

## *In The Beginning*

*From The Songlines by Bruce Chatwin*

In the Beginning the Earth was an infinite and murky plain, separated from the sky and from the grey salt sea and smothered in a shadowy twilight. There were neither Sun nor Moon nor Stars. Yet, far away, lived the Sky-dwellers: youthfully indifferent beings, human in form but with the feet of emus, their golden hair glittering like spiders' webs in the sunset, ageless and unageing, having existed for ever in their green, wellwatered Paradise beyond the Western Clouds.

On the surface of the Earth, the only features were certain hollows which would, one day, be waterholes. There were no animals and no plants, yet clustered round the waterholes there were pulpy masses of matter: lumps of primordial soup - soundless, sightless, unbreathing, unawake and unsleeping - each containing the essence of life, or the possibility of becoming human.

Beneath the Earth's crust, however, the constellations glimmered, the Sun shone, the Moon waxed and waned, and all the forms of life lay sleeping: the scarlet of a desert-pea, the iridescence on a butterfly's wing, the twitching white whiskers of Old Man Kangaroo - dormant as seeds in the desert that must wait for a wandering shower.

On the morning of the First Day, the Sun felt the urge to be born. (That evening the Stars and Moon would follow.) The Sun burst through the surface, flooding the land with golden light, warming the hollows under which each Ancestor lay sleeping.

Unlike the Sky-dwellers, these Ancients had never been young. They were lame, exhausted greybeards with knotted limbs, and they had slept in isolation through the ages.

So it was, on this First Morning, that each drowsing Ancestor felt the Sun's warmth pressing on his eyelids, and felt his body giving birth to children. The Snake Man felt snakes slithering out of his navel. The Cockatoo Man felt feathers. The Witchetty Grub Man felt a wriggling, the Honey-ant a tickling, the Honeysuckle felt his leaves and flowers unfurling. The Bandicoot Man felt baby bandicoots seething from under his armpits. Every one of the 'living things', each at its own separate birthplace, reached up for the light of day.

In the bottom of their hollows (now filling up with water), the Ancients shifted one leg, then another leg. They shook their shoulders and flexed their arms. They heaved their bodies upward through the mud. Their eyelids cracked open. They saw their children at play in the sunshine.

The mud fell from their thighs, like placenta from a baby. Then, like the baby's cry, each Ancestor opened his mouth and called out, 'I AM! I am - Snake ... Cockatoo ... Honey-ant ... Honeysuckle...' And this first 'I am!', this primordial act of naming, was held, then and forever after, as the most secret and sacred couplet of the Ancestor's song.

Each of the Ancients (now basking in the sunlight) put his left foot forward and called out a second name. He put his right foot forward and called out a third name. He named the waterhole, the reedbeds, the gum trees - calling to right and left, calling all things into being and weaving their names into verses.

The Ancients sang their way all over the world. They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-pans and sand dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed: wherever their tracks led they left a trail of music.

They wrapped the whole world in a web of song; and at last, when the Earth was sung, they felt tired. Again in their limbs they felt the frozen immobility of Ages. Some sank into the ground where they stood. Some crawled into caves. Some crept away to their 'Eternal Homes', to the ancestral waterholes that bore them.

All of them went 'back in'.