

BIGGER THAN SCHOOL STUFF— AUTHOR'S NOTE

I'm still not 100% sure if this is the proper way to publish this. It is not really a poem. It is a piece of oral history. And right now it is incomplete. It continues to evolve. It is a story; and part of its proper telling requires that it is spoken. By me.

I first told this story at Mparntwe (or 'Alice Springs') in 2018. I told it sitting beneath a very old and sacred tree in what is known as the Todd Mall. This particular tree is a significant one for Arrernte people in Alice Springs. It has special significance for the dreaming stories of uninitiated Arrernte men. I am an uninitiated Arrernte man. A number of years ago there was a big new building built very close to this tree: a new piece of infrastructure for the Northern Territory Supreme Court. Around that time, the old tree began to grow sick. I told this story in 2018 during a walking tour held by my Aunty Alison Furber. There are two Alison Furbers: Alison who lives in town (Alice Springs) and has a small cultural walking tour business; and my Aunty Ali Furber, a language-holder and translator whose first language is Central Arrernte and who lives at Mpweringka, about 50 kilometres north of Mparntwe at Burt Creek, our homeland station.

What has been translated here, I managed to do sitting with my Auntie Ali Furber and her husband Michael Gorey out at Burt Creek during winter 2019. We had a great time and I am very appreciative of their time and energy.

I really want to fully translate this story into Central Arrernte myself. And I want to do it on my homelands with my family as part of learning Arrernte properly myself. That will be the proper publication of the work—a reading of a full bilingual translation. After that, I may feel more comfortable committing it to paper. What appears here should be understood as one version of the work; a glimpse into the process of language revival.

I am an Arrernte man from Mparntwe (or 'Alice Springs') but I don't always live there. I grew up there and I am closely connected to my Arrernte family, but as a child I lived largely with my mum in a non-Aboriginal home. When I'm back at Mparntwe it can be tricky to get the logistics and timing right with family, especially family who live out bush. Lots of things can get in the way of spending proper time. Some of those things are personal, some financial, some structural, and sometimes it feels like there are spiritual or metaphysical barriers that get in the way of reconnecting deeply and learning language and culture. Sometimes I feel ashamed that I don't know more, that I don't 'do more'. I suspect that a lot of blackfellas who live

between worlds like me feel this way sometimes. It's lonely and it can be hard to talk about. I get better at these recovery processes all the time, but it's not all glory and wondrous reconnection. It's painful and sad, and the truth is that we've lost so much. The culture I grew up in doesn't really value or understand this kind of work.

But people are working to change that. I see a lot of that work, especially this year—the International Year of Indigenous Languages. That's why I've decided that it's important to publish a version of this piece as it is right now—to show that the journey is tricky and doesn't always go according to plan. I am pretty sure the spellings of some of these Central Arrernte words are wrong; and the translation needs editing with my Aunty Ali Furber and perhaps others, but it feels like a good start.

Please take care in reading this and understand that it is an incomplete and evolving oral history; a work in progress, one that takes time and patience.

Declan Furber Gillick

BIGGER THAN SCHOOL STUFF

Declan Furber Gillick

Everyone's sitting on the
carpet
except Latoiya, who's sitting
under a desk
holding her hair over her face

**Ampe mape arle-le aneme
Latoiya anyinte
aneme desk-le akwene
ingerre artelemele artele**

The other bush kids sit in
groups,
whispering in Pitjantjatjara,
Warpiri and Arrernte

**Ampe arrpene bush-arenye
mape
apurtarremele aneme
ankerrime Pitjantjatjara,
Walpiri ante Arrernte**

The town kids are spread out
amongst the few white kids

**Ampe town-arenye
mapeakgnarkerreme-le
anerrirreme**

Tyrone's a town kid
sitting next to me

**Tyrone town-arenye
atenge itwele aneme**

I help Mr Graham run the
maths games
Then I hand out spelling
sheets

**The help-irleke kaltyele
antene antene
Mr Graham maths game-ke
The spelling-pipe anteme**

DECLAN FURBER GILLICK

Then I work with Tyrone. Kele ayenge Tyrone-nenge
warrekirreme

When I work with Tyrone, Ayenge Tyrone-nenge
he's sussing me out warrekirreme re
atyenge aparreme

Tyrone speaks English: Tyrone angalate angeme
ay, what's your name again? 'iwene
arritnye ngkwene?'

Declan what? 'Declan iwene?'

And where you from? 'Anthenhe-arenye unte?'

Here? What? Alice Springs? 'Nhenhe-arenye? Iwenhe?
Mparntwe arenye?'

Ay, me too! 'Ah! Ayenge too!'

He holds up his hand and Re irltye akerne-irreke
I slap it high five Irltye-krene irltye-itye
We are the same colour artweke
Irlhene nyente-terre

DECLAN FURBER GILLICK

Do you know my brother Daniel?

Yeah bruss, I used to teach him at Bradshaw, I say

Tyrone's eyes grow wide
I can tell that with my baggy jeans and cap,
I'm about the coolest person he knows

After lunch the kids line up
Still the bush kids huddle together

Latoiya, who was sitting under the desk,
wheels around the corner with her head back and
chest out, grinning and screaming with laughter

She calls out in a shrill cackle,
to a couple of bush kids,
in their native tongue

Tyrone's head whips around
He seizes the moment like a dagger
I watch their eyes meet
There's this recognition, a flicker, a crackling
stillness

For a moment, anything could happen

DECLAN FURBER GILLICK

Tyrone smirks and hurls a mouthful of gibberish at
Latoiya
crudely mimicking the subtle tones and undulations
of Arrernte
fashioning them into a torpedo of abuse that ploughs
into her chest

Her torso deflates, her brow darkens
and her shoulders fall forwards
Her face disappears back behind her hair
and she glares out at Tyrone
with the righteous fury of a woman scorned
She snarls under her breath:
two words she knows he'll understand

Fuck you

Tyrone's not hurt
But he's outraged

*Oi! Declan! Did you hear her?
Latoiya said 'F.You' to me!*

Yeah, I heard, Tyrone, I heard

DECLAN FURBER GILLICK

As Latoiya and the others go inside
I tell Tyrone to sit with me on the low bench
By the racks of school bags

Tyrone, do you know what language Latoiya was speaking?

He shakes his head

*She was speaking Arrernte
And do you know whose language that is?*

Yeah, that's my language

Yep, I say, and that's my language too

*That's our language
How you think Latoiya's gonna feel
next time she wants to speak our language at school?*

He shrugs

Maybe bad? he says
*Yeah, I say, yeah, maybe she'll feel bad
She might feel shame
Cos what you did there,
You made her feel shame for that language
For our language*

DECLAN FURBER GILLICK

You understand that?

*Tyrone, all our families used to speak
that language here
And then slowly people stopped
They lost it.
It got taken away or they forgot it
or it got covered up by that shame
We're lucky we still go it
But if we make people shame for speaking that language,
they're not gonna speak it
And then we won't have it anymore
And our mob will get really lonely for that language
Like lots of us already are
And this country, our country that we're on here,
It gets really lonely for that language too
Do you understand?*

Tyrone nods

*Bruss, you not in trouble. Not like school trouble
This is bigger than school stuff
You got ... we got responsibilities here
We gotta look after that language. Best we can. Ok?*

DECLAN FURBER GILLICK

Ok, he says

We walk back into the classroom

And sit down on the mat