

Dust In My Blood - Kayla, Year 11, NSW

The dust of Gunnedah wraps itself around me like the hand of the past, sticky, heavy, a constant weight. It clings to my skin, digs into my lungs, every breath an effort, as though the earth doesn't want me to forget it.

My feet sink into the dry ground, the cracks running deep like the secrets buried here, the stories of my ancestors that the land keeps for itself, only to whisper when it's ready.

The wilga tree above moans, its leaves rustling like the voice of someone long gone, a sound that speaks of things I don't fully understand, but feel in my bones.

The cicadas screech is sharp, relentless, a warning I can't ignore, no matter how far I've come. The earth bites back, as it always does.

I thought I could leave. I thought the city would be a new start, that I could outrun this place, outrun the dirt that runs through my veins.

But you can't run from your past. Can't escape what's in you. I feel it now heavy, pressing down on my chest, choking me. The land never forgets.

The wind stirs, the echoes of ancestors long gone. They speak to me in dreams, their voices soft but firm, urging me to return to what I've tried to leave behind.

But it's not just the land. It's the people. The blood that runs too dark for some, too light for others. It's a curse and a blessing. It's me. *Maliyan* watches from above, its eyes unblinking, the eagle a symbol of strength, of survival.

My *Miimii's* voice hums softly in the back of my mind. *Walanbaa yinarr*, she would say. Strong women. My Grandmother's words rose, a song etched deep in my bones.

I can almost hear her now as I weave, my hands twisting and pulling the stiff fibres. Under. Over. Twist. Pull.

The basket begins to form in my hands, but it's not just the basket, my heart too, taking shape with every knot. Each twist is like the land pulling me back, binding me to something I can't escape, can't outrun.

The raffia is stubborn, unwilling, just like me. I resist, but I keep weaving. The basket grows, slowly, steadily, just like me.

Gunnedah's pull is relentless, claws in my skin, dragging me back every time I try to run. I've always hated the dust, the endless stretch of dry land. But this is home.

This is where my people are from. Dharawal, it's what I know, even when I can't breathe it in. The land remembers. The saltwater that was once ours still burns in my throat, its taste lingering, bitter.

The basket I'm weaving is coming together, each knot tying me to this place, to the spirits of my ancestors, to the land that has never let go.

Maybe as I weave, I'll understand why I keep returning to this suffocating earth, why I can't shake it off. Maybe, one day, the land will show me.

The sorrow of what was lost will fade, replaced by something stronger, something that remembers.

With every thread I weave, I draw closer to what I was meant to be. The journey is not over. Not yet. But each knot, each twist, brings me closer. Closer to the spirit. Closer to the sea. Closer to who I am.

And still, the dust settles. On my skin. In my soul. Even in silence, it speaks.

There's a scar on the back of my hand. Small, barely visible now. I got it as a child, trying to help *Miimii* strip bark from a tree. I remember the sting, but more than that, I remember her hands over mine, steady and sure.

"The land gives what you need," she said, "but only if you listen."

I didn't understand her then. I thought she meant food, water, shade. Things I could see and touch. I didn't realise she meant something deeper. Memory. Identity. Healing.

Now I listen. To the wind rattling through dry leaves. To the hush before sunset when the earth breathes in. To the thrum of the ground beneath me, as steady as my heartbeat.

The city never had that sound. It had sirens and static and the dull hum of too many people forgetting where they came from.

I tried to be one of them. But even surrounded by concrete, I'd feel the dust rising behind my eyes. See the wilga tree in my dreams. Wake with *Miimii's* words caught in my throat.

I am not lost. Not anymore.