Pension Day

All day the old black man sits, away from everyone else. He wears the same old black coat every day. Once it had silver buttons and a silk collar and was worn in the best society—with speeches, silver and champagne.

Now it has no buttons and sits upon the hunched back of the leader of the redback people. The people who hug the dark corners and scuttle hideously from rusted hiding place to rusted hiding place. Away from the pale blue eyes that are like the sun, burning everything away so all is stark and straight and true, and there are no cool secrets left.

No one wants to know any of the secrets, anyway.

He sits in the park, the old man, like one of the war cannons that guard the perimeter and stick their long green noses out threateningly at the cars that swish by, not even knowing they are there. Today's children leap and laugh over silent steel to further demolish yesterday's pride.

There is no room for yesterday's people.

He is a Wongi from out near Laverton, and he can hardly speak English. When he first came to Perth many years ago, he huddled in the back of the police Land Rover and moaned in terror as the ground swept away before him and trees and rocks and mountains and towns and his whole universe disappeared in a blur. Had it not been for the handcuffs around his great wrists, he would have leaped out the door and ended it all then.

The white men had torn him away from his red land's breast for a crime he could not understand.

A life for a life. That was how the law had worked since before everything. The law was the law.

Yet the Land Rover lurched out to the camp and the three policemen had sprung upon him, taking him by surprise as he sat, singing softly, by his campfire.

The dogs had barked, the children screamed, his young girl-woman, already full with a child-spirit, cried, and he had fought with all his strength.

The old men had watched with silent, all-knowing eyes as he was overpowered and two policemen held him while the sergeant clipped on the handcuffs triumphantly.

He took one last look at his night-blackened land and the black shut faces in the red firelight. Rubbed red dust over his horny feet before being pushed gently into the hard, hot Land Rover. A tear slid out of his frightened, puzzled eyes before he closed his mind and hunched into himself.

He was only about eighteen then and although he wore a pair of scruffed grubby moleskins (and an army slouch hat he kept for special occasions) he had only seen white men six times in his whole life.

So that was that.

When he came out of jail seven years later, he was still strong and proud. No one had been able to touch him in there. He had worked all day and at night he had willed himself out over the walls back to his country.

Red dust and thin mulga bushes and glittering seas of broken glass from the miners' camps. Yellow-sided holes many metres deep. Black open mouths gulping in the hot air and holding white man secrets and dreams.

Just the place to hide a body snapped in two by powerful hands.

He could never go home again. He would have been killed out at the gabbling, dusty camp, if not by the relatives of his victim, certainly by the new husband to whom the elders would long ago have given his woman.

So he had no country. He had no home. He decided to learn more about the white man's ways that had so awed him.

But what could *he* do? A young man with big muscles, a quick temper, not much knowledge of English—and a black skin? After a few fights in a few country towns, he settled down, working for a produce store deep down south and doing some shearing on the side.

He loved that town. His boss was a good man who protected the

angry giant from the taunts that sometimes whipped through the
air. It was his boss, too, who found him a good half-caste girl from
the nearby mission.

They called him 'Jackie Snow' and the name stuck: Snowy
Jackson, the straight-shouldered, black colossus among his brown,
sharper brethren. There was no love lost between the full-blood
and the half-castes. They jeered at the way he worked so hard and
refused to share his money around. But they were afraid of his
physical and spiritual powers. For wasn't he one from the shim-
mering emptiness of the desert, a man who came with laws and
secrets the brown staggering people had lost or only half-
remembered?

He did not tell them that he had lost those, too.

At the produce store he was always cheerful and he kept out of
trouble. His educated half-caste wife taught him a little more
English, but he never learned how to read or write.

They got their citizenship rights and a little house, just off the
track to the town's reserve. Every evening, especially in winter,
his wife read the Bible and he stared into the searing heart of the
fire with thoughtful, quiet eyes, and tried to remember before.

But this was his life now.

At shearing time they put him on the yard work. He loved to
stride through the greasy, grey sea, shouting in his own language
and clapping his huge hands so they sounded like the echoes from
the thunder in the sky above. He would fling his head back and
flare his nostrils like a wild black horse, and the sheep would pour
into the darkened tin woolshed with a furious clicketty-clatter on
the wooden grating floor. He felt like a king then, a leader of the
people.

The other shearers respected Snowy Jackson for his size and
strength. Who else could lift a bleating struggling sheep up above
his head and still flash the huge white grin he wore (like his
slouch hat for special occasions).

But he used to grow angry sometimes, and picking the stupid
sheep up by their shaggy necks he would hurl them into the yard,
sometimes killing them.

Then they put him on the shearing team alongside all the white
men. He was at last one of them, and he took great pride in his
new position. After he got over his first hesitation at the whining
shears, he became quite skilled at peeling off the curly wool so it
lay, wrinkled and ready, around his feet. Each bald, skinny, white
sheep that he pushed down the chute was a new piece of juicy fruit

for him to chew on, until his belly was full of white man respect.

Every night when he went home, he would try to explain his
joyful day to his little wife, just as once, as a successful hunter, he
had recounted his stories to his young woman way away up in the
red, swirling Dreaming. But he could not tell the half-caste any-
thing and, after a while, he would stop his broken, happy mumb-
ling and stare into his fire. He would smile softly at things that
had happened that day, while the stories came out of his eyes and
nestled amongst the coals so he could see them again the next
night.

Dreams, dreams.

One year, his young wife died giving birth to her fourth child.

All her relatives came down for the funeral. They sat around
talking and remembering, and catching up on the news. Then they
all got back in their old cars and trucks and left.

He just has the rain now, turning the sky grey and the world
cold. He used to love the rain. He could stand for hours in the soft
drizzle and let all the secrets from the heavy black clouds soak into
his soul. But he hated the rain, that day, for it was there and his
little quiet wife was dead.

He just has the rain—and his tears. All his secrets and the love
the half-caste girl had taught him, dripping from his puzzled eyes.

When he was alone, he became roaring drunk and smashed up
his house that he and the girl had been so proud of then went and
started a brawl amongst the Nyoongah people.

He might have been getting older, but his huge angry fists put
three of the men in hospital. He was put in jail.

The next morning the boss came and got him out. As he walked
down the muddy street in the sultry sun, everyone stared at him,
shocked or disgusted at the damage he had done. He followed his
boss's footsteps like a huge dog.

So he lost even his pride and gave up.

He worked at the store for a few more years. Every time he
thought of his woman he went out and got drunk. He lived in a
little humpy in the bush, where no one could find him.

The Community Welfare took away his children one day whilst
he was out hunting. All except the baby, whom Mrs Haynes the
boss's wife was looking after.

He never saw his children again.

He did not shear any more, as he was getting too old. Beer fat
lay over him, like bird dung greening a famous statue.

Just as he had been shearing beside the white men and had

gained a type of pride, now he could drink beside white men with another sort of pride. They were all brothers now—getting drunk together.

He left to wander.

He has memories of countless tin-and-asbestos towns with cold white people and whining brown people. He has memories of crowded hotels and fights, and falling asleep, drunk in the slimy gutter or under a tree. He tried his hand at boxing on a show-ground troupe. But soon he fell down, forever. His body was left to moulder where it lay, while the laughter bored into him like busy constant ants.

Boys drag lazily past, going nowhere. Cigarettes hang from their thin lips, phallus-like, to prove they are men.

The old man would like to beg for a smoke, but the wine he has drunk today thickens his tongue. All that comes out of his mouth is a thin dribble of saliva that hangs off his scraggly grey beard.

Devils dance out of the boys' black eyes. They swagger, shout and laugh loudly. The words and laughter are caught by the fingers of the Moreton Bay fig trees. Later, they will be dropped to rot away with the stinking, sticky fruit. But the boys don't know that.

Two peel away from the sly dark group and squat down beside him.

'G'day, ya silly ole black bastard. Gettin' stuck into th' gabba at this time a day? Hey, ya wanna tell us 'ow ya was the state boxer, ole man?'

'Look at the metho 'e's got 'ere, Jimmy.'

'Unna? 'E got no sense.'

'Look out, Snowman! Featherfoot comin' your way, ya ole murderer.'

'Jesus, don't 'e stink, but?'

They laugh.

He smiles, uncomprehending, and nods his head. He knows they are laughing at him. Once he would have leaped to his feet and pulverised the whole group. That was a long time ago, though. He cannot remember.

They steal $20 from him with quick black fingers. They always do, every pension day. Where they had been afraid of his powers before, now they laugh and steal from him. He has no people to look after him. Only himself.

He sits under the tree, surrounded by empty wine bottles. He

staggers over to the tap and bumps into two young girls, who shriek and squeal with mirth at him.

'The Snowman's drunk!' they shriek.

Once, they would have had to respect and admire him, as he told them about the ways and laws of their tribe.

Once.

Now they have no tribe, and he has no ways.

He half-fills a bottle with water and pours the last of his methylated spirits into it. He sits and drinks, lonely.

He watches as the groups gather in circles. People wander from one group to another or stagger across to the hotel, waiting on the corner. The tribe goes walkabout. They stumble over to the brick toilets, as lonely as he is. They clutch onto the tight circles and pass the drink and words around.

Drink gets hot, words get hot in the cold wind.

The boys strip off their shirts and fight out their quarrels, while the women join them or egg them on.

The people play jackpot or two-up or poker. Some grow rich, some grow poor; almost everyone grows drunk.

Everyone goes home, to wherever home is.

He stays.

The sky gets darker and more oppressive. Then it rains.

First there are the whipcracks rattling across the sky, rolling and growling like puppies playing in the fleeciness of the clouds. The lightning leaps and bounces like children; here, there and gone. The rain starts off fat and slow but becomes faster and leaner.

He just sits there, finishing off his metho and wishing he had a smoke. He suddenly vomits up all his pension day money. All over his coat and face and trousers.

Time to sleep.

The old Aboriginal lies underneath his tree that cannot help him, for it, too, is old and sparse of gentle green leaf. The tree and the man get wet; neither cares, though.

So cold. The rain runs in streaks down his face and body. It washes the vomit off him, with soft hands. The pattering of the rain is interrupted only occasionally by short harsh coughs.

In the early hours of the morning, the cruising police van that, like the gardener, is searching for a few weeds to pull up by the roots and throw in the bin, finds him.

His rain has taken him away from his useless, used-up life. Perhaps back to the Dreamtime he understood.

No one knew the old Wongi was dead until the next pension day.