

Moody Blue

Reflections on a Yolŋu ambassador, leader,
sister and friend.

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Flying



When *the storms of life are raging.. stand by me.*

As I write these words, yapa is flying across her world, flying across the lands.

Gi'kal is quiet and hushed.

Mata Mata is crying.

Birritjimi is lost in dreaming.

Galiwinku is silent.

The fish are swimming around the rock deep under the ocean near Rainbow Cliffs. Power and knowledge of the mother clan is vibrating from this rock out into the world. A feeling of thank you and affection for her loyal family and mother clan fills the atmosphere.

There is only a breath of air across the islands emanating from the biḷimbiḷil wititj.

It is low tide. The sea is smooth.

The mud is sticky.

Wurrguluma is gliding deeply below the waves. At the point, where she loved to sit and fish, he pops his head up to say hello.

Hear her voice gently translating and embellishing

her brother's words. "Marrpan is the green backed turtle and it is known by many names". Her poetry and sophistication made the Galpu manikay and rom come alive.

'We will build a yidaki university. It will be revered across the world. It will be funded just like the University of Melbourne or Sydney. It will be the foundation of world peace and healing.'

Where did her graceful magisterial power come from? Monyu? Gracelands? Kormilda? Papa Sheppy's sermons? the great song men? the sisters' themselves or just from the great mystery within us all? Of course from the rock. All of the above.

What was carried so easily like a breeze is an enormous weight for another to carry. As this passing generation knows too well, with responsibility comes the discomfort of our sometimes harryingly incompatible worlds. Who now will pick up the load so easily? It is easy to withdraw into one world or the other, or into oblivion. Perhaps you wish you could just go and bury your sorrows? This load is shifting and for a time it does seem too great to carry.

For a short time a great fire burns controversially and unfairly. But this is simply a reflection that she is no longer here to keep the balance. The deeper the burn the stronger she became and the stronger her family, her children and grand children will become.

Only now do we fully realise how she walked in that very dangerous place between worlds as a sort of outlaw, free spirit, exemplar and leader - loved by all.

It is no wonder that the bapurru cannot be planned smoothly when so many are reflecting, thinking, mourning, grieving and wondering about the future.

Worry not! In ten years, in fifty years, in one hundred years we will start a conversation about her as if it was yesterday or today. She will be remembered. There will be many ceremonies in her honour. There will be speeches. There will be debates. There will be many conversations in which we re-call her laugh and humor. There will be many times we recall her with the greatest of affection.

The *Gary Dhurrkay Academy* which she gave her blessing to create will contribute to generations of young Yolŋu children not just attending, but loving school through learning and sport. It will also open up the deep majesty and mystery of Miwatj to the world's children to unlock the great spirits of this land that has come to be called Australia and restore justice, truth and proper respect to its first peoples across the continent.

The yidaki university will be built. It will be a foundation of world peace and understanding. It will be a place of healing and tranquility. It will be a great platform to lift up the learning and manikay and to

show the shapes of dust and dance to the world. It will be a place where old men and women with white hairs are properly respected by young people for their knowledge and experience of life. It will encourage these 'white hairs' to throw off their lethargy and to regain their spirit and life and to rigorously pass on what they know. It will be a place where forgiving is encouraged and jealousy and blame are shunned.

There will be a house in your honour at Gi'kal - a place of rest, peace and tranquility.

These things and much more will be done.

Spirit

A serene ocean scene with a clear blue sky, a calm sea, and a distant, hazy coastline with a few trees.

Train train coming round the bend..

The little holler at the end of *Mystery Train*, have you heard it? This is her spirit.

In the night and evening before the dawn a great owl landed on my bed-head, above dhuway's mat, bringing salutations from another world.

The grand sons paddled down the silky river in the magic twilight.

The full eclipse was nigh.

Maykarranon was seen by gaminyarr on the horizon in Sydney.

A thunder clap at 2am came out of a clear sky at Djarimirri telling all that the journey had begun.

Only the crickets, insects and birds go about their business. Then at 8.08 even they stop to honour her.

It is the same day as mukul's passing. The procession of great ones into the twilight proceeds.

For many days and nights now the moon has risen serenely in an atmosphere of great beauty and splendour.

Peace in this chaotic world.

It as if heaven has been waiting for the return of one of its angels, honouring in the physical world her great works and accomplishments. Her quiet purpose is evident.

This is what peace feels like.

This is what love feels like.

This is the way the world should always be.

This was the way she worked.

It is Easter – when from the deepest of gloom comes the greatest of light.

In life, and now on her final journey, yapa made sceptics believers, she made hard-men soft and no miracle, big or small was surprising.

Yes, this was the way she worked, so full of grace and humor. She skipped across the greatest controversy and pain and, like the most powerful ambassadors, was happy that no-one would ever know of her supreme accomplishments.

We must remember this spirit she had for it is indomitable and creative. It inspires us to have fun and a laugh as we go. Yes dhuway this is the secret you shared with her. Thank you for sharing it with us.

A large group of fish, likely salmon, are splashing in blue water. The fish are concentrated in the lower half of the frame, creating a dense area of white foam and splashing. The water is a deep blue color, and the overall scene is dynamic and energetic.

Buriritj

When *no-one else can understand me..*

Bili ḡarradja yukura dhuwala
martjina Garraywala djiwarraili

How did the yolḡu know of this rock that sits so deep in the ocean? She just looked quizzically. “I don’t know!” What a question? Figure it out. So many questions.

Grab your coat and lets go walking..

Don’t procrastinate

Don’t articulate

Little less conversation..

Curled up with a doona on our lounge room floor watching NCIS – happily, nay cheerily and knowingly, defying expectations. ‘Of course I am interested in these characters in this place called Washington. Abby is my favourite’

Empty bed frame? Empty bedroom? Of course you sleep next to the fire! It’s cold.

Don’t use more force use a bigger hammer, poppa used to say.

Walking with her bag on her head carrying pandanus
with dhuway. Laughing, enjoying the feeling of the
land so much, searching for gu'ku.

Waiting patiently on the steps of a hotel in Canberra
wrapped up with coats.

Laughing with that humor that made everyone laugh.

You aint never caught a rabbit...

The fish are circling her rock under the car port at
Biritjimi. Who will turn up?

Mullet

a linguist

a corrections officer

the Prime Minister

a philosopher

an MP

a musician

an anthropologist

a nurse

a policeman

an Italian dreamer

a Japanese monk

a traveller

a mining company boss

Elvis himself?

Fresh tuna would be nice for dinner.

The family watches on.

What are they saying? Who next? When these visitors have all gone the women will come to sing.

Her daughters and sons, grand-daughters and grand-sons – the apple of her eye.

Let's chart the family tree! How many days have you got. Well lets make a start.

Do you have a database big enough? I don't think so. Three days later, hundreds of mis-spelled names, we had made a beginning. We never did finish that project.

A photograph of a tropical river scene. Two large, thick tree trunks lean over the water from the right side. The water is calm and reflects the surrounding greenery and the sky. The background is filled with dense tropical vegetation, including various types of trees and plants. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Rainbow

Rain *in my shoes... searching for you..*

A blanket and a pallet to lie down on that's all - she gave everything else to her children, grand-children, friends.

Fishing.

Like her beloved RM she was one of the great generation with a little twinkle and glint in her eye. Her grace and demeanour were so high and lovely.

When things were difficult between people she would slip away, her profound and constructive criticism reflected in an empty chair. Think long and hard.

Is your heart filled with pain.. Shall I come back again.

Now she is approaching her beloved husband and son, themselves leaders. I hear their conversation: "Don't worry the world is in good hands. Let us now enjoy our time in paradise together. Let us go fishing on the beautiful shore and look with delight on our good works".

Shall I stay.. would it be a sin..

Walking in the gardens of Darwin near the chamber. This quiet political advisor to her husband and now friend to her great supporter Lynne Walker.

Take my hand...

On the steps of parliament house in Canberra.

Pioneering mother of the Yolŋu at the WAFL and AFL.

Welcoming the Prime Minister at Gove.

So proud at Wenona of Budat, Shakiera, Mahalia, Whitney and the others who paved the new way forward.

My whole life too..

Walking at Gracelands.

Grace and poise and humor on national television – such a refreshing candour and presence with Djäwa

Who are these wonderful, humor-filled lovely people the nation asked themselves? And even the grey fox did not get what they did until much later. Throw out the window all the Q&A scripts and questions, throw out the great seasoned leaders, it was these two, of course, who stole the show. And it was yapa, with that wry chuckle and smile, that remains in the memory of so many. The ever reluctant heroine to the rescue again.

Burning love...

Of course she and her children and grand children will succeed. How many thousand years of scholar-

ship, laughter and ceremony are so naturally in their minds? Move over Shakespeare, move over Chaplin, move over Australia, in just a simple gesture so much is conveyed.

Hunting with dhuway... sitting together talking so earnestly and brightly. Watching. Eating stingray and laughing so loudly.

Hunting mangrove worms at Gi'kal. If you eat them you had better say you like them.

Everything circling around this rock and tower of quiet humility who is now fading with the light.

A night photograph of a large bonfire. The fire is the central focus, with bright orange and yellow flames rising into a dark blue sky. In the foreground, several tall, thin, bare trees stand against the fire, their branches silhouetted. The overall scene is dramatic and atmospheric.

Gurtha

This aint no time to quit...

Behind the quiet humility
she dared to go where few Yolŋu women had been or
would go.

Are we too blind to see..

Echoes of East Woody. Garray Jesu.

Elvis and Garray were her guides in the new terrain
that she traversed.

Angels singing over the patient lapping of the waters

Nhuŋu Mori'.

Garray Dangu Nnguya Nuhunul Nrranan.

At the End of the Day.

Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?

Of all people, in a stroke of luck, the athiest and
sceptic Phillip Adams played the recordings on the
ABC and *the gladdies* stopped in their tracks for a
minute or so, listening to the golden generation so
sophisticated and wise – the products of their great
ancestors but also Sheppie, the Wells' and let us not
forget the many others of a stricter generation who
ensued a discipline in reading and writing that is now
so patently absent. And a joy in singing!

Down at the end of lonely street.

There must have been other leaders in other times and generations that sailed to Macassar, that were ambassadors to the Bayini people. There must have been greater heroes in times of great danger. Wongu. Mungurrawuy. Monyu. But were there greater challenges than yapa and her peers faced? They spanned worlds of misunderstandings. In all they showed us what must be strived for with every child.

They showed us the bare bottom standard to which we must aspire. Out of Dupuma, Kormilda, Yirrara came these golden ones. Speaking and writing perfectly, more perfectly than any Professor could, in many different un-recorded languages. They spent their lives educating people who claimed to be better than they.

If these golden ones achieved so much, what more could the coming generations achieve?

Was it garray jesu who made yapa so forgiving and generous? Yes it was. I hear Djälu saying. Wänjuk said, the Yolŋu adopted garray, not the other way. For how could it be any other way? Jesu was just a young pup. Amongst the newcomers there was at least this good thing. This love for one's neighbours and this grand idea of no war.

Was it midiku who brought Jesu to her great brother when he was a house carpenter? From fierce warrior to great lover of life. He transformed himself with her companionship and grace as guide. It was in Memphis too that yapa found something in the great man's voice and life that helped her to overcome the greatest of grief, the greatest of pain, the most unbearable loss that one can bear. What a gift from her friends and family it was and back she came slowly rising again – glory, glory hallaleuh.

*I've got to follow that dream to find the love I need
Keep a-movin, move along*

A photograph of a mangrove forest. The image is dominated by a complex network of dark, gnarled mangrove roots that crisscross the frame. In the center, a small, vibrant green sapling with three leaves stands out against the dark background. The lighting is natural, highlighting the textures of the wood and the freshness of the young plant.

Darwin djäma

Well

*I'm tired and so weary
But I must go alone*

There is a picture in the Northern Territory Library of Wesley Snr. standing next to Ella and Harold Shepherdson. He was launching Ella's book *Fifty Years in Arnhem Land*. The picture represented a changing of the guard from pioneering missionary to pioneering Aboriginal politician. At this time he was one of a handful of Aboriginal leaders making his way on the territory and national stage. It was a hopeful period.

Wesley Snr. and yapa's paths crossed early but at school their destinies became inter-twined. She was a very good sportswoman. Pictures from Kormilda show his sporting prowess. He is literally flying over the high jump bar. No-one in the Northern Territory could touch him – literally and figuratively – he was territory champion. Little wonder the agility and skill of their great son at East Fremantle and North Melbourne. But he was also a diligent student and so was she.

There was a brief moment in time, magic years for yapa and her future husband, when they fell in love with learning. There is a portrait of every child at Kormilda in the year book for 1971. Every child in the transitional Grade 7 class. Every child in the post

primary classes. Every single child in the first year of high school. There in second year of high school is Sandra playing basketball and netball, in third year her future husband, Pumurali house captain, assistant scout master, basketball player and aussie rules star. His picture in the middle of technical drawing has a note: "When the photographer called, naturally he went right on with his work". He was Sportsman of the Year and Darwin and Inter-school High Jump champion. And there, of course, is Sandra in the back row of the Senior Choir with conductor Miss Helen Western. There were tours to Sydney and Canberra and games against Burwood Girls and St Mary's Hurstville and there in the school report is a colour photograph of the girls softball team outside the old parliament house.

There were trips to the homelands and out stations, Open Days and Eisteddfords. There was a visit to the school from Vincent Lingiari. This all Aboriginal school was a school with the same resources, high expectations and disciplines of any brilliant school and it gave us this golden two, this golden generation who have given us so much. I see a college full of activities and joy. For this they repaid us beyond measure.

Yapa loved her school and teachers.

After school the Northern Land Council formed by

the Woodward Commission in 1974 was a natural magnet. Galarrwuy and Wesley Snr. and others were co-leaders in this early period. In 1983 Wesley Snr was elected as the member for Arnhem in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. He was the third Indigenous person elected to the parliament in the Northern Territory and he remained as the Member for Arnhem from 1983 for twelve years until the year of his tragic death in 1995 at the tender age of 42

Yapa became her husband's backbone and from all accounts she was his political eyes and ears. She kept good relations with all his children and kept his home fires burning. Yapa learned a lot about the corridors of power during this period and Wesley Snr. remains an unsung hero of the Northern Territory. He won preselection for the seat of Arnhem after Bob Collins moved to the seat of Arafura. It was a harsh, racist and adverse political environment. He advocated many things including recognition of Aboriginal customary law, land and sea rights, native title rights, two-way education and greater Indigenous participation in school and university education.

It was hard to be Labor, let alone a pioneering Aboriginal politician in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. The Country Liberal Party ran the territory in a dictatorial fashion. How hard it must have been! He had several senior portfolio responsibilities including Aboriginal Affairs, Environment,

Tourism, Education and more. On top of this he would have had to negotiate the many complex issues involved in representing his Aboriginal and balanda constituency.

When Wesley Snr died at such an early age it was a tragic blow. It seems so improbable, pictures of him when he was elected to parliament are of a strapping, fit and healthy man. But as the member for Arnhem for over a decade the stress must have been enormous. The CLP remained in government until 2001 when finally Labor broke through and won an election by one seat. For the most part yapa's husband's pioneering role in mainstream and Aboriginal politics in this thankless period for Labor is not well documented, acknowledged or understood. The history remains to be written.

1995 was extremely difficult for yapa. Wesley Snr. must have been frustrated by the CLPs domination of the corridors of power. Once she told me that she had begged him to slow down and take it easier, but how could he? He retired from parliament in August 1995 but three months later in October he had passed away from a heart attack. I hope in the years to come Gabby, Lisa and Wesley and all of the Dhurrkay children and all of the extended Dhurrkay/Gurruwiwi family will learn more of the amazing role their parents played in the history of northern territory politics and Arnhem Land.

Meanwhile yapa was left with a string of kids to look after: the two Gs, Lisa and Wesley as well as co-responsibility for Wesley snr's other children.

There were some golden years in the early 1990s. Like his father, their son G. Dhurrkay had become a champion sportsman. It must have given his mother and father great pride to see his role as part of the East Fremantle Premiership of 1994 in the WAFL. The following year he was a member of the inaugural Fremantle AFL side but the passing of his father at such a young age in that year must have weighed heavily on the young man. He played again in East Fremantle's 1998 premiership in the WAFL and North Melbourne picked him up in the 1998 draft. He played 21 games in the 1999 and 2000 season for the Roos where he is still held in great esteem. He played in the era of Gary Ablett and other greats and held his own and was renowned as a goal kicker in tough games. He retired from the AFL in mid 2000 and came home to focus on building Yolngu culture and the Marngarr community.

We're lost in a cloud with too much rain..

GD came home to fulfil and complete his mother and father's mission and was revered as a hero. I never met G but I know from his team mates, and Russell Jeffrey in particular, how much he was respected and how much hope there was riding on his shoulders. I also know how well respected he was amongst the

WAFL and AFL football communities. Once again I also know how much yapa had been a great support and wise counsel for him.

Then out of a clear blue sky tragedy again struck. At about 5am on 21 August 2005, G was fatally injured in a car accident on the Melville Bay Road. His car rolled and he was thrown from his vehicle. He was 31 years of age. The grief for yapa and family was indescribable. The shrines at Ski Beach and on Melville Bay Rd are constantly maintained. Like his father before him he was revered by his peers and still mourned every day.

Yapa's courage in emerging from two family tragedies was profound. It is impossible to imagine the burden she carried and the great courage she has shown. Nor can we imagine what it must have been like for Gs immediate siblings Gabby, Wesley and Lisa.

The bell hops tears keep flowing, the desk clerk's dressed in black..

For yapa, apart from anything else, this world of politics must have been so unbearably painful and strange - there was no real place in the balanda world - a third wife? - and suspicion in the yolŋu world.

Through these experiences, like the strongest forged steel, came her strength and resilience. No protocol or norm could stop her. She took the Yolŋu short

cuts that only traditional people who have walked the land for generations can know. The limelight I think she instinctively knew was a wicked curse that could bring down the mightiest and strongest. She had seen it all. What mattered was intuition, heart, love, good feelings, friendship, companionship, laughter and love. With these great assets, even with this knowledge and know-how – she never shied from challenges. Through all the time I knew her I never heard her ever complain or ask for anything for herself. It was others who would tell me of the tribulations she faced in her life. She gave everything of her self to her children, grand children and extended family. She and I worked for everyone else but never directly for her.

There must be light burning brighter somewhere...

There was only so much I could know as her wawa (brother) according to customary law. So it is not unusual that I would have a friendship that was at least in part at arms length. But having seen the good, bad and ugly of politics there were things that only I could know that her Yolŋu could not and it is this that has driven me to write a record for the greater community. She lived in a perilous place between balanda and yolŋu and few really knew her journey. Negotiating for family, taking the balanda at their word, working for common justice, translating in many difficult life and death situations, having

responsibility for the fair distribution of rupiah. It would be far easier to be a dictator and king or to hide away. Yapa never took this path. She lived in the ghetto with her family. This was where she entertained guests. There she expected the best from everybody. She expected understanding from everybody. She educated the fish who came circling her rock.

Deep in my heart is a trembling question..

In so many ways yapa encouraged people to rise up to see. She journeyed to Memphis, Melbourne, Darwin, Canberra, Sydney but she never left her home. Can anybody comprehend how difficult this was? Working to bring incommensurate worlds into alignment? In the chaos and disunity yapa knew how comparatively lucky she came to understand that she and her family were luckier than the richest balanda because of the great depth of Yolŋu culture and language. It was this that gave her strength for her ambassadorial role. It gave her the strength to endure the misunderstandings from Yolŋu and the insensitivity and sometimes catastrophic rigidity and arrogance of the balanda. It gave her strength to always give to other Yolŋu from all over Australia. It brought her to other capitals of Aboriginal Australia, particularly Alice Springs and the people of the desert. Here she made great friends and endured one of the tough times of her life.

*Like the sweet song of a choir
You light my morning sky*

It was with through all this that yapa and Djälu formed their great working alliance. It was one forged in hard times and good times. They were a team celebrating the cornerstone of the Galpu - the dhuwa yidaki. Through their door came greater understanding of yolŋu culture- the Japanese, the Germans, the Dutch, the French, the Italians, the Americans, the Canadians, representatives of first peoples from all over Australia. The best and brightest of each culture came visiting. All of them had an instinct to understand the great Galpu people and their custodianship of the yidaki. If midiku and Djälu were academics their curriculum vitae would be beyond most Professors. How many graduate students have then had? How many phds, theses, articles, documentaries, translations, films, videos, recordings have they been responsible for inspiring? All of the visitors were received with generosity. Djälu and yapa saw that these newcomers might go farther than the people of Australia in understanding and knowing their ancient world. Build alliances and friends in many places – this was the quiet understanding and wisdom that was their depth of understanding. After years away in Darwin, Alice Springs, Perth and other cities yapa relished the chance to be home again working with her family.

And his mama cries

'Cause if there's one thing that she don't need

It's another hungry mouth to feed

In the ghetto (in the ghetto)

Australia's ghettos are not in the cities they are in the remote areas where eleven people share a room. King makers and king breakers come and go. Bureaucrats, social workers, nurses, teachers do not usually last very long. It is a revolving door. Decisions are made too far away. The last few years have been terrible across the whole of Aboriginal Australia. It was not just that there were cuts, they were made in all the wrong places by all the wrong people. Though the Northern Territory arguably fared better than other places the same maddening patterns occur and the northern territory intervention has had a diabolical long term effect. It represented a giant vote of no confidence in the wisdom and natural governance structures of the people. Problems are compounding in regional towns and in many ways this is the most challenging period of the whole colonial period for the yolŋu. For it is a time when young people do not respect their elders as they should. It is a time when the proper leadership of clans and malas is being broken down.

I followed the journey of the Galpu from the tents of East Woody to the ghetto at Birritjimi. Yapa was very much a key to their struggles and re-settlement. Through Djälu and yapa came, finally, a tiny skerrick

of justice from the monster. Perhaps it was another curse, but negotiating with the anthropologists, the lawyers, the corporate bosses, the politicians, the vested interests of existing agreements, was a super human feat! A small amount of royalties flowed finally to the Galpu families. But there is much to be done to ensure that this is constructive and useful. It is no easy matter to protect those who have transitioned into mainstream employment and those who have a different lives and different priorities. It should not be one way or the other. In the mainstream world the pressure on areas of our economy and society that are not immediately “productive” are equally destructive. In this context yapa’s wisdom is such a loss. It was never royalties that drove her or her brother. It was simply justice, righteousness, the real and honourable rom, ensuring that the Djanggawul and Nggapililinggu’s sacred heritage was properly honoured and that all of the sixty malas and clans of the places between sundown and sunset were properly acknowledged and respected. This was their beginning. It now falls to the younger generations to carry on the battle.

*So high you can't get over it
So wide you can't get round it
So low you can't get under it
You must come in at the door.*



Life/Death

I believe

that somewhere in the darkest night a candle glows..

There is a terrible foreboding and a great weight bearing down from lives cut short and particularly this family. What the *Closing the Gap* statistics can't tell about is times like now: the great pain of the heart, the great sadness, the feeling of helplessness, the untold losses of culture, wisdom, wealth and strength, the great loss of an irreplaceable leader, the feeling that the old reliable phone line is no longer there in times of need.

For every life cut short we lose so much as a nation – whatever that word nation means. We lose so much as people, as a culture and as a living, evolving place. What will we do with this pain and sadness? Like family members and communities before us we are caught out now because we never doubted her strength to get through any crisis or problem. Last year she battled along so well with faithful Lisa always by her side. In Royal Darwin Hospital there she was holding court! It was as if the car port at Birritjimi had been transported. Look for the group of people talking earnestly. Look for the nurses and visitors in awe at yapa's knowledge and wisdom. The ever-widening circle around yapa, always inclusive, always

bringing people in. Last year I felt sure she would walk again and of course she did. Everyone was celebrating her return. This latest twist of fate, complications from relatively minor surgery, was such a shock and particularly for Lisa having to deal with it all. Let us not dwell too long here in this difficult place, yet there is something here to say.

.a demolition derby.. a hefty hunk of steaming junk

It would be wrong to blame all the good people within the balanda medical machine for this cataclysm. In Gove and on the homelands they have helped so much over the years. But the recent tribulations of the great Gurrumul show us that cultural stereotypes and lack of thought about the effects of hospital, drugs and surgery on our precious yolŋu friends and family need to be at the top of our thinking. We need to ask ourselves: how can these things happen? For the ever fluent yapa and the famous Gurrumul to encounter problems and mistakes means that we need more yolŋu to be working at the highest levels of our medical services.

Of course these tragedies can happen to anyone. I know this too well. Humility and reflection and experience from even those with great knowledge in the balanda world is what is needed in these fatal interfaces, the hospital, the magistrates courts, the prison, the Centrelink office, the school – there needs to be more Yolŋu input, reflection, wisdom and less

balanda bravado.

Dhuway: You did not listen to me. Be patient! Too many words. Listen to the heart and the feelings, not the brain ticking away like a bomb!

But our fate is too in our own hands whether balanda or yolju. Njarali that vexed grandmother is killing too many yolju. Yolju pay more in taxation through njarali and put out more of their hard earned rupiah and tragically die for this tyrannical relative than any other group in Australia. Njarali creates too many problems. Arnhem land has the highest rate of smoking in the world. Njarali is bringing the life of elders to an end too quickly. I hear well-worn friends saying it is part of Yolju life to take risks, to live and that it is deeply embedded in the Makassan trades and traditions, and even before that goes back to ceremonies and tobacco like plants of countless generations past. When the smoke from the long pipe passes on to the initiate it is sacred.

This modern tobacco bears no resemblance to the original plants and traditions of the Iroquois that came to Arnhem land via Makassar with the traders from Europe. Nor does it bear resemblance to the ceremonies and tobacco like plants of countless generations past. It is too big a price to pay for our elders to die so young. Breathe free at sunset Yolju sons and daughters and to the older ones - there must be a better way! We do not want to lose you ten

or twenty years before your time is up. We cannot afford to. Sugar and ɲarali are the great curse of the modern balanda world. They are both killers sure as day. They kill balanda and yolɲu in just the same way. Dhuway give up on the grandmother that is killing you! please!!.. and to all the other wawas and yapas do the same. Look back at the photographs of the strong men and women of the past and let us reflect on sugar and ɲarali and our great losses. They are not worth it. Let us walk the Yolɲu roads again together freely hunting and gathering from the land.

A serene sunset scene over a large body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm orange glow across the sky and reflecting on the water's surface. In the distance, a range of low mountains is visible. The foreground is dominated by the dark, silhouetted branches of a tree on the left and tall grasses at the bottom. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Bunbu

You

may go to college.. you may go to school..

Fishing in the shadow of the monster – watching the tides and clouds – children playing a long way down the beach.

“Who is this walking across the sand dunes? I was wondering. Then I saw it was you. All the way from Sydney! Ha you have disturbed me at my office”.

“I was concentrating on the important business of the day – catching a fish for my dinner!”

“Don’t tell anyone I am here” – she would say in that gruff, cheery voice.

Here the real djäma was done, the planning and thinking and the important conversations with wawas, wakus, yapas and friends.

Here was the silence - feeling the spirit of the land, the sea and the animals as one did one’s djäma. Not just meditating but working in the spirit of the land, thinking about its care and its pain.

When your heart gets restless, move along.. Goto find someone whose heart is free.. keep movin.. move along..

Over the past few years we were working to achieve her desire to live simply at Gi’kal. This is where she

wanted to live for the whole time I knew her. She and dhuway would talk and plan. Often Batumbil would say: Just come! Last year when she was sick Batumbil wanted her to live at Mata Mata near the plane if she needed medical attention.

We were a breath away. The plans for a simple house had been developed and were being submitted for funding. I am sure we would have got those funds. After all she has given I feel acutely sad that we did not give her that last simple wish. 'A good tent is all I need' is what she would say. Over the past decade we had talked and thought hard about the precious places. Things develop slowly for a reason. Great thought and guidance of manikay is required around the homelands. Quiet knowledge and learning not tourism per se, sustainable, very well managed industry controlled by elders who live on the land is what yapa and dhuway were saying in one voice. This is not an easy journey. No-one has all the answers. This is also the journey that bapaji has mapped out for his family and the other leaders and malas are also working towards. Yaka anyone from town controlling what happens in homelands. Yaka people who's sweat is not there in the soil. This is the principle of law and Yolŋu rom.

It is also common sense in anyone's law or experience. It is also the moral, ethical standard to guide the new generations. These are principles that outsid-

ers must respect. Town and shire planners and Canberra bureaucrats have a life time of learning ahead of them. Slowly we move forward.

We will build that house for yapa at Gi'kal. It will be your house, a house for wise women, a house for children, a house to talk and laugh, a place to celebrate family, a place to remember your nandi. But such a house comes with great responsibility, sweat and djäma. It is not free. It has a price and a cost that all who want to enjoy it must pay. It requires wisdom and thought or let it dissolve into the ashes.

A photograph of a forest fire. The lower half of the image is dominated by bright orange and yellow flames rising from the ground. The upper half shows a dense forest of trees, with some branches in the foreground appearing dark and skeletal. The overall color palette is a mix of fiery oranges and yellows against a deep, dark blue-green background of the forest canopy.

Elvis

When

*I do the best I can
and my friends
misunderstand..
Stand by me..*

Elvis still lives at Birritjimi. He moves around. You can sometimes see him fishing at Shady Beach. He grows a bit weary of performing and has found other pursuits and interests. But his spirit lives on.

On any day of the week you might hear him. He performed again at Garma. He appeared out of the mists of Galkula. Bayini was by his side.

The lucky women who had gathered in the *Reconciliation Australia* camp received a command performance. You could hear their shrieks of joy for miles. It went on into the night. The greatest performers on the main stage, were on this occasion, up-staged.

For Elvis was alive and performing in the fire light with all his moves and verve. Yes of course yapa, Djapiri and the King himself had planned the whole show. It was the night *Reconciliation Australia* reconciled through Elvis – a lesson in imagination and humor in the greatest Yolŋu traditions. For this too was the tradition of surprise and garma that had greeted friends and traders over the millennia. This was the spirit that had cemented the special relationship between Macassar and Miwatj. This was the true garma and at its heart was yapa.



Bayini

No 47 said to No. 3

Muah! Smack!

xxx! Chup! Schmatz! Mats-muts! Umma! Chu! Kiss!

- *Wake up everyone!*

The crusty prison guard angrily came out of his tent.

- *On parade everyone! Get up!*

- *What's wrong Ray? Its 3am.*

- *You know its a privilege for you to be here at Gulkula.*

So whoever has brought their wife into the camp has jeopardised the situation for everyone! So who ever has done it own up now!!

Midiku and the elders staying in the camp gradually emerge to hear all the commotion.

- *What's the problem? There are no wives in this camp we are sure of that. What exactly have you heard or seen?*

- *I heard kissing outside my tent and I saw a woman's figure in the moonlight.*

At this midiku begins to laugh. Slowly the laughing infects all of the prisoners and even the other guards start to chuckle.

- *Don't you laugh at me! This is a very serious matter and tomorrow all of us will be on the way home to Ber-rima. Mark my words.*

- *Ray you have seen Bayini!* midiku finally exclaims.
You have seen a ghost!

At this Ray's eyes widened. He knew that midiku and

the elders could be trusted. They and the elders program of visiting inmates were acknowledged to be one of the best things that had ever occurred within the Northern Territory prison system.

One of the guards whispered to the other: Wait until this gets out. Ray's ghost!

- *That's enough for one night.*

As it slowly dawned on him Ray was probably thinking of his colleagues. I don't want to hear a word of this ever again.

- *Everyone get back to bed we have a long hard day tomorrow!*

But word soon spread round the camp, tough old Ray, salt of the earth, who called a spade a bloody shovel, had seen a ghost.

It was on.

The stirring continued for days, weeks, months, years. Who knows? Indignant stony faced Ray! Somewhere beneath that tough exterior, I think he quite liked the idea of Bayini.

Yapa at work once again..

A coastal landscape featuring a rocky, light-colored foreground with sparse vegetation. In the middle ground, there is a body of water with a dark, rocky shoreline. The background consists of rolling hills under a clear, light blue sky. The word "Nirriwan" is overlaid in white serif font, with the first letter 'N' underlined.

Nirriwan

There *must be lights burning brighter somewhere Got to be birds flying higher in a sky more blue*

Yapa was very proud of the Yolŋu studies program at Charles Darwin University. Much more can be written about this by her colleagues. It is ironical but also good that the majority of students in these classes were international students. Beyond this yapa wanted that joy of learning she and her peer group had at Shepherdson College and Kormilda for her own people. As member for Arnhem Wesley Snr. continually advocated for greater educational opportunity. He noted with some bitterness during the bicentennial celebrations in January 1988 that only six Aboriginal people matriculated from high school in the Northern Territory from 1980-1988. (Canberra Times, 26 Jan, 1988, p. 10) I can feel yapa's feelings too in these sentiments.

In 2016 things have arguably got worse. The problems are not from two hundred years ago, or even twenty years ago, they are happening now. There are more high school graduates in the Northern Territory but in North East Arnhem land with some notable exceptions all school age children have inadequate literacy and numeracy skills compared to the seventies graduates from Kormilda and compared to their

peers across Australia. Generally standards amongst primary children have dramatically worsened. Across North East Arnhem land many children in their last year of primary school cannot read or write English or their own languages. It is difficult to pick up this learning in high school and later in life.

Yapa saw this situation. It was not straight forward. Standards declined but so had the ratio of young people increased beyond any of the calculations of past or present elders, administrations or missions. There was a great collision of cultures, aspirations and visions occurring. Yapa would sit quietly by, listening, thinking and doing. At Garma each year we would make notes of the children that wanted to come south to school. There were many, many parents who wanted their children to come. But in many cases the cost, logistics and the greatness of the distance stopped us in our tracks. Only some kids could handle the transition and exporting the responsibilities of the Northern Territory government was not the answer in many cases.

At the same time as the great demographic changes have occurred, dreadful decisions have been made around schools and education and communities under the banner of the Northern Territory Intervention. It would be hard to imagine worse policy if you tried your hardest.

Because of her extra-ordinary experience yapa tried to ensure that children had the best of education and she turned now to her grandchildren and the small group of young ones living outside of Arnhem land. But in finding a way for them she was finding a way for so many others, she also threw them into a world that no-one could have anticipated. It was not easy, by any means, for anyone.

Yapa had seen the best and the worst of the balanda world and politics. She had experienced the pain and the love of life. She negotiated each moment as it came, handled each issue as it arose. She was preparing the young ones as best she could. 'Don't protect them too much' she used to tell me. She had every confidence in their abilities to handle any situation as she had learned to do.

But there was a greater enterprise too. Education in the yolŋu world is literally life long. This is not a concept it is a reality of life. For there is so much to learn and to record in one's mind, in one's music, song, dance and duties. At Yirrkala Dr. Yunupingu began to create a proper two-way learning system and this work continues. It spills over into primary schools, high schools and boarding schools. It spills over in the work of *Buku Larrngay Mulka*.

If two way education is not just a token gesture then there is much more philosophical and pedagogical

thinking to be done. We need to be building ladders and paths from the best of the mainstream world to the best of the yolŋu education and knowledge systems. We are no where near where we should be. We are still thinking like babies.

The unfortunate intervention years have set things back a long way. It is a problem that people think that only conventional mainstream education is some kind of answer or necessity for the future of yolŋu society and culture. It is simply not. There needs to be a much more subtle partnership and sharing of ideas and thought. We will only know the challenges when we start to do the walk. There is no one pathway or road. Each way will bring different experiences. Dumbing things down would be catastrophic. We need this combination of sophistry and practicality. There is something in the demeanour of yapa too our work cannot be laboured or strained. It has to come with ease, a laugh and a chuckle.

The joy of playing football and netball is one of the clinchers of culture. As Russell Jeffrey said describing the concept of the Gary Dhurrkay Academy “If education is the key, sometimes you need a tool. Football and sport is the tool”. Combining sport and school is the closest thing we have to a learning as we walk and hunt. We now need to create the Gary Dhurrkay Academy - a foundation to create pathways and ladders in education and life - that is about practical

learning and thought. This was yapa's dream from the first time I met her. We must now work steadily at this task over the coming years. We need to gather the nirriwan!



Mel- djurthirri

I was born about 90,000 years ago.. Aint nothing in this world I don't know.. Saw Peter, Paul and Moses playing ring around the roses..

Few in the balanda or the Yolŋu community could know of the extraordinary journey of yapa, her partner and their family. Yapa and her family walked in arenas that were unknowable. It has taken me many years to know a small part of yapa's road and the great travails she faced and the resilience she had.

The Yolŋu world of law and culture is the great treasure of the world. It must be wisely guarded by its custodians. It should not be easily shared. It cannot be squandered. It is a treasure that will take many decades of dialogue, patient discussion, scholarship and quiet learning for the world to grasp.

What I have come to appreciate is that yapa innovated across both worlds. The visions and ideas she had were not easy to accomodate. They were something like the way Stephen Page describes *bangarra* - *its own clan bridging the worlds*. This is what in the end yapa stood for. It would be easy to fall back into cultural stereotypes and to go back into culturally safe places. That cannot be a satisfactory place for too long. At this juncture we start to appreciate the great gulfs and conflicts. Work and earn rupiah like a balanda? or live on nothing, singing ceremony scrap-

ing for diesel, flour and milk powder? or find some place in-between or across or ahead. Whatever you do its not satisfactory or easy. It should be happier but at this time it cannot be.

There are new shapes and forms. Things that challenge yolŋu culture. Things that challenge mainstream culture. Things that might cause offence if looked at with the wrong perspective or without a sense of humour. For in this new clan there are women dancing like men. There is new ground being traversed. There are a thousand million contradictions and problems and yet there are none. I remember sitting with grand daughter and son at Wollongong watching bangara with naive and appreciative eyes and yet feeling the difficulties. How many times was yapa, her husband and her son in this position?

There is was so much that was complex and unknowable about this great woman who was so simple and yet so learned. Some of her friends and acquaintances would have no clue about her walk amongst Prime Ministers and parliaments.

Yapa and her family stood for the primacy of customary law and culture on all of the mitwatj lands. Yet her own position threw her into conflicting situations - marriage for love. If ever Wesley Snr had been NT Minister of Aboriginal Affairs he would have seen to it that all of the great yolŋu ceremonies were enabled

to take place in their full glory and that elders were supported in their cultural law with proper resources, including a carefully thought out payment structure and supporting infrastructure based on traditional concepts of djäma.

Such a vision is not just challenging for balanda, it is very challenging for yolŋu. For one thing it means that all of the dimensions of balanda society, government and civil culture need to be understood. *What yapa would be calling for is peace within the Yolŋu family. Love and generosity were her guiding lights. She wanted the best of the balanda world and the best of the Yolŋu world for her family.*

There are many “can be’s “ I learned from this greatest of sister and friend. It is a minimal expectation that every child, every single Yolŋu child, should be able to read and write their own language and English by the age of 12. Yolŋu education has to begin and be centred in Yolŋu education and knowledge. Nothing, no goal or achievement is beyond a Yolŋu child. Every Yolŋu mala, and every mala’s elders, should be respected as equals. There are no Yolŋu kings and queens. Knowledge that comes from grey hairs and much fishing and djama on the land and sea elects the leaders by merit and capacity. The balanda world continually disrespects and undermines this basic principle and yet the officials lined up under the car port at no. 7 at Birritjimi to patch up the problems or

to come for advice. Yolŋu ceremonies are on par with Garray Jesu's ceremonies and if the balanda world wants to restore justice and prosperity to the land and its people then it must support the Yolŋu ceremonial architecture and people. In these gatherings healing, justice, education, welfare, dispute resolution is done. So it not the Yolŋu culture disrupting the balanda world of work or life, it is the balanda world disrupting the rightful balance of the people and the land. There needs to be a balance. Slowly the world is starting to understand these things. But the balance is still too skewed one way to the mainstream. Even when the mainstream wants to respect Yolŋu ceremony it can only do so in limited ways as tourists or one-time viewers. It takes a life time not a weekend or a holiday to understand. This is just the beginning of yapa, her husband and their son's vision. It now falls to the family to take up the path that they have left for us to follow.

Djapana

A full-page background image of a sunset. The sun is a bright, glowing orb positioned just above a dark, silhouetted horizon line. The sky is filled with wispy, orange-tinted clouds. The sun's light reflects on the surface of the water in the foreground, creating a shimmering path of light that leads towards the horizon.

Never

have I felt so inadequate to the task of writing when so much is to be said.

I am conscious of the world without the written word which is so much more eloquent in thought, act and deed. Yet this feeling of loss and pain crosses all cultural boundaries. So many many must now feel as I do. That we have lost our anchor. How I long to make one of those calls to you yapa. So many times we started out with such fun to investigate the impossible and to know the unknowable, to span the incompatible worlds and to explain the unexplainable. Perhaps we always failed. But that is a good thing. I want to call you just one more time and hear you pick up.

*Oh, Moody blue
Tell me am I gettin' through
I keep hangin' on
Try to learn the song
But I never do
Oh, Moody blue,
Tell me who I'm talkin' to
You're like the night and day
And it's hard to say
Which one is you.*

Thank you yapa. We will hold your great wisdom as best we can. We will laugh and have good humor in

all the things we do. We will remember you never stopped sharing and caring. We will remember that wonderful twinkle in your eye. Your great life, is an inspiration to all of us.

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Thanks to Jess Wrobel for several images. All photographs taken with permission and under the supervision of yapa and dhuway.

Original flower design for yapa by Michele Starck, Studio des Fleurs, Prague. Sweet and fragrant, yapa loved roses and I can imagine her popping the strawberries in her mouth and laughing cheekily. Thank you Michele for catching yapas spirit so well.

