The Bush Foods Trip

Meg Mooney
the bush foods trip by Meg Mooney

Martha takes us to a river bank to look for katjutarri they used to get lots there after rain, she says now she finds the creepers from one plant among the clumps of buffel grass weed

old Tilau dutifully plonks down with a crowba digs up a couple of finger-sized pencil yams but they’re too old to eat maybe the ladies were just humouring me maybe they didn’t want to say katjutarri is gone from here now

anyway, everyone is relieved to head to the sandplain to get akatjirri we drive past a sea of spinifex to country burnt a year or so ago Who burnt it? I ask. Someone. From that Yuendumu road.

the old ladies and schoolkids are soon bending over little bushes scattered on clean, red sand the kids roll up their Tshirts to make pouches for the yellow fruit like pale, tart raisins everyone loves akatjirri and the other bush tomatoes honeyants, witchetty grubs, a few others

some kids appear with green-skinned ipalu – badly named ‘bush bananas’– the length of a child’s hand like unripe corn on the inside when they’re young and good to eat

they’re popular, but not like akatjirri it’s tasty, fills you up and there’s so much of it maybe it’s more important for the spirit of the country
to eat what’s good and easy to get
than learn about the old plants

now the kids produce handfuls of skinny bush beans
the pods are yellow, full of fluffy seeds
not as common as ipalu, the old ladies can’t think of its name
finally someone remembers, pulpalangi! pulpalangi!

Tilau bends over wangunu, a fine grass with knobbly seedheads
Daisy and Elsie show me thick clumps of ankle-high yaalkara
their mothers used to make damper from the seeds, they say, smiling
it’s hard to think of now, everyone uses white flour

I spread out samples of all our finds
the ladies talk about them
an Aboriginal teacher videos the kids
practicing the names they don’t know
everyone is happy anyway
with our booty from the sandplains
still rich after fire and rain