

## Task for *Inside My Mother*

### 'Oombulgarri'

The history of Australia's Indigenous people has unfortunately been marked by experiences of dispossession, dislocation, loss, destruction and mistreatment. 'Oombulgarri' is a powerful poem about one such episode involving the destruction of a community in Western Australia.

[Speaking to Red Room Poetry about 'Oombulgarri'](#), Eckermann comments that she sees the poem 'as a challenge, too, for the reader to research the place names and to find out the bigger story of these places, and to know that everything the government tells you is not true'. She succeeds in this intention: the poem prompts the reader to investigate and better understand an episode they may otherwise not have known about.

Oombulgarri was an Aboriginal community in the eastern Kimberley region of Western Australia, 45km northwest of the larger town of Wyndham. In 2006 it had a population of 107. That same year, the Western Australian government deemed the community 'unviable' and decided to close the town and move its residents. The heartfelt final line of 'Unearth' ('there is blood on the truth') has similar resonance with the events of 'Oombulgarri'.

Students might listen to or watch the official video for Midnight Oil's evocative song, '[Beds are Burning](#)' (1987). In 1986, Midnight Oil (whose lead singer [Peter Garrett](#) would later serve as a cabinet minister in the Rudd/Gillard governments) toured vast areas of Australia playing to remote Aboriginal communities. After witnessing firsthand the severity of their health issues and living standards, Garrett wrote 'Beds are Burning' to criticise the forced removal of Aboriginal Australians from their lands.

It is critical that students research this episode by exploring maps of the area, viewing images of the houses and reading about the impact on individual Aboriginal people, then and now.

### Pre-reading activity

Before they explore the poem and its background, students may like to capture their own community in images and words to show what it means to them. They could also consider the following questions in groups or as a whole class:

- What connection do you have to your house, suburb or community?
- What would be your reaction if it was destroyed or simply ceased to exist?

### Background

See *The Guardian's* [2014 article](#) on this devastating chapter in Aboriginal history.

### Exploring the poem

The heartfelt final line of 'Unearth' ('there is blood on the truth') has similar resonance with the events of 'Oombulgarri'.

In the opening stanza, Eckermann's evocative visual imagery – which we have come to see as an effective characteristic of her writing – establishes a desolate portrait of the town. The metaphor of 'tumble weeds of blue pattern dresses' cleverly combines the iconic representation of deserted towns (tumbleweeds) with people (dresses), thus amplifying the human aspects of this town's tragedy. Coupled with 'drift' and 'empty streets', Eckermann creates a clear image of a physically and emotionally desolate town 'where paddy wagons once patrolled' (a line that suggests tension and conflict).

Consider the numerous phrases representing emptiness:

- Empty streets
- Once patrolled
- The town is empty now
- As empty as the promises
- All the equipment is rusted out
- Echoes of laughter
- Broken
- Creak of the gate is silent

But there is another mood in this poem: a bleak and dark mood.

- With close reference to stanzas four and five, discuss the range of language choices that create this bleak and dark mood.
- Which line from 'Oombulgarri' do you think most effectively captures the human tragedy of this town's story?

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