

ONE

I was born on *Ngurambang* – can you hear it? – *Ngu-ram-bang*. If you say it right it hits the back of your mouth and you should taste blood in your words. Every person around should learn the word for *country* in the old language, the first language – because that is the way to all time, to time travel! You can go all the way back.

My daddy was Buddy Gondiwindi and he died a young man by the hands of a bygone disease. My mother was Augustine and she died an old woman by the grip of, well, it was an Old World disease too.

Yet nothing ever really dies, instead it all goes beneath your feet, beside you, part of you. Look there – grass on the side of the road, tree bending in the wind, fish in the river, fish on your plate, fish feeding you. Nothing is ever gone. Soon, when I change, I won't be dead. I always memorised John 11:26 *Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die*, yet life rushed through and past me as it will for each person.

Before I believed everything they taught me I thought when all were dead that all were gone, and so as a young fella I tried to find my place in this short life. I only wanted to decide for myself how I'd live it, but that was a big ask in a country that had a plan for me, already mapped in my veins since before I was born.

The one thing I thought I could control was my own head. It seemed the most sensible thing to do was to learn to read well. So in a

country where we weren't really allowed to be, I decided to *be*. To get water from the stones, you see?

After I met my beautiful wife, although beauty was the least of her, strong and fearless was the most of her – well she taught me lots of things. Big thing, best thing she taught me was to learn to write the words too, taught me I wasn't just a second-rate man raised on white flour and Christianity. It was my wife, Elsie, who bought me the first dictionary. I think she knew she was planting a seed, germinating something inside me when she did that. What a companion the dictionary is – there are stories in that book that'll knock your boots off. To this day it remains my prized possession and I wouldn't trade it for all the tea in China.

The dictionary from Elsie is why I'm writing it down – it was my introduction to the idea of recording, written just like the Reverend once wrote the births and baptisms at the Mission, like the station manager wrote rations at the Station and just like the ma'ams and masters wrote our good behaviour at the Boys' Home – a list of words any fool can look up and be told the meaning. A dictionary, even if this language isn't mine alone, even it's something we grow into and then living long enough, shrink away from. I am writing because the spirits are urging me to remember, and because the town needs to know that I remember, they need to know now more than ever before.

To begin – but there are too many beginnings for us Gondiwindi – that's what we were bestowed and cursed with by the same shifty magic – an eternal *Once upon a time*. The story goes that the church brought time to us, and the church, if you let it, will take it away. I'm writing about the other time, though, deep time. This is a big, big story. The big stuff goes forever, time ropes and loops and is never straight, that's the real story of time.

The problem now facing my own *Once upon a time* is that Doctor

THE YIELD

Shah from the High Street Surgery has recently given me a filthy bill of health – cancer of the pancreas – which is me done and dusted.

So, because they say it is urgent, because I've got the church time against me – I'm taking pen to paper to pass on everything that was ever remembered.

All the words I found on the wind.

THREE

yarran tree, spearwood tree, or hickory acacia – *yarrany* The dictionary is not just words – there are little stories in those pages too. After years with the second great book I figured out the best way to read it. First time, I went in like reading the Bible, front to back. *Aa* words first – there you find *Aaron*, and him in the Book of Exodus, brother of Moses, founder of Jewish priesthood. *Aardvark* – that animal with a tube nose that eats the ants of Africa. There are abbreviations too, like *AA*, *Alcoholics Anonymous* – where people go to heal from the bottle. That punched me in the guts. My mummy, she said, ‘The Aborigine is a pity, my son.’ She said everyone was always insulted by her no matter what she did, so she let herself do the most insulting thing she could think of – take the poison they brought with them and go to town.

You could keep reading the dictionary that way – front to back, straight as a dart – or you can get to *aardvark* and then skip to *Africa*, then skip to *continent*, then skip to *nations*, then skip to *colonialism*, then skip over to *empire*, then skip back to *apartheid* in the *A* section – that happened in South Africa. Another story.

When I was on the letter *W* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *wiray* would be in that section, it means ‘no’. *Wiray* wasn’t there though, but I thought I’d make it there. *Wheat* was there, but when I skipped

ahead not our word for wheat – not *yura*. So I thought I'd make my own list of words. We don't have a *Z* word in our alphabet, I reckon, so I thought I'd start backwards, a nod to the backwards whitefella world I grew up in, start at *Y* – *yarrany*. So that is the once upon a time for you. Say it – *yarrany*, it is our word for spearwood tree: and from it I once made a spear in order to kill a man.