

Emily Kngwarreye

your face
is the grace a harsh life
bestows on its survivors, each crease
a bar whose notes, escaping their dirge,
run for the high octaves like a bird
to a joyous freedom once the doors
of the cage are broken

deep-coloured as the millennia
sediments that scar the cliff faces of sacred country
your face is as ancient a bed to flowing water
carving its agelessness into the land the way
wisdom enscripts its elusive dance upon
humanity

and I watch you
slowly measuring out the journeylines with a finger
brushed with red earth and hear the dust
that others only see as a place to put their boots
open its voice and speak,
see your hand on the cave walls where they
have held the ochred spirit in the rock for all
eternity, and watch how the sun shifts
to accommodate your shadow, effortlessly,
day after day without tiring

I watch you bend
your face to greet the waterhole, see
how your laughter is caught up in the transient
ripples and released without possessive grasping
to share you with reed, tree, sky – how you
and it are the same manna
born in the same creation

I see... beyond the verticals
and horizontals of skin the hundred boys who've
died in custody and whom you've mourned, the warp
and weft of sorrow in your face for all the young women
whose eyes do not know their country or their mothers
but whose children still belong to your body – how your skin
stretches to embrace their homecoming with every

carefully recorded story, mother, son, daughter,
place and time – the same way your smile
stretches other boundaries

sometimes beyond comprehension
and lesser visions restrained to the finite byte
of desert stopover, campfire talk, a desperate camera-clutch
at a surreal otherworld that fail to distinguish how you
rise from earth, become
ancestor, mother, daughter, grandmother, granddaughter,
terrain, sacred physicality – fail to see
how the one spirit makes you blood and rock, well
and water

your face wears the intaglio of embattled anguish,
betrayal, theft, deceit, massacre and grief survived–
and when I remember the zealot piety and passion
of ANZAC, two world wars, Korea, Vietnam,
I remember also that you witnessed all of them
for nine generations and more; and as I watch you
bend to trace creation in red earth with a finger
more purposeful than Michaelangelo's Sistine god's
I see a light more eternal kindle in those you teach,
see each one, mirror-like, reflect the tireless radiance
of an inevitable grace

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