

Classic Poetry Series

Ali Eckermann
- poems -

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Ali Eckermann(1963 -)

Ali Cobby Eckermann is an up and coming poet, and lives in Koolunga, South Australia. She identifies with the Yankunytjatjara / Kokatha from the north west desert country of South Australia. Ali was born in 1963 on Kurna country, at Brighton in Adelaide, within the confines of the Cate Cox Baby Home. Through adoption she was raised on Ngadjeri country, with the Eckermann family, on a farm property at Hart. She was educated at Brinkworth Area School and Clare High School, in the mid north of South Australia. Growing up in an environment devoid of Aboriginal friendship and influence was difficult. *My journey to search for truth began when I was 17 years old, when I ran away to the desert regions of central Australia. I worked as a cook, cleaner, camel catcher and 'check out chick' at Yuendumu before following more stable avenues of employment. In my mid thirties I found my birth mother Audrey, and four years later I found my only child Jonnie. The reunions with my Yankunytjatjara / Kokatha Aboriginal family were my happiest and best years; meeting my family saved my life.*

Today Ali continues to spend time with her traditional family in the southern central desert regions of SA and NT, to learn and to heal. She has also retained loving relationships with her adopted family, especially her adopted siblings and Mum Frieda.

After nearly 30 years in the NT Ali's journey returned her to Ngadjeri country, where she is restoring the 130 year old general store in Koolunga, to establish an Aboriginal Writers Retreat.

This is my haven from the world, where I am provided the sanctuary and security to write and share my life with friends and family.

Ali was a guest of Sydney Writers Festival 2010, and she has featured on Radio National's Poetica program. Her 27-poem monograph *Little Bit Long Time* was published in 2009 by the Australian Poetry Centre in their New Poets Series.

2 Pelicans

My friend was at the A & E, he wasn't feeling good
I was at the barbecue, just like he said I should.
The phone call from the hospital shocks me with fear and fright –
'You better come to ICU, he might not make it through the night.'

I stand silent at his bedside, he looks so dead already,
I try comforting his children as their lives become unsteady.
'Please don't go away,' I whisper. 'Don't leave us behind.'
I pray then to my Ancestors, I ask them for a sign.

We sit all night like statues, on each side of his bed,
The thought of losing him is really fucking with my head!
The nursing staff fuss round with looks of deep regret.
But I was waiting for a sign that he won't leave us yet.

The morning light creeps slowly across red desert sand
His eyelids flicker open and he fumbles for my hand.
'Hello,' he whispers, 'how are you?' and then falls back to sleep
My eyes stare at the monitors, the bips, the dots, the beeps.

'He's out of danger,' the doctor says, 'you should get some rest.'
And as I walked along Gap Road I look out to the west
2 pelicans fly overhead, floating on the breeze,
'It's the sign,' I cry and thank the Spirits watching over me.

I return to the hospital, he is much stronger now
And the nursing staff all smiling as they too wonder how?
I share the story of the sign, the pelicans in the sky
We hold each others hands and smiles are in our eyes.

I drive out to Amoonguna to tell family he is right
I sit down with his Aunty, round the campfire, in the night
I ask her to explain the pelicans and the meaning of the sign
She laughs and whispers, 'Arrangkwe just 2 pelicans in the sky!'

Poet's Note: arrangkwe – (arrente word) means no, nothing, no-one

40-Year Leases

high on compensation
they tell me right from wrong
say the old days are over
you gotta sign the paper

coming on the charter plane
all friendly sitting round
say we gonna fix this place
you gotta sign the paper

I sign the paper
charter planes fly away
no more sit down circle
I wait for the fixing

my wife says
what you waiting for
come fishing with us
just like the old days

Ali Eckermann

A Parable

Interventionists are coming interventionists are coming
the cries echo through the dusty community
as the army arrive in their chariots.

Parents and children race for the sand hills
burying the tommy axes and the rifela
hiding in abandoned cars
along the fence line.

One woman ran to the waterhole
hiding her baby in the reeds
dusting her footprints with gumleaf.

Other children went and got their cousin
shouting mum you gone rama rama
you should see the clinic.

That night the woman went back to the waterhole
leaving her child in the reeds again
this time in a basket.

In the morning the children return
holding their cousin crying
mum you gone rama rama
you should see the doctor.

At the clinic I feel her pulse
check her blood pressure
test for diabetes.

Staring deeply in my eyes
until finally our heads bent
she whispers quietly in Luritja

this son him name Moses.

Ali Eckermann

A Promise

She gives him a cloud of parrots
He expects her to peel the carrots
She gives him a safari cruise
He expects her to hide the bruise
She gives him a blue magic rabbit
He expects her to feed his habit.

He gives her a kicking horse
She expects his true remorse
He gives her a rotting plum
She expects a little freedom
He gives her his silver spoon
She expects she'll kill him soon.

Ali Eckermann

Ayers Rock / Uluru

old Mr Uluru
a proud man
the day the Rock
was handed back
sits waiting

old Mr Walkabout
a proud man
at the twenty-fifth
anniversary of the
hand back
sits waiting

in the Red Rock tavern
the old men sit
waiting

yous wanna beer
the barman yells

he comes over
whatcha waiting for

the old men stare out
over their Country
waiting

waiting
for recognition
as Traditional Owners

more than just
a few days
in their life time.

Ali Eckermann

First Time (I Met My Grandmother)

Sit down in the dirt and brush away the flies
Sit down in the dirt and avoid the many eyes

I never done no wrong to you, so why you look at me?
But if you gotta check me out, well go ahead – feel free!

I feel that magic thing you do, you crawl beneath my skin
To read the story of my Soul, to find out where I been

And now yous' mob you make me wait, so I just sit and sit
English words seem useless, I know Language just a bit

I sit quiet way, not lonely, 'cos this country sings loud Songs
I never been out here before, but I feel like I belong

It's three days now, the mob comes back, big smiles are on their face
'This your Grandmother's Country here, this is your homeland place'

'We got a shock when we seen you, you got your Nana's face
We was real sad when she went missing in that cold Port Pirie place'

I understand the feelings now, tears push behind my eyes
I'll sit on this soil anytime, and brush away the flies

I'll dance with mob on this red Land, munda wiru place
I'll dance away them half caste lies 'cos I got my Nana's face!

Ali Eckermann

Intervention Allies

When john howard said
let's have an intervention
the women shouted yes!

we're sick of the drinking
the weekend footy trips away
happy hours in hotels
without bringing their pay home to us
and sometimes losing their jobs
when they don't know when to stop

we're sick of the sarcasm
the fights the occasional black eye
their priority for their mates
over us and the children
we're sick of their drunken breath
exploding in unjustified abuse
the words that can't be retrieved
when he crawls back into bed

Yes the women shouted
let's have the intervention

The Aboriginal women
weren't so sure

Ali Eckermann

Kulila (Listen)

Sit down sorry camp
Might be one week
Might be long long time

Tell every little story
When the people was alive
Tell every little story more

Don't forget them story
Night time tell 'em to the kids
Keep them story live

Don't change the story
Tell 'em straight out story
Only one way story

All around them story
Every place we been
Every place killing place

Sit down here real quiet way
You can hear 'em crying
All the massacre mobs

Sit down here real quiet
You can feel them dying
All them massacre mobs

Hearts can't make it up
When you feel the story
You know it true

Tell every little story
When the people was alive
Tell every little story more

Might be one week now
Might be long long time
Sit down sorry camp

Ali Eckermann

Kumana

There is no life
but Family.

When I am young
I live with my Family.

When I grow up
I leave my Family.

When I am lonely
I miss my Family.

When I am drunk
I reverse-charge my Family.

When I pass away
I unite my Family.

There is no life
but Family.

Ali Eckermann

Marrakai

1
they're here now
the Guardians
sitting on a rock
in the sun kissing
my skin brown
I glow happiness

2
birds start the singing
butterflies start to dance
leaves sway
the ancient spirit hums
flies sit still
autumn appears cooling the sun
the flock will arrive soon
I hear them on the perimeter
I close my eyes
wasps lick my dna

3
young cane grass
flowers rub my cheek
I turn to glimpse
Cat cloud laughing
behind the tree
changing to Rabbit cloud.

Ali Eckermann

One Child Two Child Wailing And Wild

Urgent darkness hunts us south, while my stomach churns with childbirth
He waits.

Foetal juices of blood and life baptise this child from my womb
He waits.

I wash my child with sand of red, avoid newborn eyes of trust
He waits.

A feeble cry escapes the grave. I watch it enter Heaven
He waits.

red band black man
husband and father
gently holds our toddler daughter
he has watched mine
now I watch his back
survival dictates our nomadic trek

We walk silent strong in single file fashion, stumble our way to the mission
He waits.

I bite and kick and scratch and scream "Don't take this child from me!"
He waits.

We sit broken together.
Darkness waits.

Ali Eckermann

Ribbons

'See you' I said to the children
as I memorised
their Anangu faces
filled with laughter
and trust for family
innocent in their youth
and strong in culture

'See you' I said to the Elders
as the tears flow
in my heart
and I bend down
to shake their hands
and gain my strength
by skin

'See you' I said at Murputja
and the dust from my car
as I drove away
was like a ribbon
across the desert sand
tying me to that place
forever

Ali Eckermann

Shells

in an aisle
of middens
he blocks her
advance
they laugh
as they prepare
for war
his shiny shell
embellished spear
in hand
watching her
body paint
in white ochre
her breasts
her stomach
her thighs
glisten white
on alabaster
skin
soon to turn
red.

Ali Eckermann

Tarzan

(in memory of my friend)

hey kungka
you want husband yet?
the old man sings out
from his bough shelter
boomerang factory

don't be silly Tarzan
she cat calls back as
she runs for the car
fearing his ability

hey kungka
you want wife?
the old man laughs as
she gives him the finger

might be me she wants
the old man sings
clapping boomerangs
in his bough shelter

Ali Eckermann

Town Camp

You call it 3 bedroom house
I call it big lotta trouble

You call it electricity
I call it too much tv

You call it litter
I call it progress

You call it graffiti
I call it reading and writing

You call it vandalism
I call it payback

You call it burnt car wreck
I call him finish

You call it hill
I call it Yiperenye

You call it a sad
urban environment

I call it HOME

Ali Eckermann

Wild Flowers

Mallets pound fence posts
in tune with the rifles
to mask massacre sites
Cattle will graze
sheep hooves will scatter
children's bones
Wildflowers will not grow
where the bone powder
lies

Ali Eckermann

Yankunytjatjara Love Poems

1.

I walk to the south I walk to the north
where are you my Warrior?

I sit with the desert I sit with the ocean
where are you my Warrior?

I sing to the trees I sing to the rocks
where are you my Warrior?

I dance with the birds I dance with the animals
where are you my Warrior?

Heaven is everywhere
where are You?

2.

I will show you a field of zebra finch Dreaming in the shadow of the stony hill
ochre
when the soft blanket of language hums and kinship campfires flavour windswept
hair

little girls stack single twigs on embers under Grandfathers skin of painted love
the dance of emu feathers will sweep the red earth with your smile

do not look at me in daylight; that gift comes in the night
tomorrow I will show Mother our marriage proposal in my smile

3.

in the cave she rolls the big rock for table, for the desert wildflowers they pick
each another
she carries many coolamons filled with river sand to soften the hard rock floor

she makes shelf from braided saplings to hold all the feathers given by the
message birds
when he sleeps she polishes his weapons with goanna and emu fat till they
glisten in fire light

he tells the story of the notches on his spear, the story of the maps on his

woomera

their eyes fill with spot fires lit on his return

the other women laugh "get over yourself" they laugh "he's not that good"
she smiles she knows him in the night

4.

there is love in the wind by the singing rock
down the river by the ancient tree
love in kangaroo goanna and emu
love when spirits speak no human voice
at the sacred sites eyes unblemished
watch wedge tail eagle soar over hidden water
find the love

5.

Survival Day

I hear you as you sit
in silence your eyes search the Dreamtime
crammed in a modern world

Ah! there are the children of the Dreamtime
hands on thighs dancing
black legs beat drum and didgeridoo

Ah! there are the Grandmothers of the Dreamtime
quiet under shade trees alert for dangers
ready to fight protect and die

Ah! husbands and wives of the Dreamtime
share soul celebrations beyond the cultures
another baby of the Dreamtime will be born soon

Ah! all the Grandfathers sit silent
unmoving become rock face and sacred tree
the gibar magic man one with the earth

Ah! I see you on the horizon
in silence you search the Dreamtime
your eyes meet my silence

you reveal your presence with your smile

Ali Eckermann