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War cry

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Abstract
A sound reaches me through the forest. It taps into my soul until my body and mind become fully alert to the screeching. The shrill sound bounces off the charred trunks of Banksia and Xanthorrhoea. Like a war cry of an ancient army advancing through the forest. This is sacred land.

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I am standing in the ochre-coloured creek bed where Dharawal people have for millennia, sharpened their axes in a trickle of water running over sandstone; creating axe-grooves that my fingers are caressing as the screeching sound of a band of birds reaches me.

I look questioning at my companion, “black cockatoos?” “No, too many. You only get a handful of black cockatoos together at any one time”, he tells me. We listen while the gentle rays of the spring sun warm us. “Definitely black cockatoos”, I utter on a voice that seems as ephemeral as the gentle breeze that carries it away.

The cry gets louder. All at once a sight of sheer beauty materialises in the deep blue sky that rises where the creek drops over the edge of the escarpment into the dense forest below. 30, maybe 40, a dense mass of black cockatoos circle overhead; delivering the message they carry from the ancestors of this country. Their presence makes time move in slow motion. Goose bumps ride like a wave up my arms. Down stream, a young Aboriginal boy flicks pieces of bark into the running water. Eight years old, it is his first visit to his ancestors’ country. A city boy by upbringing, I wonder if he realises just how unique this moment is?

It is for him the birds have come—a gathering in size out of the ordinary. They carry the spirit of Elders SDVWSUHVHQWDQGIXWXUHWRZHOFRPHKLPWRµKLV¶FRXQ-try. This is where he belongs—although he is still too young and detached to know what this means.

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1 The Dharawal people are the Aboriginal custodians of the Illawarra region of the New South Wales south coast, Australia.