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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 T-shirts
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

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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