**Walpiri**

Music brought me into the world, breathed life into the slack baby that fell from my mother’s womb onto the red Chanamee dirt. By the fireside in the dead of night, hundreds of kilometres from Alice but nearer to there than anywhere else, my aunties’ throated warbling and my uncles’ stamping feet entreated Ankotarinja, the first of our people, to guide my stunted body through its most precarious hours. It was a long night, so my mother would tell me, but by the time the dawn’s grey light spread across the flat scrub I was squalling against her breast as strong as any of her boorie.

I often wonder if she wishes she’d just let me die.

I grew wrong. As warped and scraggly as the kaliny-kalinypa, so the elders would gossip, but without the sweet nectar of its flowers. The other children avoided me for my squint and stoop, for my tendency to lash at them with sticks. My aunts and uncles detested me for bringing alcohol in from Alice, in the back of a ute I stole, when I was twelve. And I’m blamed for what happened to my brother at Chilla Well Creek, on the day of the floods. Even my mother’s eyes darkened on me after that.

I was fourteen when I fled to the city and I’ve been lodged in its darkest recesses since. This is a desert drier than any I’ve ever known. I’ve seen its rock bottom, slept in its darkest corners on nights so cold my teeth literally cracked in my mouth. I’ve gone days without eating, kept alive only with what I put into my veins. And I’ve done the things the people assume I have when they cross the street to avoid me, to be away from my slurred cussing and odour.

I came across the didjeridu by chance, leaning in a corner of a home I shouldn’t have been in. I never learned to play in the Chanamee but the instrument called to me. It was an imperfect beast, as crooked and unloved as myself, but with a potency in its Bloodwood bones.

At first I had no skill, but I persisted. The sonorous echoes entranced and soothed me, just as they pushed away those whom I had clung to out of mutual addiction. Now I sit on the boulevard where the harbour meets the casino, breathing the voice of my ancestors into the didjeridu for the passers-by. I’m dressed like my people, painted like them, and for the first time in my existence I feel that connection, too.

Music is different in the city. It is a currency, a frivolity, a drug. The chink of silver and gold dropped into my duffel bag accompanies my playing. I’ve paid my debts now, got myself clean. I have enough money to return home.

I have had for some time. I’m just waiting to be invited.