IV

The first time I realised something was missing, I was sitting with red earth draping itself over my body, my knees scratched and marked from rambling across Country and my hands idly twisting a blade of waxy spinifex that had become sticky with the sun's heat. I must have been about

twelve. Around me, the bush was alive with birdsong and soft movement – kindly winds pushing the tops of the gums, the rustle of a lizard slipping between bark and rock, and the smell of gidgee. Dad would have known what kind of lizard it was. He'd have known its tracks, what it ate, how old it might be and where it lived. He'd have told me the story that matched its presence, the one that tied it to the Dreaming and to us.

But Dad was gone, off to work out bush, and so I sat and watched and imagined what I didn't know. I tried to remember all the details of the lizard so I could ask him when he got back. I thought how sad it was that I didn't have someone else, from Dad's side, to tell me that stuff. I knew that his youngest brother had died, and one of his sisters. My aunty had died the year before from something the doctors called preventable, but I now think should be called neglect.

That moment shared with dust and smell has stayed with me, not because of what I saw, but because of what I couldn't name. I remember thinking, 'Someone was supposed to teach me about this lizard. How can I know how we take care of each other?' That lack of a teaching-someone created a silence in my education – not one made of quiet, but of gaps. The silence of words not spoken, of dances not danced, of stories not told and of signs not understood. When the primary holders of knowledge in an Aboriginal family are absent, the loss does not echo

just through that moment or even a year or two, but across generations, and as I sat there with the dust keeping me company, I could feel that echo, that someone was missing.

In Gudanji culture, as, I expect, in many other Aboriginal cultures, knowledge was not written down in the kinds of books used by Western communities. Our books looked different because our authors and tellers of stories have many voices and forms and places. Our knowledge is sung, spoken, performed and it is carved, tracked and painted into Country so that Country remembers, and we can find it if we know how to see. You learn by sitting near the fire, by walking Country, by watching how hands move, how eyes track. It is a way of learning that is slow, deep, relational, and if we are not careful enough to make those relationships, they can be gone quickly, and we can find ourselves in big trouble – the kind of trouble that takes lives. You don't just *hear* a story – you inherit it. And that inheritance is fragile. When someone dies, and relationships and connections have not been made, the knowledge goes with them because they have their language and ways to tell the things that are their responsibility.

I never learned from my grandmother, my owja, how to carve a fighting stick. My aunty taught me once, but she did not know how my granny made her stick. Aunty had watched my granny and carefully mimicked the movements, but she did not have the words for why each cut was made, what each line meant. 'She marked her coolamons like this,'

Aunty told me another time. But copying is not knowing. It felt like trying to write in a language I could not read or one that I was at the very beginnings of knowing.

There's a difference between information and culture. Information can be Googled or read in books that have been written by others. Culture is absorbed; it is lived in the everyday, the mundane and the awful and the joy and the sorrow. It's the tone in your aunty's voice when she tells you not to whistle at night. It's the smell of bush medicine being boiled on the fire and knowing, without asking, what it's for because that body providing home right now has been lived in before and knows that medicine. It's knowing which direction to face when you talk to the Old People. It's learning that silence and different ways of looking between people is not absence, but respect.

When our people die before they've taught us what they know, and what we need to know, we lose the *how*, not just the *what*. I can find out what a coolamon is. I can Google images, even buy one online from many different places, but until my aunty taught me how to cradle it, how to shape the wood so it curves like a mother's back, how to hold the axe and the angle to cut that wood, how to carry it balanced against a hipbone, I didn't *know* it. I only knew *of* it.

It's strange, the things you grieve when you miss out on cultural teaching. You grieve in layers. At first, you grieve the person. Then, slowly, you start to grieve the knowledge

they took with them, because it's only when their silence invades your living that you understand the little things they taught you and how those little things become grand. You think of questions you never asked. You start noticing the way others know things you don't. You feel the ache of being unrooted. You're of a place but not fully in it.

My paternal grandmother was one of the last in our family to speak language fluently. I imagine her muttering under her breath as she cooked, her words curling into the steam and rising like gidgee smoke. I heard her little sister speaking language and when I asked her what she was saying, she'd just chuckle, 'You'll learn when you're ready.' I never got ready in time. After she died, I found no scraps of paper on which she'd written. There were no translations – for animals, plants, kinship roles – only random words that I could recall at times when I was in remote places. There were no tapes, no lessons. The language was alive in her; now it's mostly not.

Without the aunties and uncles, the grandmothers and old men, we lose more than instruction – we lose information critical to knowing ourselves. I learned about bush tucker from family, but not every person can tell me everything, can give all the knowledge altogether. It must be taught by the owner in their time: *when* to go looking, or *why* some things are gathered by women, others by men. No book can tell you how to listen to the wind to know if the yams are ready. That's passed along by walking side by

side, by being shown, not by being told – not by a human voice, anyway. And to hear the telling of those non-human kin you must have been taught a whole other language.

There's a humility to Indigenous learning. You don't ask too many direct questions; only the rude and the disrespectful do that. You wait until something is given and you accept it with gratitude. When you're alone with that knowledge, that is the time to take it out and to carefully roll it around and learn its shape and feel it inside your body. Then you try it outside. When the ones who give you the map to live your culture, who show you how to walk as our ancestors did, are gone, you sit waiting in an empty room.