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Balga by Nandi Chinna

As a child my father told me:
when a black man dies
his spirit enters the trunk of the Balga,
and the Balga trunk grows only
one inch every 5 years.

I sat under a Balga tree that towered way above
my head and was afraid of all the spirits
inside there, holding their spears
standing still, watching us as we walked
through their country with our sturdy shoes
our backpacks filled with bottled water,
dried fruit and raincoats.

When the dark red sap
oozes out of the blackened trunks
I imagine it as spirit-blood congealed
on the tough skin of the plant.

We tear it off and melt it down in tins on a fire:
it smells sweet and heavy
like pollen, and dark earth,
it is soft to knead into shapes,
a dog, a sword, a cup.

When we throw the Balga wood
onto the fire it catches the flames in its fingers
holds them for a moment, then hurls them
angrily into the sky.

Nandi Chinna was born in Adelaide in 1964. Her poetry has been widely published in journals and anthologies. Her first collection *Our Only Guide is Our Homesickness* was published by Five Islands Press in 2007. She is currently a PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, for which she is writing poetry about wetlands and walking.