



White Ants

Ali Cobby Eckermann

Award-winning writer Ali Cobby Eckermann has spent the past 13 years reuniting with her family, first finding her mother, and then her son four years later. After 25 years travelling around the NT, she relocated to the 'intervention free' district of Koolunga SA. Her first book of poetry little bit long time was published by the Australian Poetry Centre in partnership with Varuna New Poets and recounts her journey that spanned over 30 years. She also co-ordinates the See My World writing project for Indigenous young adults.

The main street of Coober Pedy was almost deserted that hot summer day.

An elderly woman walks slowly along the dirt track that substitutes as a footpath. She uses a large stick to support her tiny and frail physique. Strong southerly winds whip residues of sandstone dust around her, and she stoops further against the wind, unwavering to reach her destination. Her ever-loyal dog pants loudly at her side.

Struggling against the heavy door, she enters the office with apparent relief. She uses her fingers to pat down her snow white hair. She fumbles around inside the large black handbag that is secured to her arm. After some time she presents herself at the front counter. The gentleman behind the counter has been watching her approach through the plate glass window. He spends many hours staring out that window. Customers in the office are rare and he is bored as hell. But the job pays well. He plans only to stay long enough to save for a mortgage along the coast. Despite his boredom he retains a very correct and professional manner.

'Can I help you?' the gentleman asks.

'Palya,' she replies. Silence lingers as she stands at the counter.

'How may I help you?' he asks again. He talks louder this time, in case she can't hear him properly.

One powerful and wrinkled mara (hand) flashes through the air. She beckons him to lean closer. 'I gotta change my wali (house),' she says nervously, quietly. 'Change him quick smart,' she adds with emphasis.

'Are you a current tenant of the Housing Trust?' he inquires. He notices that he is also speaking quietly.

