the Warrego River, then west of the McGregor Range, after which he sees nothing but acacia scrub and saltbush and the dry riverbeds that tangle and untangle themselves in pale scribbles against the red earth. The man strains his eyes and scans the horizon. Here and there, a salt-pan lake, shimmering in the heat, almost blinds him, but he knows better than to believe in water. Beyond the salt pans, beyond the butter-coloured ribbons of creek sand, somewhere far far ahead, according to his map, are the dotted lines of the South Australian and Northern Territory borders, but he can see no sign of these poignant ideas of order. They leave no trace on the land.

## Prologue

The official map of the state of Queensland tells him that he is surrounded by mighty rivers: the Warrego, the Barcoo, Cooper's Creek, the Diamantina. He knows that sometimes, once a decade perhaps, there is significant water in these rivers. And he knows that there are, ahead of him, vast lakes and inland seas, some of which have been full twice since the century began. The official map of the state of Queensland tells the man . . . or it could be a woman. These days, it might well be a woman, alone and determined, pushing west, her camel sore-footed and refractory, the transmission gone on her four-wheel drive, the brakes seized up with red dust. The official map tells the woman that she has entered a region without roads, a cross-hatched region whose only visible cartographical features appear to be verbal:

*Area subject to severe drought and to sudden inundation. Numerous opal fields. Extreme temperatures. Motorists should not proceed past Cunnamulla or Quilpie without adequate reserves of petrol, oil, water, and minor spare parts.*

*Caveat viator.*

Indeed, let the traveller beware.

Only delirium can help her now.

There are no roads, but certain 'tracks' do present themselves on the Government Printer's stationery – dotted lines that meander vaguely then peter out. The translation of these markings from map to landscape is a psychic skill, in the exercise of which earnest map-readers may go astray and may wander into Outer Maroo.

Most are looking for opal.

All of those who find the place are lost.

Things come and go around Outer Maroo. They appear for a little season, then they vanish, and the red earth stretches to kingdom come *in secula seculorum, amen*. When I say vanish, I mean it

absolutely. Finis, the end, full stop, amen and amen. People perish. Their habitations and their histories seem to leave no trace, though they do make an effort, they scatter messages. Relics abound, if one only knows how to look. In fact, Outer Maroo is thick with coded testaments, but the messages are legible only to those who can read the secretive earth.

Consider Inner Maroo, which, in the latter part of the last century, flourished as a town for about four years, but whose only present trace is a lacework of holes in the ground.

As for visions: oh yes, out here they manifest themselves, no question; then they dissolve, then they reappear. This is a simple fact, due to atmospheric conditions. A lake, for example, or a mountain range, or a certain cattle property with wide verandahs can all turn out to be illusions, but the illusions themselves are hard data, a scientific truth. I am setting this down because I am trying to understand my own difficulties and because I want some future reader to understand (if I am ever able to reach a future reader) why this disturbing story is sometimes fragmented and dispersed by shifting filaments of moisture in the upper air, and by variable atmospheric densities, and by rifts in time.

I want you to understand why the telling is complicated; why the facts may seem to float loose in a sequence of their own devising, much as a bunch of helium-filled balloons, their strings all released from the same hand at the same moment in time, and from a point, let us say, one mile upwind from you, will certainly not reach you as a cluster. Some will drift so high in upper thermal currents that you will be unable to see them, though they will nevertheless pass by. Some may brush your hand. Some will veer north or south and never reach you at all. Some will spin in contrary winds and come back to you, days later, from further on.

Time is a trickster, and so is space, but the air above an ocean or a desert is more devious than either of these. The air in such places is bent. Do you understand me? *Bent*. I mean that in all senses. The air

## Prologue

is a card-sharp. The air is a conjurer who likes to juggle both space and time: the things themselves, that is, as well as your perceptions of the two.

You probably know this.

You have probably stood on a clifftop somewhere – on North Head, say, at the lip of Sydney Harbour; or on the scarp at Buderim, overlooking the Queensland coast – and you have shaded your eyes and looked out over the Pacific on a day that was as clear and sharp as a razor, and you have seen a ship on the horizon, with another ship, its identical twin, floating delicately above it, upside down. Both the real ship and its airy double may have been there yesterday; or perhaps they will be there next week. Somewhere in time and space, both ships are real; but not here, and not now, and certainly not upside down, though your eyes are seeing true. Similarly, in the desert atmosphere (of which, perhaps, you are less likely to have had personal experience), the shimmering outback air can present on the track ahead a man who passed behind you a day ago.

Any children's encyclopedia will give you explanations. There will be diagrams and definitions. *Mirage*, the editors will say, *is an optical illusion due to certain atmospheric conditions*.

Questions that interest me: What would constitute a true mirage? Are there sound mirages? When you hear a voice, do you ever really know who is speaking? Oyster heard voices, he said; where did they come from?

I have a hunch that stories such as this one are too common for comfort these days. They will get worse as the decade advances. They are breeding in the dank millennial air, they are multiplying like rabbits and not just out here, west of the dingo fence. In plain common sense, there are things it is better not to know because the knowing makes living too painful. If people choose to give themselves like moths to a flame, what can be done? There do not seem to be any precautions that can be taken. Nevertheless, nevertheless, the story

has become a bushfire now; there is no stopping it. So. Too many foreigners found Oyster's Reef, that was how it began; and anyone who finds this place is lost.

Nevertheless there is a postal address, and occasionally, in spite of everyone's best efforts, mail gets through. Beresford's, in fact, has an overturned beer keg between hardware and home medications that is officially Australia Post, and an old envelope is thumb-tacked to one of the keg staves. The envelope is creamy yellow and curled at the edges. Within the nebula of a delicate tracery of fly spots drifts a pale moon of postmark that could be Melbourne (at any rate, the peaks of what must be an M are visible) and one can just make out an address that, having faded first into sepia, has moved on to a more delicate and elusive shade that could best be called a memory of fawn:

Ma Beresford

Outer Maroo,

Queensland 4480

(Bear NW of Quilpie and Eromanga, or SW of Longreach  
and Windorah, or E of Birdsville. Good luck)

Passing from pub to pub a long time ago – it must have been a long time ago – the letter left gossip like a trail of breadcrumbs in its wake. That is how the rush began, people say. Ma Beresford herself blames the second cousin who sent word of a family death. The death was of no interest to Ma Beresford, but the deceased, who had spent his childhood in western Queensland, left behind in the debris of his life a diary with a childhood listing of opal floaters found: dates, locations, colour and quality of fire, classification according to the typology of a young mind more fanciful than precise – *bloodburst*, *crazed fern*, *sunflash*, and other such categories. And there were childhood ravings about opal seams thick as a man's thigh and as long as the Barcoo itself. The second cousin, with no thought at all for the consequences, sent the dead man's diary on as keepsake and curio. Doubtless the letter had been steamed open and resealed many times

along the way, and so some in Outer Maroo lay the blame squarely at the door of Australia Post. Others claim it was Oyster himself who delivered the letter, or intercepted it, or indeed wrote it, which would, I suppose, explain everything.

At any rate, it was to this same overturned yeast-reeking beer cask that Oyster's young foreigners would bring their letters and cards. Ma Beresford would solemnly weigh each item, dispense the requisite stamps, give a ritual three thumps at the ink pad, and then, aiding the official franking of envelope or postcard by adroit movements of her tongue between parted lips, would certify in indelible ink that the document in hand had been duly received by the postmistress of Outer Maroo. She would indicate the slot in the keg through which the letter should be dropped. At the end of the week, after business hours, and with due official security, the keg was cleared. The mail was sorted (by country, by state, by town), taped into bundles, and transferred to a canvas sack. Ma Beresford herself presided, though it was frequently young Mercy Given, working a couple of hours a day after school, who did the actual pulling of the drawstring rope, and who knotted the sack securely and affixed the Australia Post seal. Following these rituals, the fragile cache of fears and longings, inscribed in so many languages, was safely and permanently stored with all the other sacks – 'Till doomsday, if need be,' Ma Beresford told Mercy – in a small locked room at the back of the shop.

'Foreigners mean trouble,' Ma Beresford always said. 'Better for everyone concerned,' she said, patting the mailroom door in her sage and proprietary way, 'if this lot stay in Pandora's Box.' She was a woman of axiom and principle. Postcards, naturally, she read; but she would swear on the Bible, if need should ever arise, that she had never steamed open a single letter, not one.

Regarding foreigners, Ma Beresford had truth on her side, for there was no one in Outer Maroo who would deny that foreigners have meant trouble no matter where they came from: whether they



were from Charleville or Quilpie, whether they were teachers from Brisbane or bright kids from Sydney or Perth, whether they were from the Murri camps that came and went along the riverbeds, or from countries where they speak another tongue: American, for example; or Greek, or Vietnamese, or Italian, or the poncey sucked-in bitter-lemon words the Poms use.

In the long run, foreigners are all much the same.

They are not us.

The arrival of any foreigner changes the map, and foreigners spell the beginning of the end.

Before the beginning of the end, before Oyster, when time still swam in its lazy uninterrupted way, foreigners came once in a blue moon and were either fêted or shunned. They trickled in, one by one, on bullock drays or in four-wheel drives or on walkabout. Or they might simply stagger out of the sun, raving and half starved, as Oyster did. Once or twice, there were camel caravans. Then Oyster came, and quite soon after, jeeps began to announce themselves in small red clouds. There were campers and squatters, and they kept arriving as the zeros on the calendar got closer; or at any rate that was the connection that Oyster himself made, and the newcomers shared his belief, and so disposed themselves for a certain kind of future, now upon us.

Ma Beresford herself, in those days, had no time for the year 2000. 'Some people see pink elephants,' she said, 'and some see zeros. Gimme a break. It's opal dust they've all got in their eyes.'

At any rate, there were people who came along the Birdsville Track from Coober Pedy, and there were people who came from Dallas, Texas, and from Oklahoma, and from Europe, and from God knows where and everywhere. Beside the road from Quilpie and from South Australia junkweed grew: the rusty stalks of abandoned cars and burned-out utes and stripped four-wheel drives; and all the drivers had dust in their eyes.