

DUST





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## FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Heading to De Grey was a spur-of-the-moment idea, a burst of inspiration I didn't question. Before I went, I have to confess, I did not even know where the Pilbara was. I had spent two years shooting just about every music-related project I could get my hands on. But two hundred thousand photos, stories and experiences later, I wanted to find another community, another micro-culture to explore. And so, with the help of the internet and a couple of emails, I followed my heart up north to see what my camera and I might find.

De Grey Station is a cattle station located at the mouth of the De Grey River in the Pilbara, around eighty kilometres east of Port Hedland. It was established in 1875 as a sheep station but now runs cattle. It stretches over two hundred thousand hectares. Mark Bettini and his family manage and run the station.

One day at the start of spring, I set off north from Perth on National Highway 1. Way past Carnarvon, after thirty-six

hours on the road, I turned off the highway. My trusty Holden toiled along a rough and rocky track. Before long, a crack appeared in the windscreen. I continued slowly through the night, edging past a group of nonchalant cattle. I drove until I saw a faint glow on the horizon. Soon the lights of the station homestead came into view, and a dog announced my arrival. Mark Bettini and his family welcomed me. The grumpy dog sampled the taste of my ankles. Mark showed me to a small demountable with little power and no water. An army of bugs chased the light through the windows. I had arrived.

At 6 am on my first day, full of excitement and a desire to impress the staff at De Grey, I jumped up, grabbed my gear and hit the door, only to find that everyone was already off working. I ate alone, camera by my side, with five horses lazily grazing on the grasses beyond the kitchen.

That first morning, Narelle Bettini took me out to see the crew at one of the yards. We drove along the white gravel track and out onto the Great Northern Highway. It was early, but extremely hot. I caught glimpses of a bone-dry riverbed. There was low scrub and big sky as far as the eye could see and then, as we entered the yard, a cloud of dust, with utes and dirt bikes parked everywhere. Not far from the yard, a regular stream of grey nomads and freight trucks rushed past on the highway. The yard was laid out in large square pens with very heavy-looking iron bars. Eventually I found myself perched on top of one of these fences, observing.

For the next two weeks my camera and I went where the action was, following the cattlemen and women who work De Grey and other, smaller stations—including Mallina and Sherlock—that are scattered across its vast acreage. I became burnt by the sun, exhausted, scratched, battered



and bruised. I captured images of a world I had not known existed.

What began as a whim became an experience that changed and deepened the way I understand Australia. The idea of travelling overseas for inspiration or to find oneself has never been stronger or more possible than it is now, but I found both these things at De Grey. There, I discovered a world full of life, drama and action. On an impulse I headed north to take photographs and, in doing so, fell in love with the dust that covers our country.



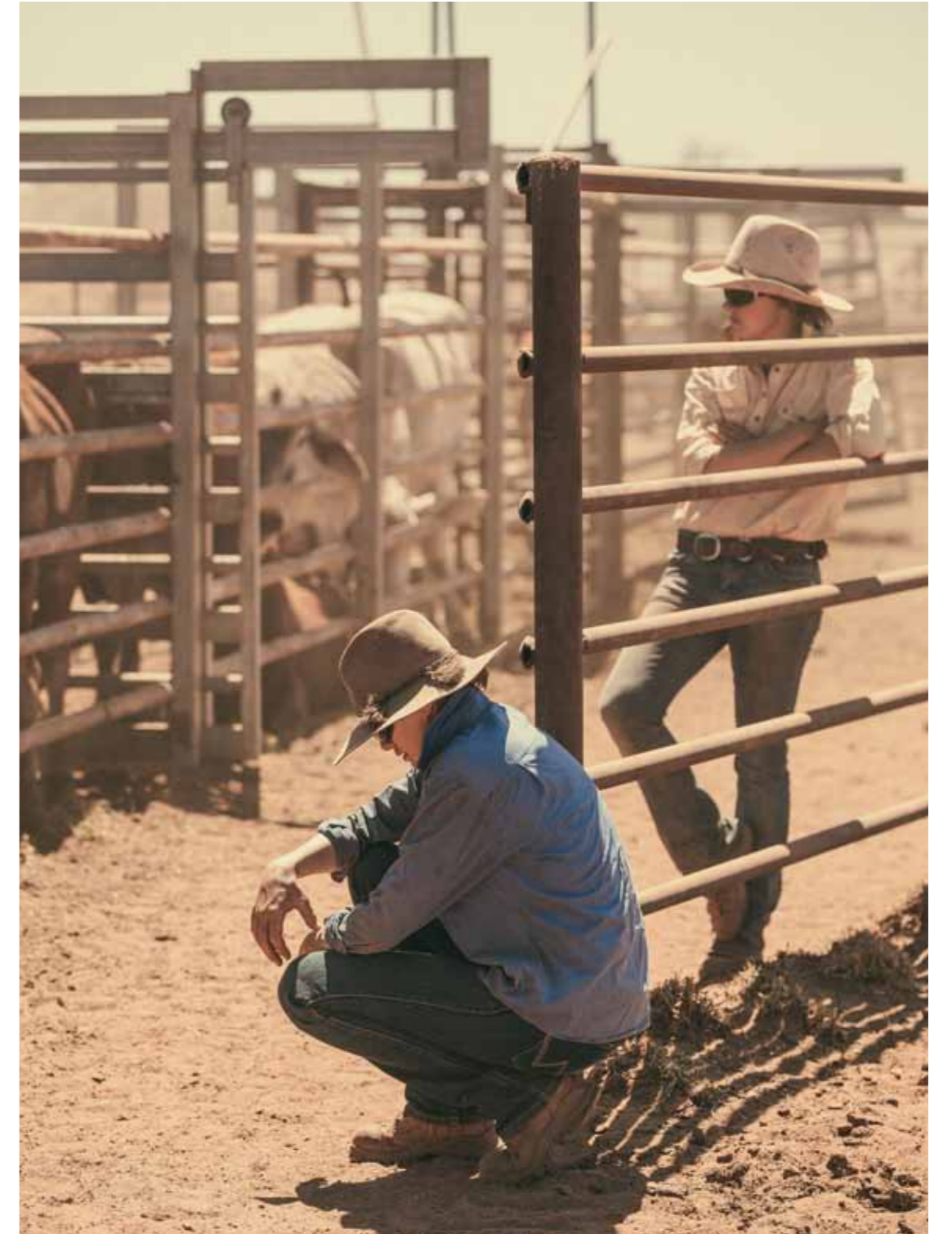




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In the cattle yard, the sun is almost on top of our heads. For most photographers, harsh top-down sun like this is anathema. But where there is some light, there is some shadow, and I am here to take photographs. Much to my surprise I find that here, in the dry, hot north, the heavily contrasted light and shadow works. It is true to the place. The sun reveals all it touches, but leaves mystery in the harsh shadows.

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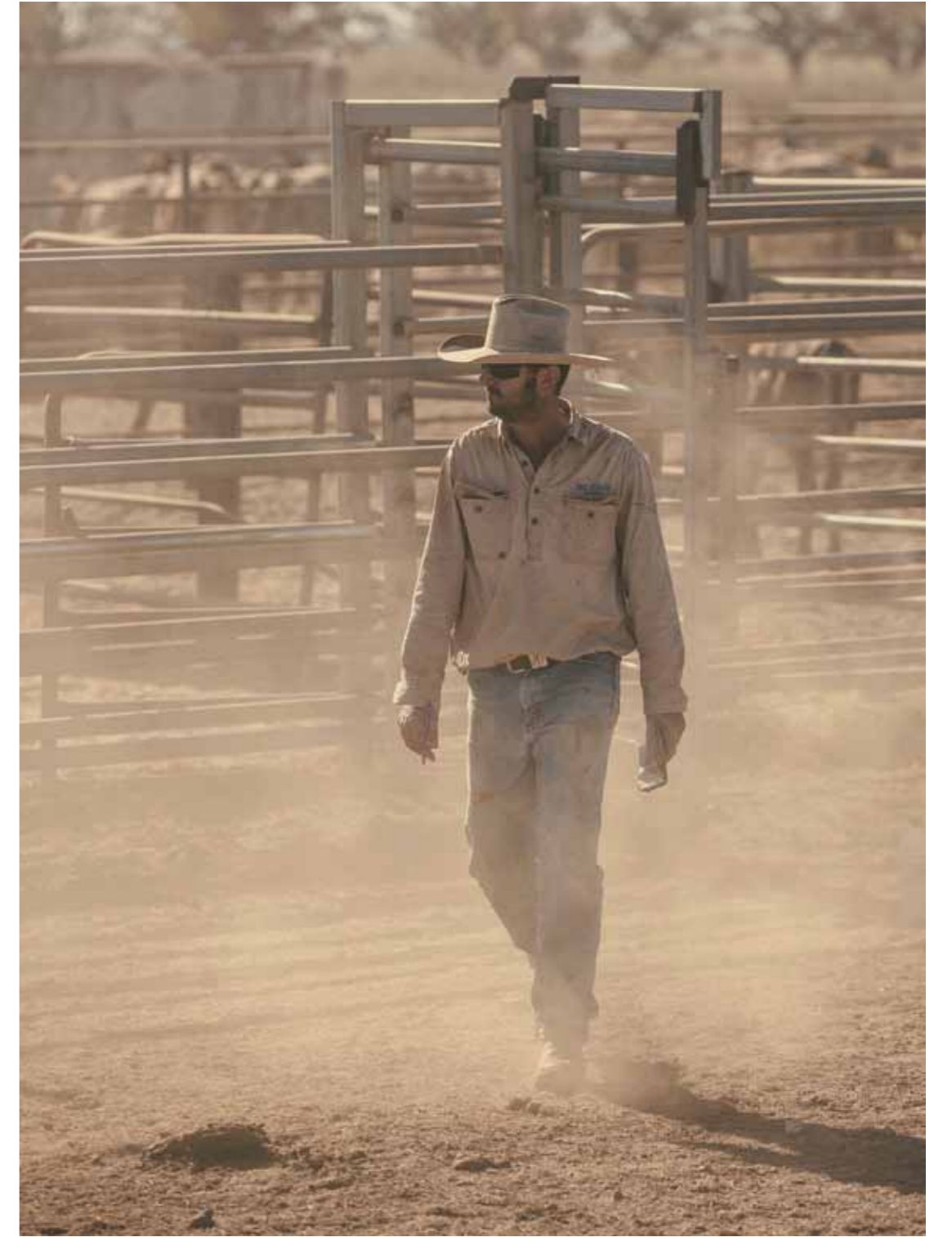




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Sharp beams of light cut through the dust and contrast with the dark clusters of cattle huddled together. As the herd surges, I find myself standing near a fence facing off with maybe twenty cows. Their options are to run through me or turn on the cowboys rushing up behind them. They choose the timid cameraman. They rush straight at me along the fence line. The fence is nearly three metres high. I scale it in a flash, tumbling down the other side.

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There's no office protocol and no induction. You learn on the job and give it a go. The work ethic up here blows my mind. From sunrise, nobody stops until the job is done.

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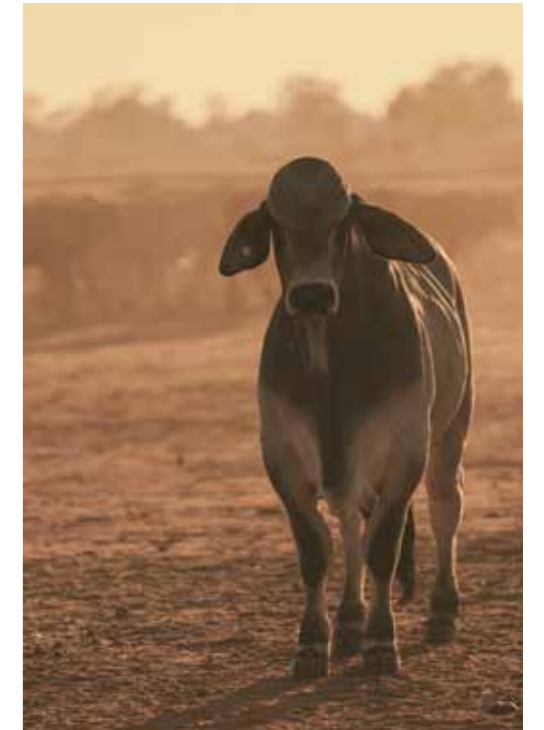


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As a photographer, I need to establish people's trust in my intentions. On the first day I am tentative and watchful, not saying much and being conscious to communicate positivity to the people I have just met. Perhaps this approach is more for my benefit than for those I am photographing. Maybe it's what helps me to feel comfortable taking photos of strangers. On that first day, I spend the first six hours barely taking a shot, perched uncomfortably on an iron gate in the middle of a large yard with thousands of cattle around me.

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Day's end. I am looking for one of my favourite kinds of sunlight — a kind of 45-degree angle, and fading. It's a beautiful time to be shooting. The world slowly changes as I shoot into the vanishing sun.

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