

Regional Echoes

The Call of Country by Renay Barker-Mulholland

Yaama and welcome. My name is Renay and I am a proud Biripi / Daingatti woman, living, loving and creating on Wadawurrung Country. I must begin by acknowledging my elders and my ancestors of the land we all stand on, and I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. As part of Regional Echoes, presented by the Emerging Writers Festival of 2021 I am going to be telling you a story about one of the nurturing forces in my life, Country. It's a piece called The Call of Country.

Country cannot be defined as a noun or a verb, it's a fundamental part of my wellbeing in a physical and spiritual sense. You nourish it and it nourishes you. Over the course of my life, I have moved house more times than I care to think of, but no matter where I have lived there's only a couple of places I call home.

I was born in a hospital in the western suburbs of Sydney, but I was created on the banks of the Colo River in Dharug Country. The Colo River is about 90 minutes drive from the outskirts of Sydney and it's a long way from where I am now, though the memory of it lives within me. In the time before my family knew of my existence, they lived on the banks of that river. My mother sat on the sand, my father walked through the trees, my brothers swam in the water. They lived, cooked and slept on that sacred land and the life that was created from within that place, my life, is inexplicably linked to it.

As I read this piece, I am laying in what most people would call a hospital bed, the kind that has an attached remote to move different sections of the mattress, and a metal frame to make sure I don't fall out. I am disabled and I live with chronic pain. Some days (and evidently today) I am so sore and fatigued it is impossible for me to support my pain wracked body on my own. So I press the buttons and adjust myself to look out my bedroom window. The window is covered by a light lace curtain and when sunlight streams through the panes of coloured glass, intricate patterns are projected on the wall opposite. Outside of the window is a cherry blossom tree that I have the privilege of studying and marvelling at throughout the seasons.

There are a number of reasons I cannot return to the place I call home, each one contributing to a sum that is greater than its parts. It adds to the cacophony of trauma and pain that I carry within myself. It's the trauma of being unwelcome in a place that is a part of you. Without the chance to connect to the Country that I *am* surrounded by, the desire to return to my essence becomes so strong that sometimes I am moved to tears. Those tears fall like the river's water cascading through the well worn path of my memory.

If I close my eyes and be still I can picture it so clearly. The water's soundless moving form generates the illusion of structure. It is living, like a malleable glass sculpture. The almost

imperceptible loss of transparency begins as the water's flow darkens and deepens, and any light that has penetrated the surface, disperses. The river's banks are soft and smooth, just like the pebbles and stones sprayed across the sand. The earth is dusty coloured and freckled with delicious crumbs of nature. The layers deepen and a warmth sets in as your distance from the water's edge grows. The dampness is plunged deeper underground and you meet the country that cracks under your feet. Stepping amongst the fallen and greyed leaves, around strips of discarded bark there are delicate drops of colour, where the wildflowers and orchids have bloomed. Each layer of life that surrounds the water is a world within a world within a world. The river snakes its way through this dense country, anchoring trees into the mountains and rushing forth with magnetic force, as it claims its path further towards the sea.

Today the cherry blossom tree is almost completely stripped of leaves, those that remain are rusty and dry. The branches are not bare, they support a world in miniature, hidden within the lichen and moss. The sky is grey all over and the air creeping through the cracks in the window frame is chilly. The imprint of that place I call home and my connection to it nourishes me through my hard days. On the days when I am unable to move, when pain and disability literally cripple me, I sit in this bed and study the cherry blossom tree. I remind myself that those branches touch the same sky, the breeze that blows through them carries the same wind. The sun and the moon reflect their light here just as they do on the Colo River, and I am placated with the echoes of home.