

SONGS FROM THE HEART

By Mark Cornell

A magpie sung me off to sleep last night. I smiled as I drifted off to the land of nod. What was he singing about ? There wasn't a full moon and it's the middle of winter. Maybe he was telling me I should feel glad to be alive ? Welcoming me back to my river land of mists and shadows. He reminded me of another bird, the Dark Emu, who flies through the Milky Way. I saw him up at Uluru recently. You'll find him in the Coal Sack Nebula. The Milky Way, the backbone of night, in the desert, it's like someone has splashed a big bucket of white paint overhead up here. The stars come down and sit on your shoulders. And there he is, the great Emu bird with his long neck, body, wings and feet hovering in the night sky, head abutting the Southern Cross. He's Biame; the creator spirit who left earth after its creation to rest in the Milky Way. He sometimes sticks his long head over your shoulder to make sure you respect the land. Makes more sense to me than this big long silver haired, bearded old fella who'll destroy your cities, burn the bush, make you sacrifice your son, turn you into a pillar of salt, burn in hell forever, if you're born different.

The Southern Cross always points down to the South Celestial Pole. In my neck of the woods the four stars represent the eyes of the first man to die and an evil spirit. Biame created him out of the red earth, with another couple. The creator taught them how to live off the land, what plants were good to eat, how to dig roots, and where the best grubs were. Then came the big drought, the plants died, and the grubs disappeared. The first woman said they should kill the animals for flesh to eat and blood to drink. The men were horrified and said Biame hadn't given permission to kill. But, she said Biame didn't tell us not to kill, and surely, we should start thinking for ourselves ? One of the men was convinced and killed a kangaroo with a sharp stone. The other man was horrified, and despite being feint with hunger, the smell made him feel sick and he ran away. The poor fella fell at the foot of a ghost gum and lay still. The other two looked on in horror as a dark spirit with flashing eyes dropped down from the branches of the white gum. It picked up the dead body and threw him into a trunk of a hollow tree. As the spirit pounced on the body, two white cockatoos started screaming and fluttered around in circles. The tree groaned as its roots were pulled out of the ground. It flew up into the air, followed by the cockatoos and merged into the darkness of night. Four stars appeared in the night sky. They were the eyes of the first man to die and

the evil spirit. The tree disappeared; the cockatoos became the two pointers. Another mob say the four stars represent the Bram brambult brothers throwing spears at the giant emu, each star in the Southern Cross represents the combatants or their spears. If you listen there are stories everywhere around here, you just need to open yourself up. It's all about connection. When I was sixteen the first big rock, I saw up in the desert was Mt Connor. He was a big table-top mountain sitting high above the mulga and spinifex plains, people mistake him for Uluru. Some wagscall it "Fool-uru."The locals say he is the feared Ninya or Ice Men, the creators of cold weather. The women sing to summon them, and the spirits stomp around the place leaving salt lakes in their wake. They reckon when deep cracks form on the soles of your feet they are caused by ice left in the grass by the Ninya. The trailing pebbles around herewere formed during the Ice Age,Ninyahaunts me. I get abit scared when I see his big footmarks.

Uluru,our heart, it's good to see you after fourtyfour years, I was a boy when I first saw you,now I'm an old man. Big red rock, shoulder of time, how you dominate the land with your thylacine stripes and caves.The tour guide sketches your history into the sand with a stick. You were born about five hundred million years ago;around the same time our continent was formed. Big crustal plates merged together to create the island of Australia. They rammed against each other to sproutmountain ranges, like India and the Eurasian continent formed the Himalayas.The rocky material that you, Mt Connor and Kata Tjuka werepart of mountain range at least as big as the French Alps.There was no life back then, no scrub, no dinosaurs. Without any plant cover the mountains quickly eroded. The rivers turned you into sandstone and dumped you at the bottom of the mountain range. Then came the inland sea with its limestone and sand.About four hundred million ago Uluru, Mount Connor and Kata Tjuta were so far down under the sea and under so much pressure, they were squeezed from sand into rock. Another mountain building event began at about the same time, over squillions of years this created the big purple rock folds you see when you fly over the red centre. Uluru and the two mountains were pushed back onto the surface. What kills me about Uluru is that the rock is laying on its side, the sedimentary rock lines are now vertical. It gives you an idea of what enormous and eternal forces producedour living breathing heart. Oh,Uluru is alive, all you have to do is watch the rock at dawn or sunset.Watch the change from orange to red, one dusk I turned away and looked back, the rockhad suddenly become blue. When I was sixteen, I was fortunate to see it when it rained,

the rock turned silver and suddenly sprouted waterfalls ! It was like looking at some giant huntsman spider.

We walk through the red trails and spinifex to see the desert oaks, cousins of the she oaks you see down on the coast. We're on our way to the Mutitjulu Waterhole. The young desert oaks look like pine trees, they spend years probing down the sand with their taps roots to find water. The tap root can go down to thirty feet. Their bark is like cork, their leaves are like olive green needles. Sometimes you can hear the wind whispering through them. Once the tap roots find water the tree sprouts. Some of them have been blown up by lightning, the tap root down to the water makes the perfect conductor. You see the occasional oak trunk around here all black and smashed by the bolts from the sky. The locals, the Anangu call the tree kurkura. I signed their book in the Cultural Centre agreeing not to climb Uluru. It's our heart, why would you want to stomp on a heart ? I saw a handful of climbers on the rock, they remind me of the pesky, sticky flies you get around here. Tom, my twenty-year-old son, feels the need to scoop up the red earth and rub it into his cheeks. He looks like a warrior.

The tour guide points to the side of a nearby red hill and we see the trail marks of Kinuyu, the sand python as she made away down the rock thousands of years ago. She'd come all the way from a water hole near Mt. Connor to hatch her children at Uluru. She carried her eggs around her neck like a necklace. She did a ritual dance as she slithered down. One day she got mad after she heard a group of Liru, poisonous brown snakes, had killed her nephew, also a Kuniya. Her nephew was resting at the base of Uluru when the Liru rushed upon him hurling their spears. Many of them hit the rock face and pierced it, you can still see the round holes today. The poor Kuniya, outnumbered, dodged what he could but eventually fell down dead. The Liru mocked Kinuyu's grief and rage. She summoned up a dance of power and magic. She scooped up the sand and rubbed it all over herself, then took up her wana or digging stick and struck the head of the Liru. You can see the blows she struck, two big cracks on the nearby wall. He fell down dead, and dropped his shield near the Mutitjulu Waterhole, it's now a large boulder. Kuniya herself is still there in the form of a sinuous black hollow. They say these stories are told to teachjukurpa, the law, how to behave. What I take out of the story of the battle between Kuniya and Liru is that it's cowardly to gang up and attack a lone man, especially if he's asleep. Bloody bullies ! Also

you shouldn't mock someone who's in deep grief. What do you reckon? A sign of a good story is that it leaves things open and doesn't lock you out.

Mutitjulu Waterhole is sprinkled with ancient rock paintings. The guide takes us to the family cave and explains it's where people used to sit around at night to tell each other stories and sing songs. Like my family used to do when I was a kid. Each member of my clan used to share their special song or instrument with the others. I remember one night up here when I was sixteen, I sang forever with my mates at the back of the bus. Some of the girls thought I was a bit of a rock star. I've never sung like that since. The first painting I notice is that of a golden tree. It looks exactly like the silky oak I planted in my garden twenty-four years ago, when I first moved into Heathmont. She was just a little sapling back then, now I reckon she's at least fifty foot high. She sprouts all these golden grevillea flowers in early November. I planted her next to this dirty great big ghost gum, who's twice the size again. I remember when I was a little tacker visiting my Uncle Ted in Ringwood, he had these two big ghost gums out in his backyard. I used to go out into his backyard by myself at night and deliberately spook myself. Silly little bugger, always testing the limits.

I swear I can see a Tassie tiger on the rock wall, there he is in all his stripy glory! People forget he used to live up here until the Dingo came along. I reckon I can see an emu pecking at the golden tree. There's a spray of golden light on the roof of the cave, the tour guide thinks it's maybe the Milky Way. I can see some bright stars in a dark blue night sky. There's a series of concentric circles flying over the top of the painting, they remind me of the stone circles I saw in Newgrange Ireland. Those Celtic circles are at least five thousand years old. I wonder how old these ones are? The tour guide reckons people have been living here for at least thirty thousand years. Tom asks him what they represent? Waterholes maybe he reckons, or a map of where you'll find waterholes, an ancient satellite navigation system. Then there's this giant symbol that looks exactly like the Sydney Harbour bridge! Uluru herself maybe with the tiger stripes? It looks like the witchety grubs my mates used to dig out of the ground when I was a kid in Bulleen.

Up at Sparrow's fart to see the sun rise over Uluru, we all snooze on the bus. A three-quarter moon hovers overhead. After a catnap, Tom and I see the first golden rays trickle down to illuminate the spindly canopies of the desert oaks. Uluru transforms from a giant

sleeping shadow to a grey green monolith. I sip my first cuppa for the day and haul the crisp desert air enter into my lungs. Uluru is now fiery red with black stripes. The word Kardinia refers to the first rays of the morning sun. Kardinia, the cattery, the home ground of the Geelong football club, The Cats. I wonder how my two-tortoiseshell pudgy tats are doing back in Melbourne. They both tempt me to say home in bed every morning before I stagger off to work.

Kata Tjuta is a Pitjantjatjara word meaning "many domes." There are many Pitjantjatjara legends associated with Kata Tjuta. There's thirty-six domes, all considered the heads of the ancestors, all have stories. One of my favourite Australian painters, Lloyd Rees, called them the "...biggest eggs in all creation, because they looked like eggs buried in the ground." There's some pictures of him when he visited the Red Centre in 1975, (same year as me,) he would have been pushing eighty years. Wearing a bag of fruit and black beret with silver hair he looks bloody happy. Much like I'm feeling now. The biggest monolith is Wanambi, the snake, with long teeth, a mane and a long beard, during the dry season he lives in a waterhole in the gorge where his breath forms a constant wind. Some of the domes are Pungalunga men, giants who fed on the locals. We walk through Walpa Gorge, an enormous red valley bordered by two giant domes. The first thing I notice is the cool winds, is this Wanambi's breath? My better half Kimberly is in seventh heaven. She loves her geology and explains the red sedimentary layers of rock to the rest of us. I spy a lone rock wallaby in the mulga below us, he blends right in. If you dig down deep enough under the mulga, you'll find the honey ants and witchety grubs. There's a green mulga apple, a combination of wasp larvae and wood. Tom's standing on the viewing platform and dares Kim to open her mouth and catch a cashew, she does it with aplomb and the rest of the people we travel with give her a rousing cheer.

Western Arrernte, Albert (Elea) Namatjira country, ghost gums, red foothills, purple mountains. When I was a little kid, my Mum won two of his prints in a raffle. They hung pride of place in my family lounge room in Chadstone, now I'm jumping up into his country.

There's Kings Canyon, when I was sixteen, I scrambled up Heart Attack hill like a billy goat. Now Tom marches up the big red dome of rock, us old codgers watch him disappear and do

the gentler walk along the creek. We come across the thin, graceful ghost gums sprouting out of the red rocky earth. I pat one, he's so smooth and cool, he reminds me of my giant in the garden back home. He smells of lemon after a storm. I spy a big blue headed Ringneck parrot in the branches overhead. You can see the rock face of Kings Canyon and the tiny silhouettes of people as they float along the ridge and stare down the cliff. I wonder how my boy is going up there? Poor fella Elea Namatjira. Born and raised at a Lutheran Mission outside of Alice Springs, after his people were ripped from their land and culture. When he was thirteen, he returned to the bush to be initiated and taught his true culture by the elders. He started making money from his paintings and began looking after his extended family, at one stage he was looking after six hundred people. He tried to lease out a cattle station but was rejected. He tried to build a house in Alice Springs but was diddled. Poor Elea ended up in a shanty in a dry creek bed outside of the Alice. A stink was kicked up and he was the first Aborigine to be granted citizenship. For the first time in his life, Elea could vote, own land, build a house and buy grog. But his family couldn't, Arrernte culture expected him to share everything with his mob. When an Aboriginal woman was killed in the shanty town, the magistrate held Namatjira responsible for bringing grog into the camp and sentenced to six months in prison. Another stink erupted and Namatjira served his time at Papunya Native Reserve. He was released after serving two months due to medical and humanitarian reasons. He was crushed after his incarceration and suffered a heart attack. He died soon after of heart disease complicated by pneumonia in 1959, the year I was born. Poor fella was only fifty-seven. In 2013 two gum trees that featured in Namatjira's watercolours were destroyed in an arson attack. The trees were being heritage-listed. Stupid bloody gubbas !

After walking a few miles up the rocky stairway of the Rim Walk I decide to sit on a ledge and take in the view. There's a huge red pyramid like hill sleeping below the vast blue dome of sky. A green trail of ghost gums snake below me towards the matchbox cars and buses in the carpark. I can't get over the silence, and marvel over this sun lulling stillness. Thousands of miles away from the clatter of my native city. I changed the first time I came up here, I feel myself changing again. Shedding skin. Walking back, I hear the zebra finches beeping in the scrub and wonder how our girl is doing back home? Later on, Tom and I play billiards at the Thirsty Dingo Hotel. We beam when they play A.C.D.C. Tom shows me pictures of his walk, one of a fossilised shell he found up top, remnant of the ancient inland

sea. We're the last to get back on the bus, the driver smiles at us and says there's no hurry. A currawong tells me it's time to go back to work, but my spirit is still in the desert.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.