

My mother, Ngandi

Her single tooth rises proud and beautiful
 Solid but alone in her lower jaw.
 Her smile is free and unashamed.
 "You will be my waku. My daughter.
 I will be your mother. Ngandi.
 If anyone asks, "Who is your mother?"
 You must tell them my name.
 Then when they ask, "But which one?"
 You must tell them, "My mother is Bapi".
 Then they will know. All the islands will know.
 I am Bapi, the Sea Snake — the Rainbow Serpent.
 My totem is the West Wind and yours is the North.
 You are an octopus, a whale — the big whale."
 She looks at me sideways and chuckles.
 "I had four children and now I have five.
 Your people will be my people.
 You are of the Warramiri tribe.
 Your skin name is Bulanydjan.
 Don't forget."
 Fellowships, degrees, diplomas.
 Insubstantial — a science trying to grasp why we die.
 She, I think, knows the much deeper secret
 of why we are alive.
 This gift of family, so undeserved, undoes me.
 I want to stand like Moses, like Gandalf —
 Magically turning back the renal failure, the chronic disease,
 the poverty, the gap.
 I want to sit in the dust with her. Fish off the cliffs,
 dance in the light of the campfire,
 cry at the funerals — so many funerals:
 Hear her wisdom, her dreams.
 My Ngandi, the Sea Snake.

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