

Poem

Chantal Jackson

Poosum Dreaming

As we walked down the hill
the girls told me.
Of how every little dark red pebble we stepped on
held the spirit of a possum.
Every one.

I looked down at my feet
thoughtlessly slapping on their little rock bodies.
I looked around with guilt, but saw only
the old women picking their way
slowly down the slope.

I noticed now the round, soft, smoothness of each stone.
Every one of them pressed by my bare, bare feet.
I said quietly,
"Sorry. I am so sorry."
And my toes lifted as I walked.

I felt that I could hear them.
Hear them restlessly waiting to be born.
A gentle clattering of stone on stone.
A low humming rising from warm earth.
They were like a sea spilling down the hillside
edgily biding their time under the hot sun
the royal blue sky.

And in this moment.
In this moment I felt something rising. In me.
To wake and walk in a world where
anything
could have a spirit.
Anything. Maybe everything. Quietly alive. Longing to be heard.

It was here, on this hill, that something came home.
To me. A little part. No bigger than a small stone.

And it was here, on this hillside, that home found me.
Amidst the possum spirits in their red gibber shells
so small and scattered and exposed under this vast sky,
lying between brilliant yellow tufting spinifex, sharp on skin:
a blood-red field of life with grey-green eucalypt scrub wandering
to the far, mesa-lined horizon.

All was small and big.
What had seemed desolate and endless was quietly alive.
A world going tenderly on among the wide-open raw
and the careful knowing that holds it safe.

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Commentary

Possum Dreaming arose from an experience I had in 1981, while living in a small Aboriginal outstation in the Northern Territory with my anthropologist mother, who was undertaking her PhD fieldwork.

As an eight year old, I, and my older brother, arrived from a small town in New Jersey to live with her. This poem speaks of a visit to a sacred site and my first introduction to Dreaming, and a culture that was engaged with a world that was alive and in relationship every moment of day and night.

This poem comes with immense gratitude for the people of these communities who so generously took me into their families, their culture, and their hearts.