



Take me to the River

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When I was a teenager, I lived by the Birrarung (Yarra) River, which lies within Country belonging to the Kulin Nation. I spent many years exploring the banks of the river and swimming in it on warm summer days. In the years since then, I've written extensively about the river, both in fiction, with my novel *Ghost River*, in poetry and extensively through essays. Since the coronavirus 'lockdown' began, I have managed to be with the river at least once a week, using the excuse of my required and 'lawful' exercise, running by it either early in the morning or late in the afternoon, just before the Autumn sun goes down, which is my favourite time of the day. I see very few people along the river at present. I imagine that they're home bingeing on Netflix, learning to bake bread, or perhaps out searching for that one elusive toilet roll.

The river is wonderfully quiet these days, and I'm reminded of the weekends I spent there in the 1970s, when there were no bike paths and ornamental parks; days when we had the river and the spirits that inhabit its waters to ourselves. Of a night, I would lay in my bed, in a nearby terrace house with the window open, and listen for the water tumbling over Dights Falls; water that moved through the city to where the river met the bay. On those nights, I would often wonder what the river was doing while I was away from it. I was so attached to the river that I sometimes believed it must be lonely without me and my friends.

This is not so, of course. The Birrarung River and the sacred country it belongs to, has never needed me as much as I need it. Prior to the invasion of the British within Kulin land in 1835, the relationship between human, nonhuman species and the river country was interwoven with strength and balance. Since 1835, the river and surrounding country has suffered repeated acts of ecological violence, while the Traditional Owners of Country have also faced and endured the onslaught of colonial greed.

It is terrible to consider that the Birrarung has been historically maligned by Europeans, as if the river itself is at *fault*; as if the suffering of the river, the gouging of its bed, the theft and pollution of its water, is not the responsibility of those who have disrespected and exploited it, but a defect of the river itself. The disregard for the river as an essential entity of life for Aboriginal people and the vitality of Country is indicative of a society



that has little understanding of an Indigenous worldview; one that accepts that the role of Country is not to serve our interests. Rather, our place on Country is to respect and be with it.

Running by the river sustains me both physically and emotionally. During these times of forced isolation, I admit, somewhat selfishly, that I am enjoying being with the river more so than I have in recent years. While I do not have it entirely to myself, I see very few people while I'm at the river these days. As a result, I have rediscovered the same sense I experienced as a teenager, free roaming the river banks with little concern of where I'm heading nor becoming concerned that there is someplace else I need to be. What has changed over the years is that I now have a greater appreciation for the evident courage and tenacity of the river. It has, on occasion, been ravaged by those who treat it as an open sewer in the name of capitalism and *progress*. Yet, it has withstood all attempts to destroy it. And it waits patiently for me, and others, to visit.

Therefore, I feel an obligation to go quietly with the river. Even when I run by the Birrarung I do so a little more slowly than I usually would. (Although as I get older, slow is not such a difficult task). I listen to my breathing, I try to feel and be with my body, until a point arrives during the run when I lose any conscious sense of what I'm doing. It is during these moments that I believe the river truly accepts my presence, when I am on Country in the interest of the river rather than believe it exists to serve my enjoyment. Between the years that I inhabited the river as a teenage boy, when every day seemed to be beautifully lazy, and the hectic years of what we sometimes mistakenly refer to as *life*, the river has been my constant source of connection. Without it I cannot imagine how it is I would exist.

Tony Birch is an award winning Indigenous author, academic and activist. In 2016, Tony won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing for his novel Ghost River. His novel Blood was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2011. Tony is a frequent contributor to ABC local and national radio, and a regular guest at writers' festivals. He lives in Melbourne.