

# Burrow Collective

## In the Eye of the Storm

### VOICE 1

The geolinguist, remember the geolinguist?

The one that spoke of the tsunami

The one that spoke of silence?

The geolinguist, she told me about the people

who told her about a storm

one in a line of many

A cyclone

That hit their archipelago,

hundreds of stony kin born from the same grinding of earthly plates

Felling trees

The geolinguist, the one who can read the earth?

She told me about people

Poets, writers, scientists

She told me about the people

Who told her about a storm

That storm, tropical cyclone Winston

A storm that tore their world apart

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## VOICE 2

On 20th February 2016 Cyclone Winston hit Fiji. A state of emergency was declared across the Islands. The Category 5 cyclone was the first of such a magnitude to hit the Fijian Islands, and was the most intense cyclone recorded in the Southern Hemisphere in history, with wind speeds reaching over 300km per hour, and waves over 12 meters high. At some points its eye was almost 50km across. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, power was cut, water and communication was gone, and villages were flattened. Tens of lives were lost. At the time it marked one of the strongest landfalls by any cyclone worldwide.

While meteorologists predicated landfall around midday of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the early morning saw islands already heavily affected. On Saturday morning Taveuni and Suva both began to feel its winds as it began to trace its path along the north of Viti Levu.

## VOICE 1

Before the cyclones come, she said

The water boils

It boils at 29 degrees and you can feel the winds at your throat

Before the cyclones come,

The hornets and bees build their hives close to the ground

The birds fly inland

And the air changes

But Winston was different

In the morning the birds still sang, maybe a little further away, maybe

I still heard them

The sun shone and the day was bright, people went fishing

People were fishing when Winston came

Like nothing would happen

The fish gossiped and gossiped, under the waves, but I did not hear them

Maybe they were telling me

I will never know

Because at midday the radios went out

## VOICE 2

It was already a difficult time they told me, it was a difficult time before he came. There were droughts and crops died, everything was too dry, or it was too wet, there were not enough jobs, there was not enough money, nothing to spare, where we were. The winds that he brought, they said, they struck there, there where wounds already hurt.

The winds they tore the roofs away, off shops and houses, factories and schools, they took them all apart, they made it something we didn't know. They weren't the only things. Windows and walls, beds and tables, fields of sugar and trees ripped from the earth, animals flung around, everything damaged, destroyed, flooded or gone. The images they showed us here, so many sorrows, songs of things lost and people found.

Behind these sorrows lay other stories, stories told quietly, or behind closed doors. Those stories haunted their words, more than echoes, felt deep in the guts and crawling on the skin when we asked why this happened. Stories about the empire come, that never ended, and the life it took from us, took everything, our seas and soils. Stories of people on boats, from India, from so far away, hidden below, promised gold but given tin. Those taken to be blackbirds on sugar plantations, stolen from their lands by the white men to cut the cane: those men who came back to steal and steal and steal again. Stories of lives, turned into looks, turned into silence, a spit and a glare now, turned into lives.

## VOICE 3

I am a Fijian. I am a story teller, I am a Fijian story teller, But today I burry a library of stories I'll never learn to re-tell.

Stories in my culture are like books, there are stories of our shape shifting Gods who take the form of sea creatures or birds so that children don't fear the sea or the jungle. There are stories of how a certain leaf can heal cuts and bruises, which ones cure coughs, and the ones that are poison, our stories are our history, the westerners took it and called it myths and legends.

We have constantly told our stories through the generations, stories of Gods and Heroes, open ocean voyaging using stars for navigation, Wars fought, Wars Lost, Paths of Demi Gods, Origins of tribes, our relation from tribe to tribe, which trail, which rivers our clan crossed to be where we are now, the meaning of our village names, the time when the first roads were built, stories of who had the first concrete house in the village, stories of our kin, going overseas for education and;

Till today, our stories of the not so distant past are still being told to eager ears listening around mats under the breadfruit tree.

**VOICE 1**

The eye that sees the ruin and the stories, the mats and the trees, what eye is this? The eye of the storm, she said, and too I mean the eye of the master. Not the eye of gods, no no, but those of men. Men with skin like snow who came to take your world away. The eyes that saw and in their seeing they took and took and take.

Before what had to be re-found, a moment of relief it seemed, the eye of the storm. Before the tanks were thrown around and lost, before the beds and schools were gone, before the roof, the cupboard, the leaves on trees? Before, before, before

Or after?

The eye the pretense of salvation, what has come, and what is still to come, hidden in the song of easier times. Ease and better times. When they came to colonise they promised what the eye brought. The lie of prosperity and the lie of respite. What came with them was death.

The eye of a storm is the most dangerous place to be in, the geolinguist said. It is the moment when all falls still, when it ceases to speak. Not silent, but still, its howls fade to moans. The moment that feels like a breath, a breath in between winds that snatch at your lungs, snatch at your limbs, snatch your hair. The eye of the storm: that monstrous quiet calming your pounding heart.

Don't let it beguile you into surrender, its gentle hands holding you close after the turmoil of before. That ragged eye, filled with clouds, the softness of ease after the violence you endured. Don't let go into that softness, that softness itself an even deadlier violence. The violence that folds you in as it takes away your air.

The eye rolls towards the thunderheads of the wall, high tight grey and furious, just beyond where you can see.

Don't forget, said the geolinguist, that the eye is the lure of the empire

After the eye trails nothing but tears.

**VOICE 4**

I remember my Aunt telling me about Cyclone Meli of 1976.

In our village there's a ground right next to the Catholic Church that no one walks across and no one plays on.

It's been over 40 years, but the memory of that day still lives on.

Even before I knew the story behind it, it knew it was tabu.

It was just one of those things that you felt, you knew, without anyone having to tell you.

My Aunt says that during Cyclone Meli, the people, my people ran to the one structure that they trusted to keep them safe: the church.  
And there they stayed, through the storm, even after they began to feel building start to lurch.

My Aunt says that young and old, parents with their children  
They were all under that giant roof when it gave way and caved in.

My Aunt says that thankfully they died where they stood  
Under rock, rain and thunder they lay for a day or two  
Before they could be buried.

My Aunt says that there were no coffins, or mats or special clothes  
That husbands cried out when they were not allowed to touch their wives before they were dropped into that church sized hole.

My Aunt says that it's probably one of the darkest days of our village's history  
But I find myself thinking of that story less and less, almost as if it's a kindergarten memory

Only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can the memory of a mass grave  
Be turned into something so mundane

My Aunt says.....

Always with the "my Aunt says"

Why doesn't anyone else say?

Why don't we have books that say?

Why doesn't history say?

Why doesn't ABC say and BBC say?

Why didn't we have young mothers crying into cameras with children on their hips, the way they do with other people?

Why don't we have pictures and movies and magazine articles of our broken foundations? Our churches on the ground with their broken steeples?

Why do we have to watch people cry over their burning houses in California, crying over their burnt possessions, holding their dogs?

But Samoa was lucky if we could get a few minutes lended to them by mass media when they would fish their loved ones out of the sea, like bloated, clothed logs.

Why is an English terrorist attack so fucking newsworthy and overwhelming  
When the silence surrounding West Papua is deafening!

I speak about this selective reporting like its new, but this is old history.

I mean, the deaths of over a dozen people, my people, been relegated to hand me down stories  
I've seen shoes get passed around more times than that story has been  
And it scares me

It scares me to think that in 40 years people will forget about Winston and what he did here.  
How he reduced whole villages and towns to tears  
How he left us battered, bruised and fucked over  
Like some drunk, jealous lover

Creeping in, in the middle of the night  
Looking for a fight.

I'm worried that people will forget that he left us looking like we just did ten rounds  
Except we're lightweights and Winston knocked the stuffing out of us, because he outweighed us pound for pound.

I'm afraid that people will forget about our kids still going to school in tents

That people will forget about Tom's father who died in a container because the wind rolled it around like it didn't care  
That People will forget about whole hillsides stripped bare.

People will forget about the flooding and how they had to start over  
Which may as well have been a death sentence at \$2.35 an hour.

People will forget about Nadarivatu High School and the entire school block that's gone  
How does a school keep going with the same number of students, but less three classrooms? How do they do it? And for how long?

And I'm scared.  
I'm scared because I think that we will forget  
So I gather these stories to my chest  
Picking them up as they fall, putting them away with the rest  
Passing them out and passing them around  
Watching these stories sail away to another mind as if it's homebound.  
And I hope and I pray that I as I pass these stories on and watch my audience's minds tick  
That maybe this story will work with this mind and maybe this time it will stick

But I'm still scared.  
I'm scared that they will forget

That you will forget  
That I will forget.

**VOICE 1**

What stories does the geolinguist seek? What stories do they find?

The stories of others after the waves came high into the shore

The scrolling fingers searching for gasping cries, the ruined house, the broken stalks of sugar cane

Faces and lives tangled together by the poison tendrils of pity and sighs, the white kiss of the man-o-war

Breathing in despair and collapse to feed

The perverse voyeurism of the colony

Cannot touch the determination of the storm and the people who danced in his winds

That skin like snow boils here in their seas

Sadness and rage against the peering eye, seeing all and nothing

Your mouth open, the words that tumble out

Can you understand? He asked

No, I cannot

Your sea it is not of me, and not for me

All I can do is listen

**VOICE 5**

I fell in love with the ocean

Not the plastic post card day at the beach ocean pushed down my throat but the real ocean

The ocean of my people

Because like most Islanders the ocean is my life

For me the sea is my father's last image of his home when he left for a white education

For me the sea is the Sundays learning to be a marine scientist so that I could be the voice of my people and our resources not an imported ideal forced upon us

For me it's a small restaurant that was my mum's life and empire

For me it's a source of food that reminds me of people now gone

For me it's a reminder of my strong grandmother before her mid betrayed her

For me the sea is my Godson holding the glass looking at animals that his God son may never see,

For me the sea is my identity

So you asked me about Winston

But you didn't want me real story you wanted my sad loss of trinkets that you could relate to

Because if you couldn't relate to my loss in your white concrete world

It wouldn't be a loss

But this is my story about my loss

Not the story you want MY STORY

Sorry

This started as an apology

I started to say I'm sorry

But then realized how can sorry be enough

How can two words I'm sorry fix this

How do your destroyed homes get fixed with I'm sorry

How can I'm sorry mend your broken wings

How can I'm sorry fix your torn up nests

You gave me everything

You put 100% into this relationship and all I can say is

I'm sorry?

How could I have done this to you?

How am I capable of doing this?

What have you done to deserve to share your home with someone like me?

I'm sorry

There's those two words again

Sorry I polluted your water

Sorry that I took and took even after you said

Stop



Please

Stop

**VOICE 1**

So much sadness and so much sorrow

So many stories of sorries and tears and

Words without words

By those who felt the winds in their home

The sea at their door

And live in the eye

The people, poets, writers, scientists

Whose words you hear here, she said

You listen

You listen

You listen to them

But know, my friend, she said

That your listening is not enough

Your listening is no redemption

Your presence no reconciliation

Your recognition no applause

Your concern no concern

What has been taken is taken

What is gone is gone

Your skin it burns here in the sand

Nothing here is for you

Don't forgot that the eye, she said, that eye it trails with tears

The eye of empire

Taking the air of all it sees

**VOICE 2**

i think of their things, peoples things  
their pictures and their trinkets and their gems  
and their charms and their favourite things  
these are the things that make us human  
our things are connected to people, place, situation - our things are physical memories and  
they make us - they are us  
i think in those new places, places of refuge  
i wonder if they miss them, if they miss looking at their pictures, or miss holding their charms,  
their grandmothers necklace  
these are things that fill my thinking  
weeks before he came  
sweat fell off our faces like rain  
spilling down our faces like tears  
we all knew something was coming, we all knew something was in the air  
the swirling humid heat bought him on here  
and he came that night  
with the fury of the gods  
and his arms reached out across our land  
and he spun in circles and danced the death dance  
his fury he carried the weight of a 100 gods  
the winds bought an ocean of tears  
he came fluent in a language of displacement  
it carried with it the scent of things dead  
of children silent with the dead scream of their cries still caught in their throat  
some out there floating between the waves  
or lost in a tree, that one - that one that hasn't been found  
where did those winds come from  
where did it go to

is it out there ...

tucked into the bellybutton of the sky