

Kororoit Dreaming

Ron Burrows

THERE WERE always dead dogs, puppies, cats or kittens in hessian bags in the Kororoit Creek when I was a boy. The smell of the bodies, as they bobbed up and down in the brown water, has stayed with me.

Our parents wouldn't let us swim in the creek until we were twelve. On my first day, Pete and I ran down the hill to the banks of the creek to where a rope hung over the water from a bough of a gumtree. We stood on the bank and stripped off as crows cawed from branches overhead.

'Argh, what's that stink?' I said, as I took off my undies.

'Dead dogs or cats. People put 'em in bags and drown 'em.' Pete lunged for the rope. We teetered on the bank, in the raw like Greek wrestlers, arms and legs twisting as we fought for the rope, which was close to where the stinking waste from the horsehair factory oozed into the water. I felt my hands burning from the rope as we swung out over the creek, and I let go.

'Why do they drown the dogs?' I said to Pete, after spitting out a mouthful of foul-tasting water.

'Prob'ly cos they've got distemper.'

I floated, looking up into the branches of the gumtree. 'Who, the people?'

'You drongo.' He pushed my head under the water and swam for the bank.

After we scrambled up the slope we stretched out on the flat rocks in the sun and told dirty jokes. Over the other side of the creek were the grasslands, which went all the way to the You Yangs and beyond. Purple-headed, Scotch thistles grew everywhere, and we worried about tiger snakes slithering out of the brambles, which grew beside the factory.

This morning I walked along the track past where we used to swim, as a wattlebird called from a gumtree on the opposite bank. Graffiti (modern ‘rock art’) covered the pylons of the bridge. In the creek, a white duck with a yellow beak shook her tail feathers and snapped at a waterfowl, as she nudged her brood of brown ducklings along the creek. I’ve seen the white duck stand on a rock, which is a couple of centimetres below the surface, and direct her brood from there, like a feathered traffic cop.

In the half-light, the Ballarat train whistled past on the overhead line, the lighted windows visible through the trees. After it had gone, the hum of the traffic from the ring road resumed, with the occasional rattle of a truck’s engine-brakes louder than the drumming background noise. Even that didn’t disturb the sense of comfort the creek gave me. When we were kids, Pete and I went mushrooming or dug cubbyholes and used rusty, corrugated iron sheets as a roof, but I don’t remember any trains.

Back home, eating breakfast on the front verandah after my walk, I watched a crow drop a piece of dry bread into the birdbath under the gumtree and fly off into the Norfolk pine across the road. No matter where I am, when a crow caws it takes me back to—

‘The Indonesians are going to execute two of the Bali Nine,’ said Ladybugs as she came out onto the verandah to give me a cup of tea. ‘They’ve taken them to the island to murder them.’

‘It’s barbaric. The Aussie politicians held a candlelight vigil this morning. I remember when Henry Bolte—’

‘Darling, can you tell me about it later, please? I’ve got to get ready for work.’ The screen door slapped behind her. Sometimes, if she is too slow, it slaps her behind.

I finished my tea as the crow returned, plucked the bread from the water and flew off again into the tree. It cawed: the president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, clearing his throat.

The bird cawed again, and I sighed. Henry Bolte, premier of Victoria, gave the order to hang prison escapee Ronald Ryan, who had been convicted of shooting a prison guard. There was much speculation after the trial as to whether Ryan fired the shot; the prosecution’s case was flawed, and some jury members admitted, after the trial, to not being sure of his guilt. Bolte, who years later almost killed a man while drink-driving, showed callous indifference to their concerns and may have hanged an innocent man.

I didn’t go to the vigil attended by three thousand people outside Pentridge. Instead, I walked along the Kororoit early that morning in 1967—I was twenty years old—and reflected on the type of man Victorians

had elected as their premier. Bolte was reelected not long after the hanging. What sort of people were we?

After the regimental constraints of school, the Kororoit Creek of my childhood was a place of freedom and adventure, but also a peaceful place for contemplation. The Kororoit instilled in me the wonder of nature and helped to expand my imagination, but most of all it gave me—and still gives me—a feeling of wellbeing.