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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Creation was not a one-time event

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Gunditjmara

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Thunder rumbled above our heads – a warning from the creator spirit of the torrent of rain about to follow the clash and clamour. Our camp sheltered by a natural canopy courtesy of the ancient Karrang, the most noble of trees, Kookoon says; strong, yet they bleed.

‘Tell me nowyoorreerr, tell me about the beginning of time.’

‘Time!’ he scoffed, his voice catching gravel on its way out. ‘Niece, our people lived on this land long before we were ruled by the tick and tock. Before we measured and counted and scheduled. We have been here since the very first sunrise, when the creator brought light into darkness, form out of formlessness.

‘We belong to a time when we observed the passage of moments by the passing of seasons, by the constellations in the moornong moornpoong, the growth of a berry, the migration of a bird.

‘We emerge from a time when the coming of eels told us stories of the warran pookarr flow. A time when the largest tree held a whole song cycle. A time when the guardian spirits sat high in those sacred trees watching over our women and thookay. A time when we could see our whole history written in the stars, and our future in the lines in the sand. A time of simple complexity. A time before white man... and his... time.’

He waved his marrang in a sweeping motion across our camp, as if the gesture itself might conjure up and disturb the sleeping giant in the dust and dirt. He looked down at the flames, and I understood the language of his silence.



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‘Nowyoorreerr,’ I hesitated quietly, ‘nowyoorreerr, what of us now? What of us in the white man’s world?’

He shook his head slowly, raised his eyes and spoke softly, so as not to distract from the creator’s sky show, now flashing warnings across the clouds lying softly on the black velvet.

‘My niece... they think we want their Father Time to rearrange the stars so we could start again. We know they hold not that gift. No, we are sovereign people in this ’ere meerreeng... and yet, we only exist in the space between every one of their words... in the space between their breaths... in the pauses between their heart beats.

‘We exist in another world in a different time and space. We live in an unimaginably beautiful place, a cosmos of our creation. We exist on a different plane, amid the constant rotation... different planets moving across the zodiac, spinning on alternate axes. If only we’d meet, if only we’d align... then my niece, then the most beautiful constellation would be realised.

‘Until then, they’ll never know the heartbeat of this meerreeng, hear the whisper of the trees, receive the messages carried upon winds drift... so we will spend our time dreaming up galaxies, while they feed upon the stars.’

People say that every time an Elder passes, we lose a library of wisdom. Our old people are the keepers of song, story and law. All of their knowledge rests beneath their skin, settling into their bones, mixing with their life blood: they become the living archives for our people and Country. We turn to them for the wisdom of survival, of endurance and of resistance.

I’ve always rested at the feet of our Elders, keen to hear the stories, learn the law, sing the songs, dance the dances. It’s because I’ve always craved culture. I grew up away from Country, without my Mother, my kin and my language. I was raised on someone else’s land, speaking a tongue that did not belong to me, or to the earth that birthed me. And while I didn’t know my culture then, I knew the absence. It was a gaping hole in my tummy; not the hungry for food kind, rather the insatiable hunger for knowledge.

I think a lot about the way our culture was passed down. It was never written down, and colonisers have tried to belittle it because of that. But, I think that is its strength. While we held it in our hearts and song, even Captain Cook and his *terra nullius* couldn’t touch it. So, it saved our culture, and now our culture saves us: it sustains us, it creates and remakes us.



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I'm very far away from my Country. I long to place my head on the forest floor, bathe my feet in the cool waters of home. My heart longs for that connection, and it's just another absence I feel, a deep regret and longing, like an open wound that just won't heal. And so, I connect in different ways; ways that I hope honour my ancestors.

I speak every little bit of language that I can. I don't feel shame if my pronunciation is not quite right, because I know my old people will be pleased that I am awakening that part of me because our languages never disappeared, they just laid down and rested while the world beat on, waiting for our yearning to bring us back to them.

I tell my kids the stories of the land, and teach them to caretake it, especially while occupying someone else's sovereign country.

And I smoke myself. I gather up all the varieties of eucalypt I can get my hands on. I thank the trees and the land for providing for me, I dry them out, and when the time is right, I light flames across the leaves and inhale the most beautiful smoky aroma. I let it waft across the surface of my body, cleansing my skin, and settling into my pores. I pull the smouldering smoke into my nostrils and breathe it right down to my belly, so it can touch my soul. I smoke my home and through all the spaces we reside.

And as I trail my bare feet across the floorboards, I thank my ancestors for fighting to survive this new world so that I may be here today. I thank them for holding our culture in their hearts so that we may now enjoy it.

When people ask me if culture is important, I tell them it is as vital to my survival as oxygen. It is what sustains me, what saves me and what creates me... because as my leempeen says, 'The creation wasn't a one-time event, it happens every day you draw breath, bpup-bpup ngan.'

So, I say to my people, keep drawing breath, be still, and wait for the missives that are sent through the rustle of the leaves in the trees, and trust in your old people. It is by their grace that we are here.

*text contains content from yarns with family members now passed

Tabitha is a Gunditjmara woman, born and raised on Kurna country. As a First Nations woman, Tabitha is blessed to have her mother's stories and the blood of all the women before her coursing through her veins. It is in their honour, that she centres their unique knowledges, and privilege their voices and stories in all her work. Tabitha is a formerly incarcerated woman, still shackled to the system. It is part of who she is, but not all that she is.