

# **I Am Nannertgarrook**

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BUNDYI

# BABAYIN BETAYIL

## Mother Whale

Her arm stretches across my shoulder, hand resting open like a night flower blooming for the moon above. Velvety black, my girl's skin gleams in the luminous moonlight, bare chest gently rising and falling with a carefree grace. My little Boyerup, named so by the Elders at birth, when her first cries caused a flurry of butterflies to flee from their home among the banksia flowers. Delicate, this one, like the balambalam, and careful. Even when she dances, her favourite thing to do, she places her foot lightly on Biik.

Next to her, my youngest sleeps spreadeagled and face down on a possum skin fur. Although deep in slumber, Yearl Yearl still looks like he's about to take off running, quick and nimble, the complete opposite of the ponderous sea snail he's named after. Clapsed in his tiny hand are three gangan, resting perilously close to his little button nose. I can't stop the smile from spreading across my face remembering his relentless pursuit of that cheeky Waa the raven trying to steal his pipis at lunch. No-one, not even the great bird of his moiety, takes food from Yearl Yearl.

My heart is full with these two, my bubup. They light every day, knitting each one to the next with love. Stories are sung for them, wisdom shared for them.

I trace my finger over the scars cut on my chest after the birth of each of my children. These scars that speak of knowledge and experience, a picture of my passage through motherhood. I still remember my own mother's expression, warm with pride, as she

held me in ceremony, surrounding me in the calming resonance of ancient song, thanking Mother Whale for the blessings of these bubup. When the aunties, the murndigarrook, drew the blood and packed the sacred cut with soothing ochre, their eons-old wisdom seared a profound knowledge onto my skin.

*Made from your flesh, forever marked on your flesh, these most joyous of creations, my babayin whispered. And one day, as the cycles of our Time endlessly revolve, you will be them and they will be you. And so it goes.*

The low hooting echo of a distant owl travels across the still night, rousing me with a sudden restlessness. Ever so slowly, I lift Boyerup's arm from my shoulder and lay it carefully by her side. With a drowsy huff, she rolls over and curls back into herself, still lost in her dream world. In a few more years, she will be stepping into her own layers of knowledge, her own markings that speak of blossoming womanhood. But not just yet. Some part of me wishes to never let her go, not even on the day I travel to Karralk with my whale and back into the Dreaming. If I could, I would keep her hand held tightly in mine as we walk back and forth along our songlines for this whole life, and the next, and the next.

Picking my way carefully over the sleeping children, I head to the low-burning fire and add more sustenance to the flame. Spring might be just about to burst the land open with colour, but the night air of early Pareip still chills with the last echoes of winter. Around our camp, bodies wrapped in possum skin cloaks snore lightly. This time, our wilam is a women's place, tucked within the curving folds of a sheltering dune, stretching along the languid shores of the bay. While the men are travelling a different path on higher country, we come with our children for womindjeka, gathering in this place of women's song and dance with a singular, sacred purpose. To honour Mother Whale and her children at Yellodungo, her place of perpetual rest in the most stunning of Sea Country.

A low grumble nearby draws my gaze to where my mother, Dindoo, sleeps. Mouth falling open, her back rests against the

warming curve of her werrun. Her dingo is an old, loyal one, with a warning growl that cautions any night walker to stay away from her babayin. They have been inseparable companions for many years and draw a mutual comfort lying together, especially after my father travelled into the Dreaming.

I study my mother's sleeping face. Wisdom has etched itself in the lines across her forehead, the corners of her eyes and the upturn of her lips. But in between those linear tracings of time, it warms me to see that her black skin is plump and soft with a pervasive peace.

The gentle glow of Meeniyān the Moon beckons me from our sand dune wilam to the glittering shore beyond. Are the whales gathering yet? As I get closer to the tideline, the night air is thick with the briny scent of an abundant Warrayin. I can hear the waves lapping at the smooth sands of the beach, their regular rhythm instilling a sense of rightness. Ears straining, I try to listen out for the telltale slapping of a whale's fluke on the surface of the sea. In Warrayin's mysterious depths, my family's totem travels. Guided by our Babayin Betayil, the great Mother Whale, the new mothers bring their calves into the safe embrace of Warnmarring. Arriving in the cooler seasons, these betayil families rest and wallow, feast and grow fat on the offerings of Mother Whale in her gentle bay, before they embark on their final epic journey, past the horizon and into the deep blue.

We women will gather over the coming days to honour them. Sacred to us is the Whale, the creator of the sister bays. Especially for my family, as she is our totem and custodial responsibility. With her care, we can live and our babies can thrive. With our care, she can live and her babies can thrive. A symbiotic relationship spanning millennia.

Ceremony will start tomorrow, an ebbing and flowing of song and story, dance and drumbeat, over a handful of Pareip's newly warming days and starry, brisk nights. For the first time, my mother will lead the yingali, moving further into her role as Knowledge Holder.

A shivering rush of excitement runs through my body. Since I was a young girl, Ngargee for Babayin Betayil has always been my favourite time. Just like my own little Boyerup now, I could hardly wait to wade into the water along the sandbar with my mother, aunties, cousins and children, getting as close to the majestic beings as I possibly could. To maybe, one day, be close enough to touch. And to maybe, one day, earn my rites of knowledge, the ancient yulendji, so that I can stand tall in the line of thousands of Old Women before me and lead our family's yingali for Mother Whale.

One day.

Holding my hand up to the gleaming darkness, I feel the rising of a brisk coast breeze. I whisper my wish to the Old Ones travelling on the gentle wind.

*Liwik, if I am ready, let me be close enough to a betayil to touch, so I might learn just a fragment of the wisdom she carries.*

Like a sudden, sharp inhale against my ear, a whispering flurry of mornmoot rushes past. My Ancestors have heard me. Waa the raven caws over the sand dunes near the camp and I head back to my sleeping babes, heart warm with anticipation.

As I lie down, I hear the calming crackle of the low-burning fire, the rise and fall of my bubups' breath, and the promising rumble of Warrayin in the distance. All is peaceful. All is perfect.

Gigantic shapes emerge from the shadowy depths of Warrayin. Great gusts of briny breath shoot out from blowholes, revealing the families of betayil gathering in Warnmarring.

I break into a blazing grin when a fluked tail waves to me from across the water, a glorious gesture of kinship. At my side, a clinging Boyerup gasps, nervous excitement shining in her eyes. She might be the careful one, but I know it won't be long before she succumbs to the urge of dancing for these incredible beings.

Shrieking behind us, Yearl Yearl darts all over the beach. Stomping across the breaking waves, scrounging through flotsam and jetsam, hurtling down the slope of a sand dune.

I shout a warning. *Enough, bubup! This is the Country of the Burri-barri, you must be very careful of their tiny eggs. Waa and Bunjil are watching!*

Chastened, Yearl Yearl shuffles in behind us, twiddling sticks impatiently with his busy fingers. A frown creases his forehead and he looks at me imploringly. *I'll always be careful around their eggs, babayin, always, always. But I didn't see any on that sand dune, I promise.*

*Let's be still for a moment.* I take both of my children's hands and walk back to Yearl Yearl's sand dune. *Thooamee*, I whisper, pointing to my ears. *Listen for the sounds of their song.*

Almost immediately, Boyerup's eyes widen and she points to a dense patch of old man saltbush just beyond the first crest of sand. I nod approvingly and look to Yearl Yearl. Screwing his nose up with intense concentration, he looks like he is trying to channel all of his power into listening. I can't help but laugh. Stroking his creased forehead, I reassure him to just be patient.

Then, a tiny black head peeks nervously through the leaves of the saltbush, the red circle around her eye blaring a warning. Carrying a piece of dried seaweed in her red and black beak, the hooded plover darts across the sand and into the neighbouring vegetation. Yearl Yearl's mouth falls open and a flush reddens his face.

*I'm so sorry, babayin.*

*Konye, watch a little longer.*

After a few minutes, more tiny heads pop out from the comforting foliage of the old man saltbush. Fluffy fledglings summon the courage to step out into the open. Judging the beach to be safe from predators, the adult hooded plover chirps the order for her family to return to the tide mark for feasting.

*This one lays her eggs in a scraped-out hollow in the sand, I whisper to my children. It takes many weeks for her babies to break free from their shells. And she has to be on the lookout the whole time to protect them from many dangers. Especially the clumsy feet of little boys!*

Yearl Yearl chews his lip and twists the twigs in his fingers nervously as we watch the fledglings huddle close to their mother on the shoreline. Although the bubup have heard it before, I continue the story of the burribarri.

*And then it takes many more weeks before they can fly and survive on their own. Yes, old man saltbush gives them shelter. Or they can crouch and hide under rocks or driftwood, but their special wilam is the sand dune. This is their Country too. I look pointedly at Yearl Yearl. And we must walk softly when we visit it. Just like Uncle Derrimut does near his wilam on the shoreline of Nerrm.*

Yes, *babayin*, the chastened boy whispers.

*Will you remember for the next time?*

*I will.*

*And what do you say to Country?*

*I'm so sorry, Biik. I'm so sorry, burribarri. I promise to take better care of you.*

A thumping splash breaks the sobriety of the moment. Our heads spin around to see the foaming whitewash aftermath of a breaching whale.

*Let's go!*

I squeeze my children's hands and pull them to their feet. Swinging our arms playfully, we pick our way carefully over the hooded plover's home, back to the edge of Warrayin. As soon as our bare feet touch the wetness of Sea Country, a baby betayil launches itself clumsily into the air. We all gasp and call out.

*Kye!*

What a joy to see the smaller ones roll and thrash as they try to copy the grace and power of their mothers. They are learning too, just as our young ones must. So we both, whale and human mothers alike,

sing out our stories to teach them. Never do I have a fuller heart than at this time, when the embodiment of my family totems gather to share their knowledge and presence with me. To teach me and my sisters and our bubup the way of the great Mother Whale, giver of life, teacher of nourishment and replenishment. Babayin Betayil, she who made the sister bays and returned life to the Boonwurrung in their time of conflict and chaos. She who rests in Warnmarring to keep Sea Country alive and vibrant. The great Mother who enables that most sacred of journeys, Karralk, when we depart our time on the land and travel with our whale to the rays of the setting sun on the ocean horizon.

Catching up to our group along the curving stretch of shore, I let go of my children and they rejoin the other young ones in play. Yearl Yearl barrels ahead to throw himself enthusiastically into a digging race for pipis with his cousins. Singing sweetly to herself, Boyerup skips over to a gathering of girls who selectively scour the old tidelines for treasure. Soon their smaller bilang will be clinking with a variety of carefully curated shells for necklaces and bracelets.

*Kye, Nannertgarrook!*

My younger cousin calls out to me, waving. Painted in yellow ochre, the markings of the whale fluke fan out just above Meendutgarrook's eyebrow ridge. Down her arms and torso painted in various shades of yellow, orange and pink, the symbols of her personal and family totems make a beautiful, patterned contrast against her black skin. She has already fastened her liik around her forehead, a delicately woven band made of the softest possum tail, adorned with the finest feathers of ngayook, the white cockatoo.

Bright, gleaming eyes, this one, always lit with the glint of mischief. Younger cousin sister, just a baby when I was eight and heading out with the aunties for my first long dive in the deeper waters of Nerrm. On the sheltered shoreline of our fathers' Yalukit-Wilam clan estate, Meendutgarrook cried like a fledgling kwiyp-kwiyp, kicking her tiny feet impatiently in the saltwater. She wanted to

swim too, out in the deep, a true Bubup Warrayin, Child of the Sea. Over the years we would play in the bay, diving and leaping like barrunan the dolphin or pretending to be secret, shape-shifting Koormamgarrook. And I would teach her in the shallows to hold her breath underwater, to be strong and assured in Warrayin's embrace like the Liwik in our family line. For Boonwurrung Sea Country is Women's Country, and if you were a girl who could swim like a fish in the water, the murndigarrook would make sure to find you a husband whose clan estate bordered the sea. That way, you could become a Knowledge Holder for women's saltwater Lore and Ceremony, a Bagarrook Warrayin. That way, we could hold fast the unbroken, ancient songline of Mother Whale and the glorious Sea Country she gifted our Old Ones.

Linking arms with my kin, I ask her to paint the markings of Babayin Betayil across my forehead too. As she focuses on her task, mixing the ochre with just the right amount of oil from barrimil the emu, I confess to her that, last night, I sent out a wish for our Liwik to help me get close enough to touch the betayil today.

Meendutgarrook clutches my arm with glee.

*I did the same thing*, she whispers conspiratorially. *Although my wish was to get close enough to stare into one of the bubup betayil's eyes.*

I burst out laughing, and my cousin playfully punches me in the arm.

*Don't laugh! How else are we really supposed to know who's travelling with them this time around?*

*We're not meant to know*, I admonish her with mock condescension. *We don't hold that knowledge yet. That's for the Elders to know and us to find out . . . so they always tell us.*

Cheeky grins spread across both our faces. We know the rules, but sometimes it would be lovely to find a way around them.

Meendutgarrook finishes the markings on my face and balances the wooden bowl of yellow ochre on a large driftwood log. She reaches for another tarnook, which holds a creamy paste of white ochre.

Neither of us says his name, but we smear our shoulders in ngar-rambil to show our love and respect for our father and uncle who has passed. Using my kin's palette of yellows, oranges and pinks, I paint the patterns that tell my story over the rest of my body. The tracks of koonwarra the swan, waving lines that speak of the sea, the shapes and stories of our Biik.

As we wash our hands in the lapping waves that lick at our feet, a boy's shriek suddenly echoes across the water. In a mad flurry of flailing arms and legs, all of the boys who had been paddling in the shallow depths of Warrayin dash for the safety of the sand, faces etched with foreboding. Meendutgarrook and I search the calm sea for the tell-tale fin of a lurking predator, but instead we see the whiskered, mischievous face of an inquisitive seal. Popping just above the water line, the koormam languidly lets the current carry her while she enjoys the spectacle on the beach.

On the high tideline, the girls had dropped their bilang of shells and were now cheekily trying to pull the boys back into the water. They would've been more successful if only they could control their raucous laughter, spurred on by the boys' terror.

*No, no, no!* The boys squeal. *Koormamgarrook! Koormamgarrook!*

Every baby in the Boonwurrung Nation has grown up with the wild and wonderful stories of the Koormamgarrook, the shape-shifting Women of the Seal and Kelp. For where there are koormam, these female water spirits will swim, hiding themselves among the blubbered creatures, sometimes even becoming them. Mermaids, shapeshifters, seal women, Koormamgarrook search for a morsel of human male to satisfy their lusty hunger. It is known that women can swim in the depths of Boonwurrung Sea Country because Koormamgarrook see us as their kin, ensuring our safety in the dangerous ocean currents and the entangling giant sea kelp forests. Providing for our sea harvest, keeping it plentiful and sustained, they might guide us to where they have left their iridescent scales against the rocks for the abalone to call home.

But best beware the man who dares venture into the deeper waters of Warrayin. He must cling tight to the edges of his gurrung if he chooses to fish beyond the breaking waves. For if he falls in and the Koormamgarrook are about, they will steal him down to their rocky lairs on the ocean floor. And even though the deadly descent means he will surely drown, they will revel in keeping his lifeless body in their underwater cavern for eternity.

No wonder the boys are squealing in panic.

*Enough, munmundiik!*

Trying to suppress our laughter, we furrow our brows in a stern frown and call the girls off their shivering prey.

*The Koormamgarrook are not a joke! Just because you are girls, don't think you're safe. Those water spirits are not too fond of disrespect in any form.*

As the girls scatter back to their shell bags and foraging, the now subdued boys dig sullenly in the moist sand for more pipis, grumbling among themselves about having to be around the girls, sharing a yearning wish that they were old enough to join their fathers on the hunt.

Looking back out to Warrayin, I see the seal's curious face still watching the proceedings of these strange two-legged creatures with an amused, yet wary, gaze. I murmur an acknowledgement to her and her kind. I pray to the Old Ones that she be protected in her search for a safe harbour. And just in case there are any Koormamgarrook surveying the scene from under the surface, I likewise pay my respects to them and their Old Ones.

Satisfied, the seal twitches her whiskers and takes a final dive back under the briny sea, flicking her tail with performative aplomb as she goes.

*Stay safe and travel well, lone koormam of Warnmarring,* I whisper.

Hands clean, I untie my possum fur headband from its safe-keeping spot on my emu feather skirt. I straighten the glistening black gangan of koonwarra the swan, my cherished guide and

guardian, that adorns the centre of the liik. Wrapping the band in its ceremonial position around my forehead, Meendutgarrook ties the leathery straps of possum skin securely at the back of my head. We are ready for our Ngargee of Babayin Betayil.

Ancient song starts to fill the contours of the bay, my mother's chant, swirling, echoing, rebounding off the landforms surrounding it, calling to Country, to our Old Ones, to the Mother Whale resting in her hidden channel. As each new Elder joins the yingali, the song swells with passion and purpose. A small group of women bring in the sonorous bass notes of possum skin drums and in turn, these are accompanied by the sharp clang of clap sticks. I see my radiant cousin, Kardingarrook, sister to Meendutgarrook, start the ceremonial dance of the Mother Whale. Newly wed, her lithe body glows with the honeymoon flush of new romance and young love, as she shuffles and kicks her feet in the cool sand.

A mighty splash erupts from the still waters of Warnmarring. Launching from the depths of Sea Country, a large, glorious betayil soars through the air, her eyes turned towards us as she crashes back into the blue. Suddenly, we can see the multitude of bodies that have been resting under the layer where water meets air, rising to the surface, fins slapping and flukes flying. They have gathered just like us, this clan of kindred whales, so that we can do our ceremony together.

My babayin, Dindoo, begins the ritual of venturing out along the sandbar. Her tone is raspy and quivering, filled with emotion as she sings the praises of the Creator of our Country's sister bays. Almost immediately, the closest whale slaps her fin on the water in response. A shiver runs through my body. I have seen this before, year after year, since I was a small girl, this miraculous call and answer. And it never ceases to fill me with wonder and awe. Continuing across millennia, this timeless song and dance, this yingali, has been etched into the very being of us who walk on two legs along the shore and our kin who glide like shadows in the sea.

Our family step forward to fulfil our custodial duty. Aunties, sisters, cousins. I am joined by Meendutgarrook and Kardingarook as our bare feet slide into the brisk, lapping waves of Warrayin. Tumbling from our lips are the songs of a mighty songline. Carried from one Country to the next, coastline to coastline, the story speaks of our shared connections, the binding wholeness of every layer of Country no matter where your place is on it. I have known these songs for as long as I can remember. My voice is unwavering as I join with my family to sing it now and keep the songline strong.

Carefully, respectfully, I wade out along the sandbar. An energetic calf rolls her clumsy body towards me. A curious one, the bubup slaps her fin as if calling me towards her. My heart thumping, I sing back to her, and slowly make my way through the crystal-clear water of the sandbar, closer to her. Surprisingly, my voice holds strong even as a fluttering stirs in my belly when I see her focus a cheeky eye on me. I think I hear Meendutgarrook gasp from behind me but everything fades around the focal point of this extraordinary being and her soulful gaze searing into mine.

Such depth in the spirit of this newborn betayil, I marvel to myself. I wish I could speak in whale song, or find a sweet, shared language that we could both understand. *Who are you, little one?* I want to ask her. Your eyes speak of old knowledge, as if you've been here before. Have you? Are you my great-grandmother coming to say hello?

A delicious thought fires up from the base of my spine, sending tingles rippling through every cell. Or are you a new spirit, a returning bubup, lying in wait until the right time to land in my body and grow in human form again?

As if she understands the character of my thoughts, the calf rolls even closer to me, fanning her fluked tail merely metres from me. I hover on the very edge of the sandbar, just one step away from where the floor of Warrayin plunges down into a deep channel, the sacred resting place of Babayin Betayil. If only I could get a bit closer,

if only I could stretch a bit further, my wish to the Old Ones would come true. Finally, I would be able to touch this magnificent being and feel with my own flesh the magic that courses through them.

A sonorous call comes from the calf's mother, as she effortlessly glides towards us. I call back in the tongue of my people and immediately the mother whale sings again. My whole body shivers with a great surging of emotion. A chant bursts from my lips and I slap the water's surface. She raises her tail in acknowledgment and taps it twice upon the water, like beating a drum double time.

Over and over, we mirror each other until I feel our very heartbeats are aligned. We are the same. Our black skins bearing scars with pride, showing the sum of our life's knowledge. Our fins and hands clapping in kindred harmony. I feel as if I am transported into her very consciousness and suddenly, in a blaze of brilliant illumination, I see with absolute clarity all the wisdom she holds within. The profound importance in the simple act of caring for Country. The right ways as a mother to tether a child just tight enough. The constant circling of our pasts and futures so that the songlines prevail across epochs. The entirety of Time itself.

And then, with one last exhale of air from her blowhole, the mother whale sinks back into the loving embrace of Sea Country. Without hesitation, her calf dives down after her, and the pair slip from view. Elated, I wade back to shore, forever changed.

Not much needs to be said around the campfire tonight. A humming blanket of happiness wraps itself around everyone at the wilam. Our spirits are full from our wondrous Ngargee for Babayin Betayil. Our bellies are sated from the feast of abalone, snapper, scallops and pipis. Each bubup is tucked up snug in possum skin rugs, in blissful repose after a marvellous day.

Gently, I prise the two twigs of driftwood from Yearl Yearl's grasp, lest they become an accident in waiting during his restless

nighttime adventures. Always very loyal to the treasures he finds on the beach, my boy held the kalk tightly for the entire day, the sticks spinning with perpetual motion. Only now, in slumber, are they finally still. Likewise, it is safer to slip Boyerup's freshly made shell bracelet off her slender wrist. Creases in her skin have already begun to form as the weight of her hand grows heavier in sleep. One last look at the two vulnerable souls destined to be under my care, and I pad back to the fireside.

With the light from the fire flickering in her shining face, Meendutgarrook clasps my hand in hers.

*You looked into her eyes!* She whispers in wonder. *What did you see? What did you see?*

With a cascade of thoughts crashing through my brain all at once, I shake my head in a state of wonderment. How to possibly describe the depth of the unfathomable?

*I saw it all, my liwurruk. I saw it all.* I feel an evangelical zeal sweep through my mind as I try to wrap it around the complexity of the experience. *And the only thing I can say about it is we are lucky to be the custodians of such magnificence. So lucky.*

I squeeze her arm with a happy reassurance, laughing as she flashes me a wide, toothy grin. Those gleaming mischievous eyes twinkle back at me, forever shining with the eagerness and impatience of that brave bubup on the beaches of our childhood home. So quick to laugh and even quicker to rush where others, like me, might take pause, preferring quiet contemplation over impulsiveness. And yet I recognise the determination etched in her face, for connection, for knowledge, to be a true Bagarook Warrayin.

*Next time, she promises aloud, more to herself than anyone else. Next time, the Old Ones will hear my wish.*

*Maybe they did hear your wish, I quip. They just gave it to the wrong person.*

I grin as Meendutgarrook snorts with amused realisation. *You know what, I think you're right!*

*So next time, I declare, with the same fervour as my cousin, maybe the Old Ones will let me finally touch the betayil!*

Standing, I sweep the detritus of dinner into a pile and fill my arms with the remnants of charred shell and bone. Nearby, strewn throughout the undulating hills of a special, windswept dune, stands our family Keeping Place. There is something strangely beautiful about seeing layers upon layers of feasted-upon shell, building up and mixing within the sands of the dunes. It speaks of certainty and continuity. Of the countless cycles of Ngargee for Babayin Betayil.

Glimmering before me, I see the very place where my great grandmother laid her shells, as did her great grandmother, as did her great grandmother. The older shells are cracked and brittle, weathered by the forces of salty wind, ocean mist and spinning Time. Nevertheless, they remain. A shimmering testament to the longevity of my Old Ones. As I run my fingers along the layers within reach, I thank those who created them for the gifts of their learnings and traditions. Knowledge that has kept us alive and thriving, kept our Country, our culture, our community and our children flourishing, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, millennia after millennia.

Returning to the warmth of the campfire, I see that the older women have joined our circle, a cluster of quiet murndigarrook whose faces are shadowed with concern. As I settle in beside her, my mother points to the barely perceptible shape of an island in the darkened distance, Korriyong.

Once part of the beautiful family estate of our neighbouring Boonwurrung clan, the Yallock Balak, this Country is now a lonely island devoid of its custodians. Following her pointed finger, I know why Dindoo is filled with a simmering resentment. Faint, but obvious in the dark cloak of night, a light flickers on the edge of the island. Men, white as the ochre of death, relentless slaughterers of the koormam. Sealers.

In years past, when I was a younger girl, I would lie on these very shores after our Ngargee for Babayin Betayil. Drifting off to sleep, I would hear the distant grunting and hollering, the splashing and slapping, of a restless community of koormam. Travelling across the Bay, the sounds of the seals would fill my sleepy mind with images of their mischievous, whiskered faces shape-shifting into the guardian water spirits of Sea Country, the Koormamgar-rook. Dreams would take hold of fantastic adventures under the sea, diving in the forests of giant kelp, mermaids and whale calves by my side, glittering abalone shells lighting the ocean depths with their wurrdin iridescence.

But those sounds have stopped now. Each and every one of those seals that called Korriyong their home was bludgeoned to death by the white man. It happened so quickly, within the space of a handful of seasons. Silence rests heavily in their place now. Silence and sealers, still lingering on the empty island, claiming it as their own. No Boonwurrung can go there now, the place of their Ancestors since Time began, for if they do, they will suffer under the same club that decimated their koormam kin.

In hushed whispers, as the firelight flickers across listening faces, my auntie tells the story of a young mother and her eight-year-old girl snatched by a group of sealing men last summer. After searching for the better part of a day and night, her family finally found them both in a rocky cave. Disfigured, bloodied and broken, their lifeless bodies told the story of unspeakable violation.

*Not men but monsters*, my auntie murmurs. *Here on our shores. Buldjinganu, bad devils, who refuse to leave.*

Heads nod in agreement around the campfire. Over many seasons now, stories like this have filtered through the clan estates, becoming more and more frequent. From all over Country and the lands of our neighbouring Countries too. Women and children going about their saltwater business, diving for abalone, fishing, gathering shells and kelp, holding their sacred ceremonies, are no longer safe

on the sands their Ancestors have walked since Time Immemorial. Desolate stories of being stolen away, brutalised and left to perish in lonely caves. Heartbroken whispers of young women and little girls vanishing, ripped from their Biik by sealers on wooden vessels, floating over Warrayin and past the horizon, never to be seen again. Never to see their family and Homelands again.

My mother begins the song. A cry to our Old Ones, to Mother Whale, Bunjil the wedge-tailed eagle and Waa the raven, to keep the spirits of these lost women and children tethered somehow to their Biik. Dindoo's voice breaks as the mournful lament fills the air. One by one, the older women raise their voices to help carry the song up to Sky Country. I imagine that somewhere across the ocean, our kin might hear the wailing call travelling on a persistent breeze. Maybe these stolen, vanished bagarrook and bubup might draw the strength and courage they need from our song. And maybe the sounds might weave a songline through the mornmoot's ether that could somehow draw them back to where they belong.