

# DRINKING IN THE CEMETERY

by

Michael Bolton

Like many Katherine locals, I often drive past the Katherine Cemetery. It is a well-treed and regularly tended park, always green and usually with a fresh grave or two. It lies next to Katherine Hospital and between Gorge Road and the Katherine River.

In recent times the cemetery has given me cause to reflect on my own mortality. During these pensive moments I always recall the image *"Drinking in the Cemetery"* by the late great character and artist, Paddy Wainburranga Fordham. He passed away in 2006 at the age of 74.

*"Drinking in the Cemetery"* was one of the last commissioned artworks that Paddy produced for me before his passing from this world into the next on June 1<sup>st</sup>. Not that Paddy felt unfamiliar with the world he entered that day. The drawing vividly shows us one of Paddy's frequent communing and carousing with the spirit world.

Only Paddy could, without compunction, after last drinks at the perpetual Last Chance Saloon, take a taxi to the quietest most serene setting in Katherine town. Sitting down happily with a carton of green VB cans Paddy would commune with his deceased countrymen and family members until the humbugging Satan disrupted the reunion.

In the artwork the scene, or rather the theatre, is the cemetery. And the stage is Paddy's, clearly marked out by the small oval paddock on the left of the bottom half of the drawing. This is not an exclusion zone, but the stage he shares with the spirits who have gone ahead, merrily drinking and orating stories of Country and history.

It is a performance that wakes the dead - literally - as we can see in the several figures in the drawing who have risen out of their graves, drawn up by Paddy's unshackled revelry.

*"Drink! Take your cartoon, leave-im there. Drink! If you drink like that, people gonna come along everywhere. Some they don't come out, they just look at you, the heads come out."*

These emerging figures are spirits who are two-ways: dead but still living,

*See that shadow, him different one. One man but too many life.*

But the performance brings danger too,

*They gotta different sound, what they tell you. When the bad devil come they tell you, "you betta go". He really Satan. They tell you true.*

Paddy reiterates the strong warning from his spirit family,

*This one can walk. He's the witness. He let you know. He family. He telling you, "you have to go", he say from the graveyard.*

Paddy took this seriously,

*You get up and go!*

At face value *"Drinking in the Cemetery"* displays Paddy Fordham in all his wild and unconventional ways. His irreverent humour, his showmanship, his humanity, his disregard for white convention, his incomparable drinking exploits and his mastery of the two worlds, physical and spiritual, are there in plain sight.

However, there are sub-stories in this intriguing story-board when one delves deeper.

Along with his countrymen, Paddy had deep misgivings about white burial practices.

*My grandpa, they wrap-im and put-im in the tree. More clear. You bury-em, we don't know where they go because they underneath now. You don't know where to go. My grandpa, older graveyard - if you put-im in the heaven, on top, in the tree, that's the best! Your clear. After that, you colour the bones and bring back home. To Country.*

Paddy has in fact drawn the older section of Katherine cemetery. Note the many unmarked, unnamed graves. These speak of a time pre 1960s when not all citizens were equal. In those times it was not uncommon to bury a person in the sanctified ground, demarked with a number only.

*They one tribe, or relatives. Some they no more gotta cross. That old cemetery from long time ago, when they bin die Katherine. No name, just number only. After that they gotta cross. Everybody gotta sign and name in the cement. Cementery!*

Though unknown to us, they are “Family” to Paddy as they raise their heads from their unmarked graves to revel in his midnight performance in which Paddy is completely at home,

*They can't hurt you because you belong to here, the ground. Over there they gone.*

*They all come to you – family – they talk to daddy.*

By his own oral accounts, one is left with the impression that Paddy Fordham was comfortable and familiar with this fantastical graveside party. But despite the obvious merriment and gaiety in the performance there is an unspoken personal sadness contained in the artwork. Some of the family members he communes with have an achingly close connection to Paddy as he explains,

*I can show you my son over there. Young son, mine. I gotta picture of (him) at home. I got-im. Him only young bloke. Him bin die 17 years old. But him have a different sort of sickness – diabetes. Him bin turn to diabetic, but then him turn different.*

The figure lying prone, sharing in Paddy's carton, is his first-born son, and the stage is in fact his gravesite. Paddy's drawing, as well as showing us the revelry, is also a story of loss and abiding grief - loss of cultural practices, loss of connection to birth country, loss of identity, loss of family - particularly the young.

Yet despite these melancholic undertones, this simple 2004 graphite drawing still seems to sing to me - ultimately a song of celebration of life and its power over the distressing or bleak elements that are beyond one man's control or indeed the community's.



287 05 gp 75\*56 cm *Drinking in the Cemetery* by Paddy Wainburrnga Fordham