

## Y-erran-gou-la-ga: Hawkesbury, 1804.

The currawong nested in my mother's hair and the egg swelled in her belly till it hatched through her thighs and I was born with dark feathery down, a stick-legged person watched by the black and yellow eye of the currawong. It was always there. Often just a fleeting speck of vision somewhere to the side or in branches among leaves. Watching.

That was before they came, the day an island floated through the bay and possums shinned up the stumps and bared limbs that studded the surface. Or so it seemed. The scene snatched visions of panic from awed faces and many fled through the bush to hide from the terror. These were their *nuwi*, their boats, their vessels. Out of them sprang an endless leak of people. And when they came ashore, they strutted like emus preening their feathered rumps. These creatures from the sea barnacled in coloured bark turned out not to be animals like us but from the other side of death, their skin turned inside out.

I had seen it as a child. Corpses of our kin. Bodies, after life had seeped from their nostrils, bloated in the summer heat, the flies rubbing their legs with glee, pricking the flesh and humming their dirge of dying. The spirit fought against the skin to escape and when the hide blistered and burst, the flesh peeled back to reveal the pink inner skin of death. Those of that pink skin were now here, the dead returned, and deadly turned, ghosts amongst us.

Their breath fouled through their stubs of teeth, a death breath that choked the people, a gust of venomous air. The *gal-gal-la*, the smallpox tore people to death in a few weeks without disturbing the indifference of the incomers. They came and with them the *gal-gal-la*. A strange silence settled on harbour waters and the myriad caves and coves around *warrane*, their Sydney camp, became bloated with corpses and the sweet stench of death took the place of voices in the watery air. Faces erupted in pustules, eyes shuttered against the pain, and thirst stole dew from their lips. They shrank like sacks in huddled heaps, left to bury themselves.

People fled but death stalked them till it caught their escaping footfall or discovered them in hidden rock shelters. In every hidden and open place bodies were strewn like careless kindling for a blaze no-one was left to light. Not some but many, not dozens but hundreds till the odour like fog settled on everything.

The struts that held up the sky had shrunk from the contagion and rotted like flesh and the old men who could intercede to correct the catastrophe lay dying themselves. No one to repair the rites and tend the ceremonies. And the women, the babies, the infants, innocent of life. It is true, your heart does break: it cracks along a meridian of feeling, the line between grief and insensibility, the breath squeezed from you, eyes hollowed of tears.

Before they came, the *Berewalgal*, the ghosts from far away, I was just *kuri*, a person. My skin steeped in the smoke that forever hovered, sheltered me in the satisfying shade of campfires with a wisp of eucalypt leaf, earth mould and charcoal. Now under their eyes I ceased to be part of the habit of my surroundings. They, the Pink and

White deemed me Black and Unnatural, no longer just the colour of the land around me.

Our colour was unnatural; our smell unnatural. When the mosquitoes and midges swarmed, squeezing the oil from fish intestines on our heads and bodies gave blessed relief from the assault of insects but to them we reeked of the repulsive. And yet it was they we could always detect downwind; the stench of skin rolled in brine like their barrels of pickled pork.

Living together on the sea took from them the smell of land while we were cloaked in the colour and tang of earth. We were family to every creature, plant and insect – some, for me, like the currawong, a guardian and guide. But they had no kin or relatives among life on the land and slaughtered everything with impunity.

They lived gripped to one place till it turned to shit and mud. They had no sense to move. And even when they ventured a short while from their hovels they became hopelessly lost and blundered about blind in the bright light of day. They would stare at the stone in their hand, their *ngamurri*, their see-the-way, their *compass*, as though it would tell them what the land would not. The country was a maze of stories at points and places and we travelled the whisper of *songlines*, but they heard nothing and saw less. And they kept telling us we were ‘backward’ like some malformed idiot that would occasionally fall from the womb.

They turned us from natural to unnatural and made us savages as well. The boats that first brought them spawned beyond the waves and brought on the foam new varieties of their pink and blotched people. We had seen the French before but now they came to look, to study us like something you scrutinize and poke before you eat.

They were forever collecting and hoarding, storing and pinning them in cases. But these men had the gift of putting people on parchment. And the Frenchman, Petit, treated us as more than specimens. He would sit and listen pencil poised to capture a pose or inclination of the head. His gaunt face at an angle of inquisition, his blue eyes always about to question. But he would listen and ask as though we mattered. I mocked the way the British spat the word ‘savage’ in our direction as though we were gnawing beasts. But Petit paused and said seriously the word had altered in their mouths. In French, he said, *sauvage* just meant *wild* and that was something natural and celebrated, not despised. It was the first time I found that words could change from the tongue of one to another.

Life leached from us from the moment they arrived. They robbed us of our centre, our country, and piece by piece the parts that were ours, the jigsaw of our souls, were stolen and they made us infants in their sight. I became a curiosity not a man. But they had fearful unnatural powers.

They could bring down fowl from the air with their infernal weapons just by pointing at clouds. When I was a child a story spread with the awe of retelling from mouth to ear and out the mouth again. Some of our people in their *nuwi* watched from the water while one of the incomers on shore shot a bird and having retrieved it from where it fell, waved it by the legs, feathers flaring, to entice us ashore and into their company. But our people remained fixed in their suspicion and growing tired of our reluctance,

and with some disgust, the incomers threw the bird in our direction. But instead of flopping on the water the bird took to the air again to everyone's astonishment. They could take life and restore it just like that! And a wave of awe and wonder escaped from every mouth. Of course, the bird had merely been winged and had recovered to take flight but to the men in their *nuwi* that day the pink skinned purveyors of death had performed a miracle of life.

We usually avoided the men of weapons, but one officer seemed to seek me out to conjure tricks. He was dressed in red feather down with a curled crop of hair, a wig that he could take from his head like a turd. He wanted to show me a tube that shone against the sun. It began small in the captain's hand, but he drew it into length and put it to his eye. It was an *eyeglass* he said, and he handed it to me to try as he had. The gesture seemed generous, but the superior contempt never left the corner of his mouth. I put the cylinder to my eye and the land exploded in size. I wrenched it from my face in shock and put my hand to my eye to judge if it too had expanded to the size of a gibber. He laughed and patted me on my matted hair like a child. I was a captive of his gesture and I wanted to snap his wrist like a twig and watch him scream in pain as his hand limp patted the air instead.

The eyeglass was the currawong's vision; the tube polished the same colour as the bird's yellow eye. They had stolen the currawong's sight just like they stole everything else. They pondered theft and thieved endlessly. They even brought felons in the bowels of their vessels, thieves and captives, part of what it was to have so many possessions to protect. These were people made for possession and possessing others. They craved the captivity of everything.

Thieving was part of the pattern of every captive day. Men spreadeagled on a triangle of trunks to be flogged, the whip knotted to tear flesh, the bloody pulp flung among onlookers. On one occasion our women were so outraged they tried to snatch the whip from the slaughterman and beat him with his own weapon. To our way, to restrain someone and beat them was without honour, a coward's ploy, *jee-run*. For punishment a man is unfettered: standing shielded against a volley of spears till wounded. Honour satisfied. But to take a man, tied and trussed, loop a rope about his neck and shake him loose to convulse in mid air is without sense or honour. And as regularly as they occurred, they trudged to these occasions moving to order, their feet captive to the drumbeat, the monotonous recurring thump and rattle of the kettledrums.

From the beginning it was the noise that was the most obvious thing about them. The constant rat-a-tat-tat of their drums, along with fife and bugle, accompanied almost every action. They had instruments of noise, anger, fury and pain. They would constantly fire their muskets, their *djerebar*, these musket-men, the sound ricocheting from every direction. And louder still their cannon, a thunder reverberating across the water in rage. Even before they fired on game or our people for sport or menace, the day rattled with gunfire. A volley commenced the day, and another marked its passing. They fired as a sign or signal, sometimes as a warning; fired to tell that someone was once again lost and to guide them home by the racket. Their weapons forever blistered the air. You could not only smell them down wind you could hear them as well. You always knew where they were.

They would crash through the bush like beasts wounded which seemed to urge them to clear the land, so they were not forever lost. Once along the Hawkesbury, at a site they called Portland Place, I watched them take their gangs of captives to clear over a hundred acres, forest swept aside as an irritant. They ripped the skin off the land like hide from a steaming carcass with swift and deft indifference. They silenced the soil. Birdsongs no longer clung to the leaves and branches and there was no rattle or scurrying of creatures, no crackle of insects. Nothing familiar: nothing of the minutely tessellated pattern of living sound.

It had been a place of reeds and ponds, of waterfowl and eggs, of forested copses and open game ground, erased in less time than it took to breathe. And the satisfaction, the celebration this gave them, astonished me as they stood among the smouldering wood heaps toasting themselves with success.

They raked among the ashes and spread their peculiar seeds that always sprouted in straight lines even without fife and drum to keep them in order: corn with beards that bristled from their closed coats, cabbages that bloated from the ground, potatoes that buried themselves from scrutiny and pumpkins and gourds that wandered from view and then swelled into sight. But more often the plants parched in the summer heat and withered like the ancient spirit souls that had now forsaken the soil.

Because we were *nura*, country, we withered as well. In ceremony we nurtured and renewed but meaning deserted the words and emptied the gestures. Now the people too were deserting. Robbed of so much some wanted nothing more than a corner of peace. But I cannot live in exile from the crush of eucalypt and the scent of leaf mould. I cannot forsake a rage that coils and winds within.

This distemper, this venom stalks my steps even when enclosed in country and its familiar sculptured presence, where the jagged teeth of an ancestral past has gnawed the land to leave broken branches of gullies and streams that bite through steep ravines. Secret places.

They call it the Hawkesbury – even the gift to name is no longer ours – and beyond that what they call the Blue Mountains, an elevated massif and redoubt where people can cluster in safety. Scaling the escarpment takes me beyond the currawong's eyrie to a sight so vast, so breathtaking, even rage seeks respite.

The mountains have always held the sea from the inland plains and now keeps the incomers from stealing further into the interior. Here in these hills my touch is closer to clouds. From here I can stretch through the azure haze and trace the line of the distant shore. Here I can cup the vast valley in my hands.

The plain below is speckled with countless scattered campfires and from each, wistful smoke drifts and stalls in treetops. And as night falls the points of firelight become spirit's eyes in the land. Campfires were where my childhood roamed with laughter in a jumble of infant limbs, a past remembered but fading into forgetting. Now campfires in the early morning are where they know we can be caught and killed.

Days I have dreamed among the patient sandstone crags listening for a whisper to steer my steps. Soft as skin, the sandstone where I am has been carved with the

cicatrices of ancestral lore that mirror the marks and signs incised on my flesh, the *gungarray* that initiated me into the same mysteries. Here I stand on the towering escarpment hidden high from the view of those who would trample the secrets of how steps matter and paths have direction. Here among the angophora with their gnarled grip on sandstone fissures, I stand against their twisted trunks intoned with the shade of a fading sunset and listen to the wind snarl through the leaves and limbs.

The message from outside the world is a roar not a whisper, a wrath of wind. It tells us to remake an earth buttressed from the sky, the order that ought, where the props and struts separate the things that should be apart. And things apart should be our people from those dead returned, the *gonin patta*, the shit eaters that have fouled the land.

Their possessions fatten them like their pigs and the power expands their girth. Men like Marsden, whose belly swells with his loathing of us. Their god guardian, he keeps spirits in a black book he clutches to his side, opening it only to release them for some mischief. I have watched him, his round body listing like a ship before grounding himself on some pulpit of rock to address our people, his broad scowling face poached pink, scolding us for mysterious misdeeds he sees but which we cannot fathom. I never knew what it was to be fat till these men with their gluttony for possession. Only the creatures that control seem to bloat though, the rest just shrivel.

They possess the power to slaughter, that is their greatest possession. Now it is for us to turn their slaughtered corpses into allies of us, to scyther them like their wheat into slain windrows, to sink their vessels into waves of their own despair, to see them thundered from our sight. I see an apocalypse to turn the day around, so the soil takes hold of roots, so the vigour of words returns, and the power of gestures are restored.

The angophora's pale skin glistens like dew in the blush of moonlight and shadows pick at the scabs of bark. The currawong crouches on a limb, its yellow eyes piercing the future, of blood running to ground and people winnowed from the earth. But their fading tears still brush the heath, still nurture the soil, and they will rise again to find the rigour of words and the power of rites.

*Y-erran-gou-la-ga (known to the British as Musquito) led an Aboriginal revolt on the Hawkesbury from 1804 till 1806 when he surrendered to British authority. He was banished to Norfolk Island till 1813 then transferred to Van Diemen's Land. There he joined with the Tasmanians in the early phase of the Black War before he was captured and hanged in Hobart in 1825.*