

Rolling Tears

By Alyssa Mignacca

I let the tears roll down my face, getting carried away by the river.

Waru Ngarra, 200 Days since Father died

I woke up early this morning, to warm summer air. I crept along the soft earth, heading towards my father's resting place. I paused, picking up my spear and looking guiltily at my mother, her chest rising and falling under her grass woven blanket. I continued down the path, holding a 'borrowed' basket, which I was using to collect wild berries and flowers. Seeing something move by the riverbank, I froze, raising my spear. It was just a wombat. Finally, I reached my father's grave, marked out by banksias and wood carvings. Laying down the flora, I sat down in the dried mud next to his grave.

Elizabeth Parker, Day 201, 1787

It's day 201 of our journey to Botany Bay. The other females demand to be separated from the males, as they are getting rowdy and are starting fights. Personally, I don't mind. Anything beats the silence of the hulk.

One of my chores is to bucket out the ocean water from the waves on the top deck. I climb the stairs, and the other stairs and the other other stairs. They're getting wet, soggy and mildewy. I get scared they're going to collapse. I grab my bucket and set to work.

After an hour, my back aches and so do my arms. I'm covered in salt water, but I can't say that's a bad thing. It's a relief to feel the cold water compared to the stifling hot down below. Suddenly a shout goes up, "I see land! A day's journey from here!"

Then, Captain Philip's over the squawking gulls, "It should take us 12 hours if the seas stay calm."

"Rightyo sir! Hey you there!" One of the Rear Admirals shouts at me. "Put your back into it."

"Yes sir!" Then as an afterthought.... And why don't you jump overboard? *

We continue slaving away til' mid afternoon, by which time my slops were crusted with sea salt and my arms were so sore I could barely move them. The land becomes clearer as we are ordered to venture down under the deck. I rub my bruised wrists, from the tight, heavy shackles. I'm the last one down, and by that time the marines, sergeants, admirals and of course the esteemed Captain Philip have lowered themselves into rowboats and were tiny specks in the distance.

Waru Ngarra, 202 Days since Father died

This morning I am woken by my tribe's leader, Bennelong. He tells me to hide behind the thick shrubbery around the back of our camp. I oblige, wading through the shallow river. Once I'm safe, I pull aside the thick foliage and peer out towards the ocean. The view is obscured by a thick wall formed by the tribal elders and the parents. I move along, finding a gap in the wall of my tribe and I am shocked by what I see. Huge brown sea-craft are moored to thick tree trunks. Pale figures in strange clothes are making their way up the shore holding even stranger weapons. I'm scared now. More figures are making their way up the shoreline. These ones are more dirty and are in heavy looking chains. One of the funnily dressed men says one foreign word, 'Haunches.' I don't know what this means but they do. They crouch down, and stay there. It looks painful. As I scan the line of dirty humans, my eye gets caught one of the girls, dressed in blue and brown rags. She looks up and I startle. Her eyes are a piercing blue, soft lips and curly brown hair. I think I'm in love.

Elizabeth Parker, Day 202

Our voyage has come to its end. Again. But, here I am, crouching on the hot sand of the beach, on my haunches. I peer through the wall of foreign, dark-skinned people at the exotic shrubbery. I see a boy, mostly naked except for a thin animal skin tied around his waist, like the other foreign men. He's looking straight at me, somewhat curious. I look right back at him. He jerks his head at my chains, shackled to the next prisoner. I mouth, 'criminal.' He nods his head, waving goodbye and disappears. As he walks away I realise he mustn't have understood.

I hear orders, hours of pain later, telling us to carry in our master's supplies and bring them to our master, who will tell us where to set up camp. Unfortunately for me, I've got the worst master of them all, Commander Robert Stickland. I carry his supplies over to him and he tells me where to put them. Then, I go back for a second round.

Half an hour later, I've set up camp and I am starting on a campfire. I have to sleep outside, as I am one of the youngest convicts and therefore, should be able to cope in the wild. Commander Stickland returns from chopping down trees to build a hut, and stares at the fruit of my labor, the campfire.

"This fire won't provide any light or warmth! Build another!" He barks.

"Yes sir." I salute then I sigh, looking down at my splintered fingers and set to work

Waru Ngarra, 204 days since father died

There was a heavy shower last night, leaving the grass sodden. I spent the night awake, thinking about the girl, and her mysterious new word. I hadn't understood what she had said, but luckily I'm an expert on lip reading, and the word looked like 'criminal.' It feels funny to say.

I look around, wondering where Bindi Lowanna was. She is the expert on all languages, and would be able to teach me the language that the word 'criminal' was in. Heading over to the Elders lean-to, I hear a voice, "Where are you going jarjum?" I am pleased to see it is Bindi. I tell her the strange new word, and she tells me it comes from a land called Britain. I also tell her about the girl. When she asks me what the girl's name is I look sheepish as I say, "I don't know."

"Very well. I suppose you want me to teach you English Waru?" She replies.

"Yes please."

"Our lessons shall commence tomorrow," she says, in perfect English, so of course I don't understand. She repeats it for me in our language.

I nod my head then say, "Thank you Elder Bindi," bowing in the traditional way.

It is only as I am walking away that I realise how lucky I am that Elder Bindi did not question my being in love with a foreigner.

6 years later, 1793

Elizabeth Parker

I have seen more of the boy now. He is an Indigenous Australian. His name is Waru Ngarra and he speaks English now. I asked him who taught him English and he introduced me to another Indigenous Australian woman named Elder Bindi Lowanna. I know her well now, and she calls me her jarjum, which means child.

I meet Waru in the forest daily, where I collect berries and firewood. He lends me his knife so I can hack down the branches. Waru doesn't mind, as long as I don't break his knife and that I only chop down the small branches. While I work, he tells me how some of his people developed smallpox and died. I feel guilty, as I know we brought that disease overseas with us. The shrubbery around his camp is scarce, whereas it used to be lush. I feel bad, and tell him that. He tells me it isn't my fault.

After I finish my work each day, he pushes out my splinters. There is a lot of them. I hate to think what would happen if someone found out about this. I'm nineteen now, and my sentence finishes in a week. I can't wait.

I ask him a question, one I really hope he'll say yes to. "Waru, I get a portion of land when my sentence is over. I can plant flowers and crops there. I know that you are required to leave your tribe soon, so, would you come and live with me?"

He pauses, and I can't tell whether he's going to turn me down. "Yes. I'll live with you. On one condition, that I get to say goodbye to everyone first."

I smile, nodding my head as I try to contain my excitement then say, "Of course you can say goodbye. I don't have a heart of stone you know."

"I know you don't. But sometimes I wonder," he jokes. I punch him playfully in the arm.

"Owwww," he moans.

1 month later

Waru Ngarra

Elizabeth's sentence is over now, and we live on her farm. We grow many wild flowers as well as a crop called potatoes. The grass is lush, and well looked after. Elizabeth's out at the gate, collecting the post. She walks up to me, and I can tell something is off.

"Elder Bindi, she's gone. Smallpox." Is all she can muster, before tears start running down her face. Normally I try to stay strong for her, but this is too much. This time the roles are reversed. I sob, the tears running down my face in fast, salty rivers. She pulls me into a hug, and wraps her arms around my back as tight as she can, just like Bindi did. It makes me cry harder.

We stand over her grave, next to my father's and what seemed like billions of other Indigenous graves. Normally, Bennelong would lead the ceremony, but everyone agreed I was closest to Elder Bindi, so I did.

"She acted as a mother figure for me, since my parents died. She helped me through my problems and taught me everything I needed to know. She taught me English, so I could communicate with the person I love. I'll miss her more than anything, but just as much as my mother and father," I finish, turning towards her grave and throwing a wood carving and a wreath of wild flora. Then, I move aside the soft earth, and gently lay in my gift to her, a note carved into wood that reads;

'Very well, our lessons shall commence tomorrow.'

In perfect English. Nobody could possibly understand what that means to me, except Elizabeth. But she isn't Nobody.

Elizabeth Parker

Everybody's gone now, except for us two. We sit down on the dried mud, in the dark. I can still feel the tears running down his face. He needs me right now, and I think this might be the right time to tell him what my father told me when my mother died, with a few changes. I nuzzle into Waru's chest and murmur, "If it wasn't for you, I'd be all by myself. If it wasn't for you, I would never know what love is like. I love you Waru. And so did Bindi. You're not alone in this Waru. Trust me, it can only get better." Then he replies, "I hope so. I really, really do."

50 years later

Bindi Ngarra

I sit on the veranda, in the early morning mist keeping watch over the crops, making sure that no scavenger can touch them. “What are you doing child?” My mum asks.

I smile, she still calls me child. I’m old now, not a child anymore, but I must admit, it is somewhat comforting. “Just watching, the world go by.” I reply.

“Marlee needs you. She had a nightmare again. I remember when you were a child having nightmares. You would come and crawl in between your father and I.”

Pain flashes across her face. It’s difficult for her to talk about dad since he got killed by the British. I barely remember him. Each day goes by that I worry that I’ll forget his face, his laugh, and the way he would tell me stories about the Elder I was named after.

“Tell her she’s safe. If she asks where I am, tell her I have to go and do something.” I say.

Mum seems to understand.

“Stay safe.” I nod, pull on my coat and walk out past the fields, through the bush and to the riverbank.

Bindi Ngarra

I sit down on the mud, in-front of three graves. My grandfather's grave, marked out by wood carvings and a shrivelled up wreath of banksias. My dead godmother, who my parents insisted be my godmother although she had died years before, Bindi Lowanna. And finally, my father's grave, marked by a ring of stones, bundles of flowers, drawings done by me as a child, ripped, torn and almost unrecognisable by the weather. Finally, a knife, made of wood, full of memories. Memories of hunting food for his family, hacking down branches for his his first love and days of teaching a seven year old how to use it. Thinking of him is painful and I start to cry.

I let the tears roll down my face, getting carried away by the river.

