

**Ali Cobby ECKERMANN**

**Poetry**

**First Time (I Met My Grandmother)**

For Rosina

Sit down in the dirt and brush away the flies  
Sit down in the dirt and avoid the many eyes

I never done no wrong to you, so why you look at me?  
But if you gotta check me out, well go ahead – feel free!

I feel that magic thing you do, you crawl beneath my skin  
To read the story of my Soul, to find out where I been

And now you' mob you make me wait, so I just sit and sit  
English words seem useless, I know Language just a bit

I sit quiet way, not lonely, 'cos this country sings loud Songs  
I never been out here before, but I feel like I belong

It's three days now, the mob comes back, big smiles are on their face  
'This your Grandmother's Country here, this is your homeland place'

'We got a shock when we seen you, you got your Nana's face  
We was real sad when she went missing in that cold Port Pirie place'

I understand the feelings now, tears push behind my eyes  
I'll sit on this soil anytime, and brush away the flies

I'll dance with mob on this red Land, munda wiru place  
I'll dance away them half caste lies 'cos I got my Nanas face!

### I Tell You True

I can't stop drinking, I tell you true  
Since I watched my daughter perish  
She burned to death inside a car  
I lost what I most cherish  
I saw the angels hold her  
As I screamed with useless hope  
I can't stop drinking, I tell you true  
It's the only way I cope!

I can't stop drinking, I tell you true  
Since I found my sister dead  
She hung herself to stop the rapes  
I found her in the shed  
The rapist bastard still lives here  
Unpunished in this town  
I can't stop drinking, I tell you true  
Since I cut her down.

I can't stop drinking, I tell you true  
Since my mother passed away.  
They found her battered down the creek  
I miss her more each day  
My family blamed me for her death  
Their words have made me wild  
I can't stop drinking, I tell you true  
'Cos I was just a child.

So if you see someone like me  
Who's drunk and loud and cursing  
Don't judge too hard, you never know  
What sorrows we are nursing.

### Intervention Pay Back

I love my wife she right skin for me pretty one my wife young one found her at the next community over across the hills little bit long way not far

and from there she give me good kids funny kids mine we always laughing all together and that wife she real good mother make our wali real nice flowers and grass patch and chickens I like staying home with my kids and from there I build cubby house yard for the horse see I make them things from left overs from the dump all the left overs from fixing the houses and all the left overs I build cubby house and chicken house

and in the house we teach the kids don't make mess go to school learn good so you can work round here later good job good life and the government will leave you alone

and from there tjamu and nana tell them the story when the government was worse rations government make up all the rules but don't know culture can't sit in the sand oh tjamu and nana they got the best story we always laughing us mob

and from there night time when we all asleep all together on the grass patch dog and cat and kids my wife and me them kids they ask really good questions about the olden days about today them real ninti them kids they gunna be right

and from there come intervention John Howard he make new rules he never even come to see us how good we was doing already Mal Brough he come with the army we got real frightened true thought he was gonna take the kids away just like tjamu and nana bin tell us

I run my kids in the sand hills took my rifle up there and sat but they was all just lying changing their words all the time wanting meeting today and meeting tomorrow we was getting sick of looking at them so everyone put their eyes down and some even shut their ears

and from there I didn't care too much just kept working fixing the housing being happy working hard kids go to school wife working hard too didn't care too much we was right we always laughing us mob all together

but then my wife she come home crying says the money in quarantine but I didn't know why they do that we was happy not drinking and fighting why they do that we ask the council to *stop the drinking and protect the children* hey you know me ya bloody mongrel I don't drink and I look after my kids I bloody fight ya you say that again *hey settle down we not saying that Mal Brough saying that don't you watch the television he making the rules for all the mobs every place Northern Territory he real cheeky whitefella but he's the boss we gotta do it*

and from there I tell my wife she gets paid half half in hand half in the store her money in the store now half and half me too all us building mob but I can't buy tobacco or work boots you only get the meat and bread just like the mission days just like tjamu and nana tell us and from there I went to the store to get meat for our supper but the store run out only tin food left so I asked for some bullets I'll go shoot my own meat but sorry they said you gotta buy food that night I slept hungry and I slept by myself thinking about it

and from there the government told us our job was finish the government bin give us the sack we couldn't believe it we been working CDEP for years slow way we park the truck at the shed just waiting for something for someone with tobacco

the other men's reckon fuck this drive to town for the grog but I stayed with my kids started watching the television trying to laugh not to worry just to be like yesterday

and from there the politician man says *I give you real job* tells me to work again but different only half time sixteen hours but I couldn't understand it was the same job as before but more little less pay and my kids can't understand when they come home from school why I cant buy the lolly for them like I used to before I didn't want to tell them I get less money for us now

and from there they say my wife earns too much money I gonna miss out again I'm getting sick of it don't worry she says I'll look after you but I know that's not right way I'm getting shame my brother he shame too he goes to town drinking leaves his wife behind leaves his kids

and from there I drive round to see tjamu he says his money in the store too poor bloke he can't even walk that far and I don't smile I look at the old man he lost his smile too but nana she cook the damper and roo tail she trying to smile she always like that

and from there when I get home my wife gone to town with the sister in law she gone look for my brother he might be stupid on the grog he not used to it she gotta find him might catch him with another woman make him bleed drag him home

and from there my wife she come back real quiet tells me she went to casino them others took her taught her the machines she lost all the money she lost her laughing

and from there all the kids bin watching us quiet way not laughing around so we all go swimming down the creek all the families there together we happy again them boys we take them shooting chasing the malu in the car we real careful with the gun not gonna hurt my kids no way

and from there my wife she sorry she back working hard save the money kids gonna get new clothes I gonna get my tobacco and them bullets but she gone change again getting her pay forgetting her family forget yesterday only thinking for town with the sister in law

and my wife she got real smart now drive for miles all dressed up going to the casino with them other kungkas for the Wednesday night draw

I ready told you I love my kids I only got five two pass away already and I not complaining bout looking after my kids no way but when my wife gets home if she spent all the money not gonna share with me and the kids

I might hit her first time

wali – house  
ninti – clever  
kungkas – women

tjamu – grandfather  
malu – kangaroo

## A Parable

In(ter)vention(ist)s are coming, in(ter)vention(ists) are coming  
the cries echoes throughout the dusty community  
as the army arrived in their chariots.

Parents and children raced for the sandhills  
burying the tommy axes and the *rifela*  
hidden in abandoned cars  
along the fence line.

One woman ran to the waterhole  
hiding her baby in the reeds  
dusting her footprints with gumleaf.

Other children went and got their cousin  
shouting "mum you gone *rama rama*  
you should see the clinic".

That night the woman went back to the waterhole  
leaving her child in the reeds again  
this time in a basket.

In the morning the children returned  
holding their cousin crying  
"mum you gone *rama rama*  
you should see the doctor".

At the clinic I felt her pulse  
checked her blood pressure  
tested for diabetes.

Staring deeply in my eyes  
until finally our heads bent  
she whispered quietly in Luritja  
"this son name is Moses".

*rifela* – rifles

*rama rama* – crazy, mad

**Faiku**

I drink in the street  
 Ask for money each day  
 Intolerance is free.

When I pass away  
 Alone under the bridge  
 Weeds grow in your mouth.

A paupers grave site  
 Dead flowers bent backward  
 Broken by neglect.

**Circles and Squares**

I was born Yankunytjajara My Mother is Yankunytjajara  
 Her Mother was Yankunytjajara My Family is Yankunytjajara

I have learnt many things from my Family Elders I have grown to recognise that my Life travels in  
 Circles My Aboriginal Culture has taught me that Universal Life is Circular

When I was born I was not allowed to live with my Family I grew up in the white man's world

We lived in a Square house We picked fruit and vegetables from a neatly fenced Square plot  
 We kept animals in Square paddocks We sat and ate at a Square table We sat on Square chairs  
 I slept in a Square bed I looked at myself in a Square mirror and did not know who I was

One day I met my Mother I just knew that this meeting was part of our Healing Circle

I began to travel I visited places that I had been before But this time I sat down with Family

We gathered closely Together by big Round campfires We ate bush tucker, feasting on Round  
 ants and berries We ate meat from animals that lived in Round burrows

We slept in Circles on beaches around Our fires    We sat in the dirt, on Our Land, that belongs to  
a big Round planet    We watched the Moon grow to a magnificent yellow Circle    That was Our  
Time

I have learnt two different ways now    I am thankful for this    That is part of my Life Circle

My heart is Round like a drum, ready to echo the music of my Family

But the Square within me still remains    The Square hole stops me in my entirety.

### **(Yankunytjatjara) Love Poems**

1.

*ngayulu tjina ananyi* south    *ngayulu tjina ananyi* north  
where are you my Warrior?

*ngayulu nyinakatinyi* desert    *ngayulu nyinakatinyi* ocean  
where are you my Warrior?

*ngayulu inma ankanyi* trees    *ngayulu inma ankanyi* rocks  
where are you my Warrior?

*ngayulu inmaku pakani* birds    *ngayulu inmaku pakani* animals  
where are you my Warrior?

*ngura ilkaritja* everywhere    where are You?

2.

I will show you a field of zebra finch Dreaming in the shadow of the *puli puli* ochre  
when the soft blanket of language hums kinship and campfires flavour windswept hair

little girls stack single twigs on embers under *tjamus* skin of painted love  
the dance of *kalaya* feathers will sweep the *munda* with your smile

do not look at me in daylight; that gift comes in the night

tomorrow I will show *ngunytju* our marriage proposal in my smile

3.

in the cave she rolls *puli pulka* for table for *tjulpun tjulpun* they pick for each another  
 she carries *piti tjuta* filled with river sand to soften the hard rock floor  
 she makes shelf from braided *punu* to hold *nyalpi tjuta* given by the message birds  
 when he sleeps she polishes his weapons with goanna and emu fat till they glisten in fire light  
 he tells the story of the notches on his spear the story of the maps on his *woomera*  
 their *kuru* fill with spot fires lit on his return  
 the other *kungkas* laugh “get over yourself” they laugh “he’s not **that** good”  
 she smiles she knows him in the night

4.

there is love in the wind by the singing rock  
 down the river by the ancient tree  
 love in *malu ngintaka* and *kalaya*  
 love when spirits speak no human voice  
 at the sacred sites eyes unblemished  
 watch *walawaru* soar over hidden *kapi*  
 find the *mukuringanyi*

*Yankunytjatjara* – a traditional Aboriginal language group of north west South Australia, who have maintained their traditional cultural practices, and are a major language group of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands.

### **Bird Song**

Life is extinct  
 Without bird song

Dream birds  
 Arrive at dawn

Message birds

Tap windows

Guardian birds

Circle the sky

Watcher birds

Sit nearby

Fill my ears

With bird song

I will survive.

### **Kulila (Listen)**

Sit down sorry camp

Might be one week

Might be long long time

Tell every little story

When the people was alive

Tell every little story more

Don't forget them story

Night time tell 'em to the kids

Keep them story live

Don't change them story

Tell 'em straight out story

Only one way story

All around them story

Every place we been

Every place killing place

Sit down here real quiet way

You can hear 'em crying

All them massacre mobs

Sit down here real quiet

You can feel 'em dying

All them massacre mobs

Hearts can't make it up

When you feel the story

You know it true

Tell every little story

When the people was alive

Tell every little story more

Might be one week now

Might be long long time

Sit down sorry camp

## **Message**

Every grain of sand in this

big red country

is a pore on the skin

of my Family

Every feather on the ground in this

spinifex country

is a spiritual message

from my Ancestors.

Every wild flower that blooms in this  
desert of red  
is a signpost of hope  
for my People.

## **Womb**

It is when the sudden silence  
Of a baby's cry lingers  
Framed in an empty window  
Then the mother knows for sure  
More than breast milk will dry up today

And when the slow spinifex touch  
Of your mothers hand is severed  
From the sandhill of your cheek  
Then harshness and ridicule  
Become the new seductions

And when your own born child  
Is whisked from outstretched longing  
In a tendril of smoke to the sky  
Then how do you ever trust  
The universe if you cannot trust  
The womb?

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