

What It Means to be an Elder: *Elcho Island* by Kirsten Dickinson

Elcho Island

“Baru, Baru”, she shouts out loud,
to a group of children along the river shore.
She gestures for me to help,
her large brown eyes and hands implore.

She sits on the homeland sand,
her daughters have gone to find mangrove worms.
She and I are in charge,
of wrangling children as a small fire burns.

The Yolngu are living in two worlds,
hunting, suicides, speaking dialects and English.
They watch iphone videos,
while cooking their freshly speared fish.

The Elder Mari gives me a rock
And she shows me how to crack the sea shells.
I smack down the rock and it opens,
But I am fearful of the slug and its strong smells.

The children take them eagerly,
the offerings of the wriggling mangrove worms.
I watch as they swallow them,
not worrying, like me, about any dirt or germs.

There are gaps in my education,
this new experience challenges my learning.
The first nation’s ability to survive,
their language and bush skills I am now yearning.

I have come back home to my Nillumbik life,
with a desire to learn about Wurundjeri people in the future.
To seek more education about their bush skills,
their ancient knowledge and the land that they nurture.

Kirsten Dickinson

This poem captures the author’s experience of spending time with Yolngu Elders in the Northern Territory. ‘Baru’ means crocodile, and ‘Mari’ mean’s grandmother on the child’s mother’s side.

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Age on the Page – Poetry Challenge 2021

All poems were judged anonymously, and poet Anne M Carson awarded poems which combined literary merit with how well the poem addressed any of the 5 categories identified in the competition:

- *What It Means to be an Elder*
- *Independence*
- *Stereotypes*
- *Identity*
- *Wisdom*

Judge's comments:

This poem uses the experience of visiting and learning from the Elders and other members of the Aboriginal Community up north on Elcho Island to explore qualities of being an Elder. These include the ability to listen and be receptive not just to new experiences (which as we know keeps us young) but learning to value the wisdom in a culture which appears radically different to our own and has been decimated and devalued. This is a timely and important poem which expresses many of the qualities I think our society is most in need of at present.