

Barnong (a winter festival story).

I wrote this story for a winter festival at Ballarat Steiner Kindergarten. It is a nature story - the details about ringtail possum behaviour are essentially true - and the cultural picture of the Wadawarrung people is accurate, to my knowledge, including their astronomy and the language used. The weaving in of the lantern walk picture was to connect this picture to our winter festival and was intended to illustrate the picture of the "inner light" that needs kindling to lend us strength in the darkest months of the year.

The story was told at night, lit only by the children's paper lanterns, and with a large gum branch with woven possum nests - dreys - made in it by winding gumleaves and moss and twigs. My sister - a special effects costume maker - made me the little ringtail possum puppet used to climb along the branch, under the hung lanterns, and to curl up in his drey.

I am happy for anyone to take this story and adapt it for their region, using their local indigenous language, cultural pictures, astronomy, and animals. This will need a little research, and the permission of your local indigenous cultural centre or land council or similar to use the language of the First Australians in your area.



A long, long, long time ago, the Wadawarrung people came here to this land, and they called it **Balla-arat**, which meant "resting place". And in autumn they would look up to the night sky, and know that **kawirr**, a giant emu, would appear, a huge black shape outlined by the billions of tiny stars - **turt-barram** - that made up the Milky Way.

Then the days would grow shorter, and **mirri** the sun, would sit low in the sky. Winter - **mayanyu** - would arrive and with it a giant wedge-tailed eagle - **bundjil** - appeared in the stars of the night sky to join **kawirr**.

Now years and years and years have passed, and many have forgotten the olds names and the old ways, but **kawirr** the emu still appears in the night sky each autumn. And a year ago, with **kawirr** high above and **yirn** the moon, shining, a little ringtail possum was born. The old people would have called him **barnong**.

At first **Barnong** stayed snug in his mother's pouch, drinking her milk and warmed by her soft fur. All day he slept in the pouch while his mother, his father, and his aunty curled snug and warm together high in a tree in a little round nest made from leaves and shredded bark, lined with moss and soft grasses. **Bundjil** the eagle might be out hunting, but the possums were safe in their leafy nest.

And at night, when **Bundjil** the eagle slept in *his* nest and his likeness took shape in the stars above, the grown-up possums woke and hunted for food, and little **Barnong** stayed snug in his mother's pouch, peeping out to see **yirn** - the moon - and all the stars - **turt-barram** - shining down on him.

When **Barnong's** own fur grew and he was a little bigger and stronger, he would come out of the pouch to ride on his mother or his father's back, holding tight to their fur coats, and they would teach him to eat the new green gum leaves, fern fronds, and flowers. By spring there were lots of these, and also insects and birds' eggs to eat.

And little **Barnong** grew big and strong, learning to wake at dusk when the sun, **mirri**, went to bed, and to leap from branch to branch like his father, his mother and his aunty, to hang from his long, curling tail, and to forage for his own food under the light of **yirn**, the moon.

Then, when dawn was coming and **mirri** the sun peeped over the horizon, **Barnong** would follow his father and mother and aunty back to their nest in the gum tree, to sleep safe all day while **Bundjil** hunted. And **Barnong's** mother would say to him: "One day it will be time to live alone; you will make yourself a home and start a family of your own." But the little possum, curled safe and warm with the others in the nest, closed his eyes to sleep, and chose not to think about that.

The world turned; a year passed; the days grew shorter and the nights grew longer, and **kawirr** the emu appeared again in the stars. Tiny new baby possums were born and slept snug and warm in mother possum and aunty's pouches. Each night little **Barnong** woke to see **yirn** the moon shining above him, and he was glad he had his own fur coat to keep him warm now as he made his way through the branches, and leapt from tree to tree, following the other possums as they foraged for food.

The days grew shorter still, and colder, and as **Mayanyu** - winter - arrived, the shape of **Bundjil** the eagle joined **Kawirr** the emu amongst the stars. The rains came and flocks of yellow-tailed black cockatoos - **wirran** - were on the move in the skies over Ballarat, looking for the tiny golden sun blossoms of **garra**, the wattle tree, so they could tear at the wattle bark to find moths to eat. The possums slept deeply all day, saving their energy in the cold, and staying safe from **Bundjil**.

When dusk came and the possums woke, **Barnong's** mother said to him: "'Now it's time to live alone; you must make yourself a home and start a family of your own.'" But **Barnong** was frightened to be on his own; he loved the warmth and the company of his mother and father and aunty and the new brothers and sisters and cousins in the nest, so he pretended he hadn't heard his mother, leaping into the branch of the next tree, and pulling a paw full of leaves to his mouth.

Then midwinter arrived, and with it the shortest day of the year. Little **Barnong** woke at dusk and followed his family out of the nest to forage for food. The ringtail possums saw

the shapes of **Bundjil** the eagle and **Kawirr** the emu shining amongst the stars of the night sky. And on the ground below them, something was shining too. Tiny lights were moving across the earth, and voices were singing. "What is that?" **Barnong** wondered. "Have some stars fallen from the sky?"

Barnong crept towards the ground along his branch so he could see the tiny lights. And as he drew closer he could see that the lights weren't **turt-barram**, tiny stars, fallen from the sky, but little candles inside paper lanterns, carried by children who led their parents in a walk under the stars on this, the longest night of the year. And the sight of those little lanterns and the children carrying them was so beautiful, that the little possum forgot to be frightened.

"It's time for me to live alone; I must make myself a home and start a family of my own," he said to himself. And on the longest night of the year, in the light from the children's lanterns, he gathered leaves, and shredded bark, and carried them in his curled tail, then wound himself a nest. He lined it with moss and soft grasses, then crept in, alone. And as the dawn approached he went to sleep in his little resting place, **Balla-arat**, and he dreamt of falling stars and candlelight, and of the family of his own he would soon have to share his nest, to teach how to leap from branch to branch, how to find good things to eat, and to watch with for midwinter and a chance to see the children with their lanterns once again.