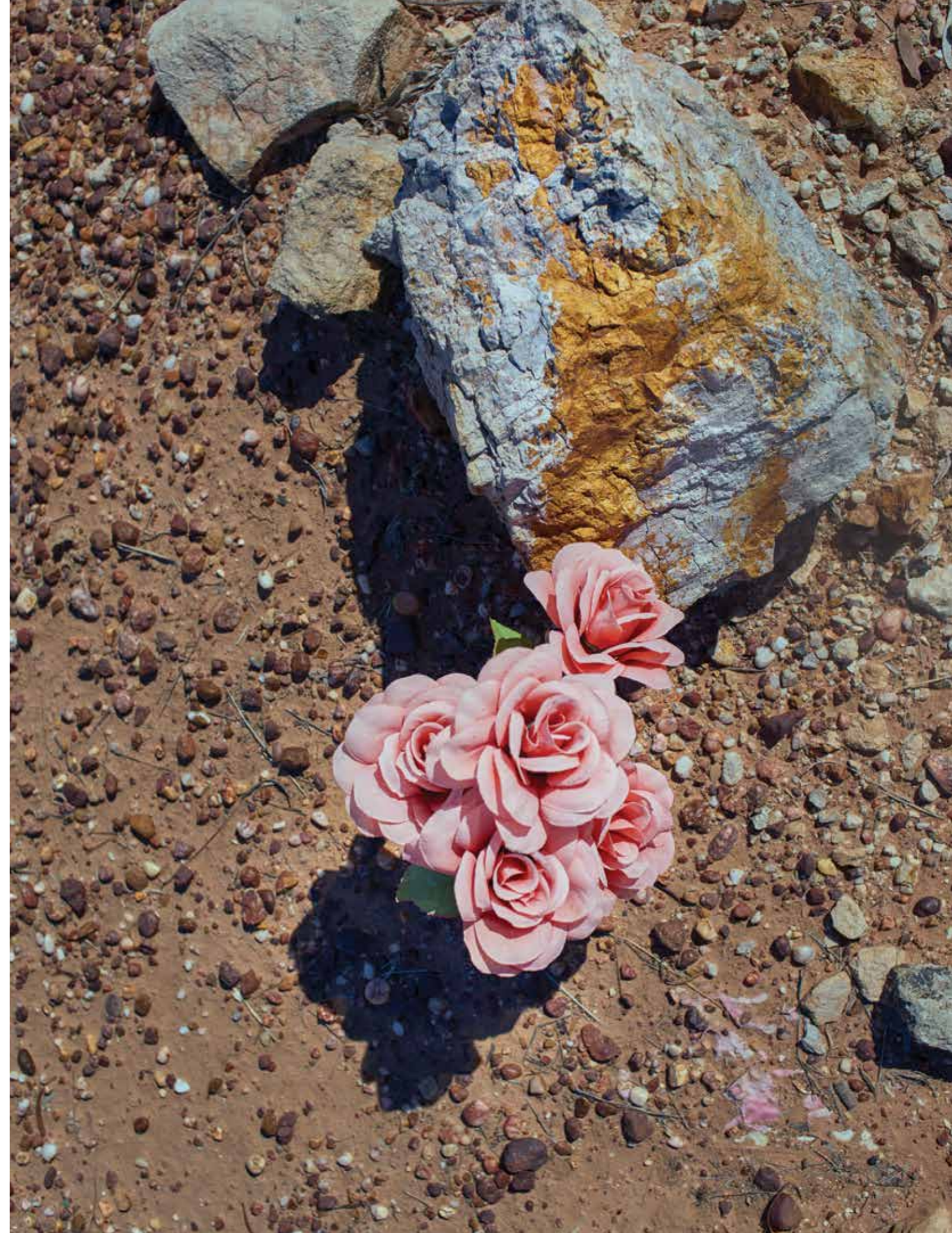




LIFE & DEATH AT THE RIDGE

I don't know if the man
being buried at the
Lightning Ridge cemetery
was particularly large, but
his coffin certainly was.
Too big, in fact, for its hole.

Words Annabelle Hickson Photographs Hugh Stewart





As the friends and family of the dead man began trickling into the cemetery for the morning graveside service, some sitting on plastic chairs around the freshly dug hole framed with strips of artificial grass, others standing, chatting and offering condolences to the grieving son who was wearing a joyful Hawaiian shirt and a fedora, I wondered how the coffin problem would be solved.

The hearse was parked among the graves near the hole, boot open, its interior filled almost completely with the homemade coffin which, with a very pleasing nod to the concept of maximum efficiency, had been used by its

maker as a coffee table before becoming his burial casket today.

Volunteer undertaker with the Lightning Ridge Funeral Advisory Service, Ormie Molyneux, a bearded third-generation opal miner in shorts, thongs and a cricket hat, was undeterred. 'We'll just take the handles off after we've carried it to the hole.'

Ormie flip-flopped over to the three men standing by the hearse: his brother Joe Molyneux and two friends, Nifty Martin and Tom Urquhart, who are also volunteer undertakers, to discuss the plan and, presumably, find a spanner.

The music shifted from the passions of a 'Con te Partirò'

instrumental to a jazzy Gershwin number, lending a convivial atmosphere to the graveside gathering—and I got talking to Maxine O'Brien, the secretary-manager of the Lightning Ridge Miners' Association (LRMA), who also handles administration for the funeral service.

Maxine explained that the volunteer-run, non-profit funeral service, which started almost 20 years ago, was born out of necessity. Lightning Ridge did not have its own undertaker and the closest was 75 kilometres down a dirt road, in Walgett. It was often tricky to get the bodies there or to get the undertaker to come out. >

Above Volunteer undertakers of Lightning Ridge Funeral Advisory Service.
Facing page Ormie Molyneux is a third-generation opal miner and volunteer undertaker.

So the people of Lightning Ridge did what they always do and worked it out for themselves.

‘Ormie asked the board of the Miners’ Association if they could volunteer my time to take over the the admin of the funeral service. That’s how I got the job ... on the condition that I wasn’t making the bloody flowers and that I wasn’t touching any dead bodies. It’s nothing I’d have ever imagined I’d be doing, but it’s really humbling.’

Today the funeral service is still run by volunteers. The amateur undertakers have buried about 750 people, most of whom were their friends and neighbours. They charge ‘tops \$4000’ for the service, which includes burial fees, and the profits they make are put back into the community.

By comparison, in Sydney a standard cremation with no service costs about \$4000, a standard burial with service is about \$10,000 and can cost up to \$30,000.

Back at the grave, Ormie, 61, was having trouble unscrewing one of the coffin handles. He and his friends had managed to carry the casket to the hole, but the bolt was not budging, which meant the coffin still wouldn’t fit.

‘Fuck,’ he says, not angrily, before striding over other graves to his ute to get a tool with more purchase. Gershwin was still playing, the crowd still mingling.

It is Ormie and a group of other volunteers who carry out the undertakers’ work in a morgue at the back of the local hospital.

‘We prepare the bodies. Sometimes we dress them too. It’s something that we don’t encourage, but if that’s what they

want us to do, we certainly will do it,’ says Ormie gently. ‘It’s better if you dress them when they first die rather than later on when they’re pretty stiff.’

The local men’s shed makes the crosses and a local artist paints them. This is a community service, run by the community, for the community. Ormie, although an understated man, is visibly proud when he talks about the kind of community that takes on the responsibility of creating their own funeral service.

‘There wouldn’t be a person in Lightning Ridge who hasn’t benefited somehow from this service. It’s cheap and we’re still

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making money. That money’s there for the people. And it’ll always be in Lightning Ridge, I’ll guarantee that.’

Says Maxine, ‘One thing we’re looking at now is a scholarship for local kids to help with tertiary education, whether it be for apprenticeships or something else. It’s alright for kids starting off in the cities: they can live at home, but for country kids it’s really difficult,’ says Maxine.

‘Death is a great leveller,’ says Ormie. ‘There are a lot of people who think they might be a little bit of a cut above the rest of us. Death

brings them all down to the same level. All of humanity.’

If death is the ultimate leveller, I think living under the beating sun of Lightning Ridge might be a close second. Although looks can be deceiving, miner Butch McFadden warns me: just because someone looks rough, ‘with his arse out of his pants’, doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a holiday house on the coast and millions of dollars of cash in the safe, says Butch.

‘I reckon I know 50 millionaires, and some of them have made tens of millions.’

The town proper is like a lot of other rural Australian towns in that it has a main street and motels and restaurants and a supermarket and two cafés. There are bigger houses and smaller houses, a school and a hospital. There’s an impressive swimming pool and diving centre: fundraising for the complex was spearheaded by five cupcake-baking local girls who were sick of travelling to Walgett to swim. They had raised almost enough for the first stage when they went to Canberra to receive an Australia Day award recognising their efforts. One of the girls, Crystal, used her acceptance speech to thank Prime Minister Bob Hawke for the award and then hit him up for the rest of the money they needed to make it happen. He gave it to them.

But venture out beyond the town and you’ll find yourself in another world entirely: the camps.

Camps are temporary-looking dwellings made with tin and rocks and caravans, set up on the opal fields. There are no amenities—such as water, electricity and >

Facing page Locals relax at the bore baths, where natural hot spring water soothes away stress; opal mining made the area famous.





gas—servicing the camps. There is no air-conditioning and the dry heat in summer is ferocious: a blistering 48.5°C is Lightning Ridge’s highest ever recorded temperature. Camps are the homes of people—of around 50 different nationalities—who have come to mine opal.

Note: you mine opal, not opals. Some more lingo: if you steal opal from someone else’s mine, you’re a ‘ratter’. ‘Ridge nails’ are well-placed rocks on roofs. The mounds of dirt dug from the mine shafts are called ‘mullock heaps’, dotted throughout the landscape like sandy piles made by hundreds of tunnelling beach crabs. To

‘speck’ is to simply look down and keep an eye out for opal while you’re walking around. And it is not without its rewards. (A couple on holiday uncovered a \$20,000 black opal in a specking dump just outside the visitors’ centre.) To ‘noodle’ is to get something like a butter knife and poke around in the mine waste. A ‘genny’ is a generator, a very important part of life without mains power... and there must be so much more.

Living is off-grid, not because of a hipsteresque choice, but out of necessity. The 2016 Australian Census estimated the population of Lightning Ridge to be almost

2300, but given the uncounted people living in the camps on the surrounding opal fields, the actual population could be double that. The post office says that during the mining boom there were anywhere between 6000 and 10,000 people, but now they estimate the number has levelled out at around 4000.

Amid the shanties and shacks and slapped-together structures, there are moments of pure *arte povera*: the house made of beer cans, with coloured glass bottles for windows, at Nettleton’s First Shaft Lookout; the cheerful white interior of Fred Bodel’s 1916 hut—possibly the oldest camp >

Above A window of coloured glass bottles in the beer-can house at Nettleton’s First Shaft Lookout.
Facing page Danielle King grew up in Lightning Ridge and has a real affection for the local landmarks.



in the area; a succulent and cactus garden at the Grawin, an hour out of Lightning Ridge, which felt very Georgia O’Keefe.

Local Danielle King, who grew up on the Three Mile opal field in a two-room hut with her parents and three siblings, showed us her favourite car wrecks in faded pastel hues surrounded by cacti, and they too were beautiful.

‘I wouldn’t swap my childhood growing up out here for anything,’ says Danielle, 43, who lives in town with her partner, three stepsons and their daughter. ‘We went out specking, we dug holes through the mullock heaps, sometimes we snuck down old

shafts. We’d go motorbike riding. Wild goats would run over the mullock heaps. When the genny went out everyone cooed and it was time to go to bed.’ Danielle beams as she shows us around.

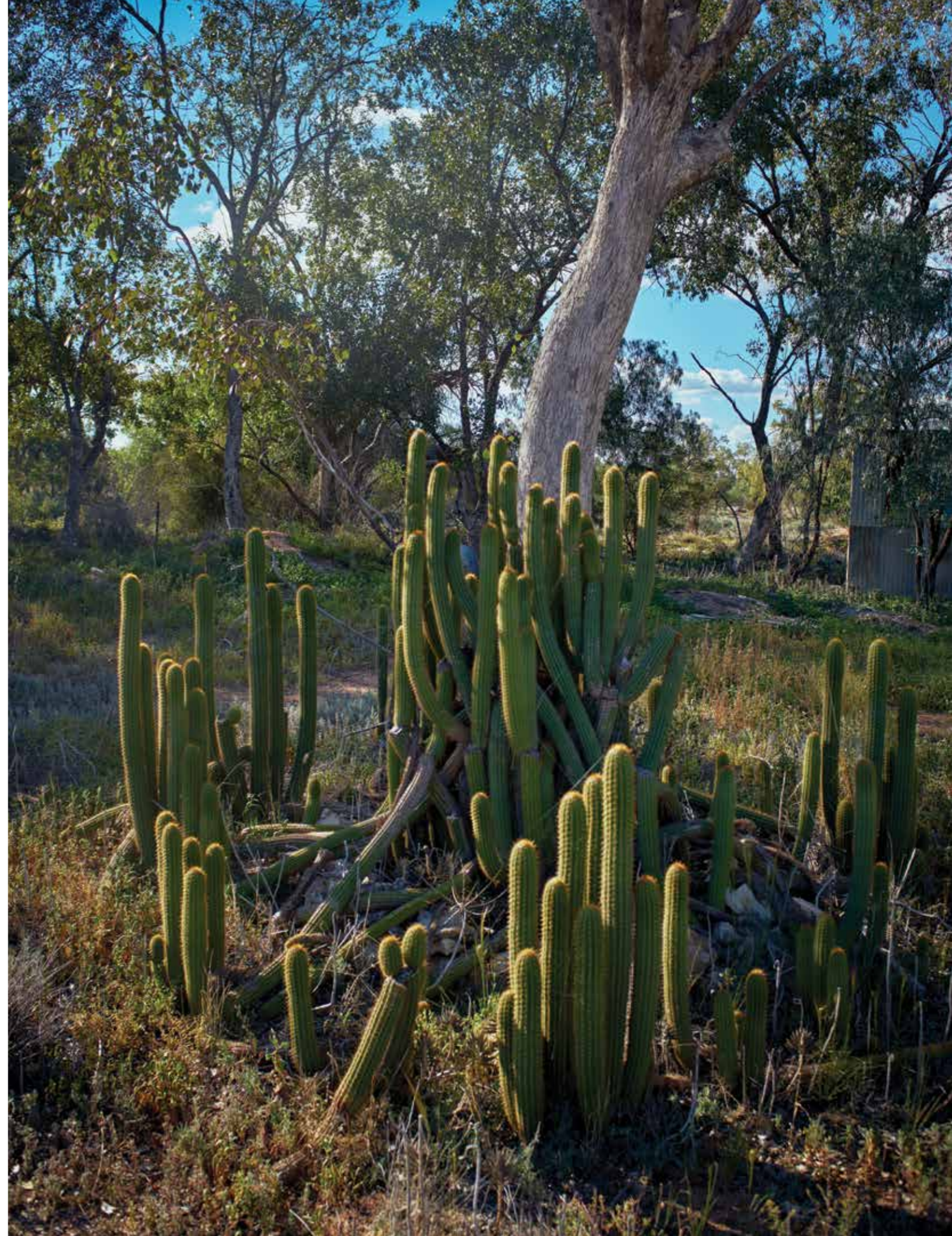
Danielle now works as a tow-truck driver in Lightning Ridge—she’s kept busy with the grey nomads and their caravans—and for the local Fire + Rescue New South Wales service. For the past 10 years she’s been trying to buy back the lease of her childhood home. She’s also on the committee for the proposed \$33.4 million Australian Opal Centre, designed by world-renowned architects Glenn Murcutt and Wendy Lewin,

which is to be built just up the road from her childhood camp at Three Mile.

Murcutt, the sole Australian winner of the Pritzker Prize—architecture’s equivalent of the Nobel—regards the Lightning Ridge opal centre as a building of ‘great significance’. Special Projects Officer for the Australian Opal Centre, Jenni Brammall, says they hope it will be the MONA of north-west New South Wales, acting as a model for what is possible out here.

The off-grid, carbon-neutral, partially underground project with a Gondwana fern garden sprawling over two levels has >

Above This camp consists of a caravan whose roving days are forever behind it. **Facing page A** garden at Three Mile. **Following page** Pete Cooke in his workshop.







secured \$20 million in funding for the first stage of construction, which will begin early next year. Stage 1 is set to open in 2022.

‘I think this building will really open up Lightning Ridge on an international level,’ Danielle says. ‘In saying that, I’d be unhappy if it disturbed the countryside out here. This is what I remember and I’d like it to stay this way for the rest of my life, and be here for my grandkids. But times change and things need to happen.’

Times have changed in Lightning Ridge. In the late 1980s and early nineties, when the field price for the best quality black opal was \$8000 per carat and demand from Japan and China was strong, you could, even as a small scale operation with a jackhammer and a bucket, strike it rich. Today the field price for top quality black opal is \$10,000. But the industry is more regulated and there are more hurdles to jump before mining a claim. And the increased regulation has made it harder for people to speck. Locals will often quote a 2001 University of Canberra study that showed seven out of every 10 Lightning Ridge families rely on welfare as their main source of income.

We visited miner Pete Cooke’s workshop in town, where he washes his opal dirt and does contract washing for other miners, as well welding fabulous creations such as earthquake detectors and a container to house aliens in. ‘I’m one of the few blokes in town that has a registered truck and a licence,’ he says, laughing.

Down the street, police have circled a house for a drug raid, but Pete, 59, is not fazed.

‘I did a road trip with my dad 35 years ago and fell in love with the place; been coming here ever

since. And for the past 10 years I’ve been here full time. It’s a very diverse community, there’s a lot of room for eccentrics and people outside the square here. I love it.’

Pete, whose hero is Leonardo da Vinci—something reflected by his workshop with its mad and wonderful creations—is one of the larger scale miners. He has excavators and big trucks, but he says, although it’s not always easy, you can still find opal with a pick and a wheelbarrow.

‘The little bloke has a chance. Some blokes have come here with millions of dollars to set up, thinking they’re going to change the industry. Then a couple of years later they leave town with

Ormie Molyneux finally got the handle off. He lowered the coffin into the grave and it fit like a glove.

their tail between their legs and they’ve gone broke.

‘Resilience is important. You can go a long time between opal. A couple of years is not unusual,’ says Pete. He could have been talking about farming.

‘I’ve got a big tip truck that holds 20 tonnes of dirt. I’ve done 90 of those in a row. Trucked them, brought them into town, processed it and found nothing. Then the next truck could have a quarter of a million dollars in it. It’s crazy. Big businesses have gone broke trying to understand the process, where really it’s just pot luck. If anyone thinks they know what they’re doing, they’re just bullshitting.

‘Opal makes up its own rules. It’s capricious. But you’ve got to keep plugging away,’ Pete says.

Back at the cemetery, Ormie Molyneux finally got the handle off. He lowered the coffin into the grave and it fit like a glove. I felt compelled to clap.

Gershwin stopped, which also made me want to clap, and the service started. It was a lovely send off. The son in the Hawaiian shirt spoke beautifully.

I didn’t know the man being buried, or his family and friends who threw dirt onto the coffin. But what I did recognise was a group of people willing to give time to a service the community needs. There were old people and young people, white and brown. Some arrived at the cemetery on foot, others in new cars. I saw care and kindness and decency.

After the service, the crowd milled around the grave, clinking shot glasses and telling stories. The volunteer undertakers rolled up the artificial grass strips while they chatted to the family. They were there as friends as well as service providers.

And then the council worker arrived, driving a small tractor with a disproportionately loud engine, and started to backfill the hole, despite the lingering crowd.

It felt ridiculous and wonderful. Ormie packs up the speaker, the microphone and the plastic chairs. This cemetery is where his mother, father and brother, and aunts and uncles and cousins are buried. It’s where he’ll be buried too.

‘It’s better if you know the people,’ Ormie says, about burying his friends. ‘It’s easier. It’s something else we can do together and it’s got to be done. It’s very good for this town.’ ■