Metro
Santa Clara Valley's Weekly Newspaper

Nano, Nano

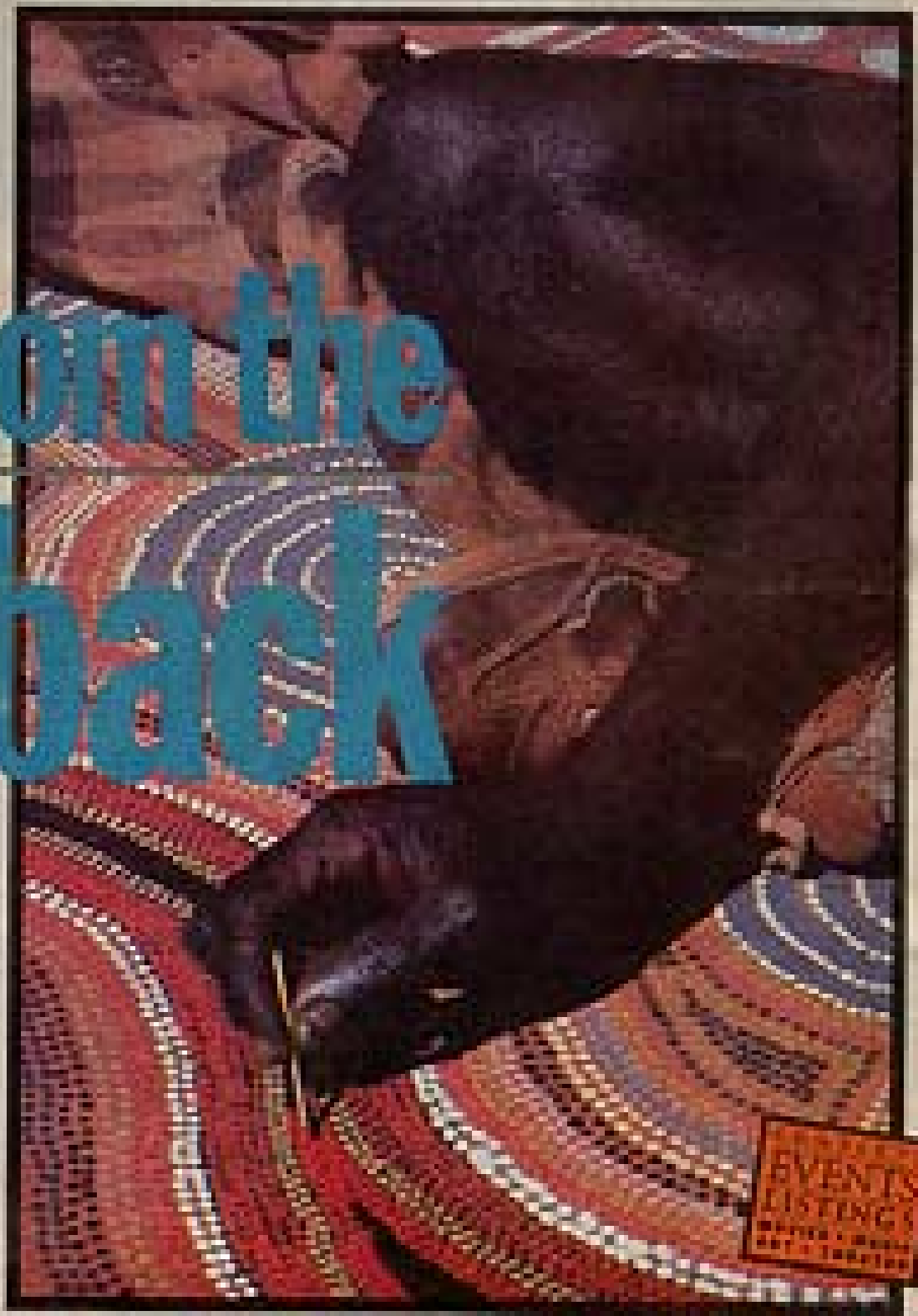
Intravenous submarines and molecular machines (p11)

Who Needs Napa?

Local wineries offer tastings without hassles (p45)

A rare tour of Aboriginal dance and sand paintings visits the South Bay. Article by Morton Marcus (p17)

ART from the Outback



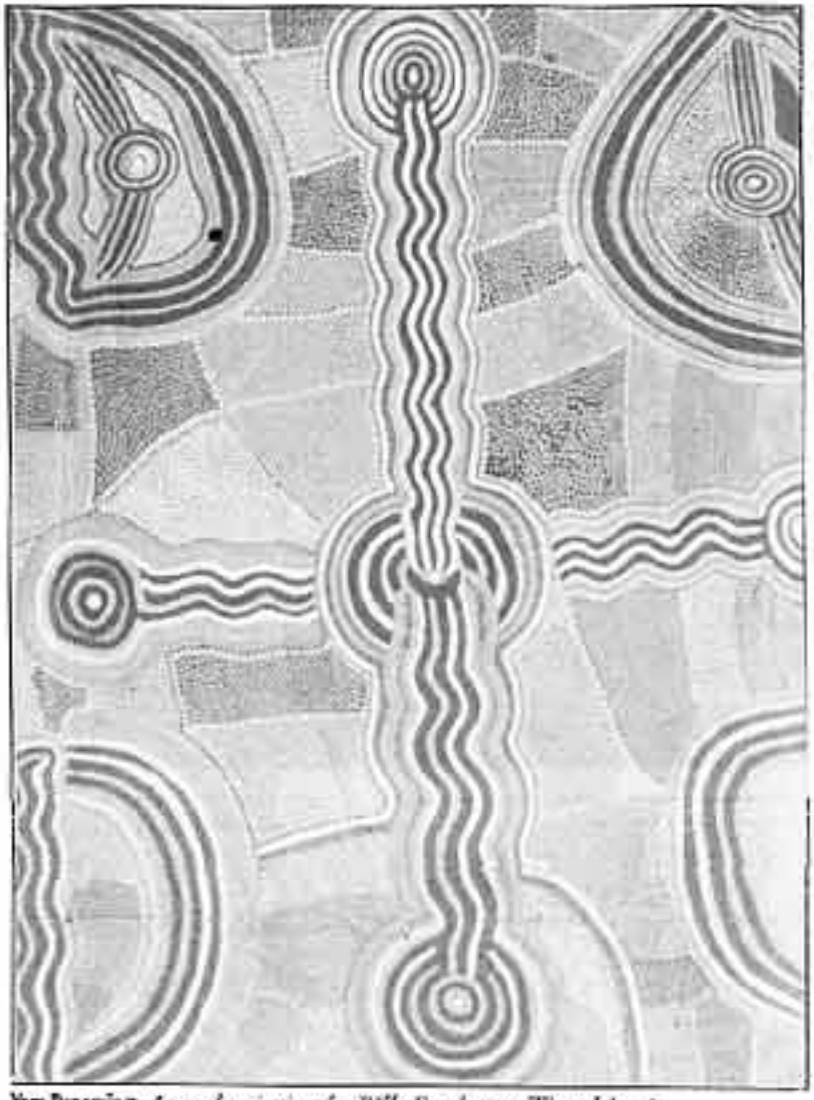
Eye Spies

Public Eye blows the lid off two secret agendas: a contemplated light rail line switcheroo and the move afoot to extend Redevelopment well into the next century (p14)

EVENTS LISTINGS

WARTILPA KALIPUR-NANGKA

A Walkabout Tour of California and the Southwest Celebrates 30,000 Years of Australian Performance Art



Yam Dreaming *A sand painting by Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri*

BY MORTON MARCUS

WHEN I first heard about the Wartilpa Kalipurnangka, I was sitting with two other American poets, Anita Wilkins and Joe Stroud, in an apartment overlooking Sydney harbor on a sultry March night in 1989.

It was the end of the Australian summer, the temperature was 70 degrees at 11pm, and the air was thick as honey. Anita, Joe and I were chatting with poets Billy Marshall Stoneking and Nigel Roberts, our hosts for a reading tour of the Sydney area.

Billy and Nigel had become as close as brothers to us. Billy is a fine prose writer and playwright and one of the most popular performance poets in Australia. Tall and loose-limbed, with an untamable blaze of red hair and scruffy beard, he is one of those extraordinary people whose enthusiasm inspires trust and affection in everyone.

From 1979 to 1984, Billy had lived among the Pintupi Aborigines of the central desert and so endeared himself to them that they considered him one of their own. Since returning to Sydney, Billy had produced three documentary films about the Pintupi and set up several visits for Pintupi sand painters to show their work in the white cultural centers of the coast.

Billy had us over at the urging of Dave Purdy, a stage director and mutual friend who had traveled to Sydney to put on several plays and to lecture on American dramaturgy. Dave had left for England by the time we arrived, but his influence lingered.

Billy was talking about Dave and the Pintupi now. "You know, this doesn't have to end here. Dave and I have drawn up plans for a Wartilpa Kalipurnangka, a walkabout tour of California, a sort of traveling show demonstrating a 30,000-year continuum of Australian performance art."

Observing our growing interest, he continued: "Nige and I will bring over some of the blackfellas who live in the bush to chant their songlines and do communal sand paintings. We'll bring over the films as well, and do some performance poetry, which arises from the Aborigine chanting. This will shed some light on Aboriginal culture, in which many Western artists and thinkers are finding their notions of art, their attitudes toward the land, even their assumptions about the nature of reality, challenged and changed.

"I want to highlight how contemporary Australian poetry has been affected by the traditions and knowledge of the first Australians and show how the ways of all traditional peoples who venerate and still live on the land can influence us whites for the better."

By the time Billy finished, his eyes were radiant behind his round, wire-rimmed glasses. I'd caught some of his excitement, but I didn't know what to say. I stared at Joe and Anita, and they stared at me. The silence was as thick as the yellow air in the room.

Nigel broke it. He is more than ten years older than Billy, in his 50s, and has been termed "the grand old man of Balmain [the Haight Ashbury of Sydney] poetry" and is one of the founders of the Australian performance poetry movement. Although short and chunky, he moves and speaks with a deliberate self-possession and poise that can only be termed continental. He helped organize the first major exhibition of Aboriginal sand paintings—in Sydney in 1981.

"You see, mate," he said, "we've got something with real vitality here that has endless possibilities. We bring the Aborigines not only to perform but to meet with Native Americans, and both groups sit down together and talk about the ways they do things. That interaction is a first, a dream, important for them and maybe for us all."

I could hear the hammering in my chest as I looked out the window. What was I feeling? What did Joe and Anita think about all this? The lights from passing boats sprinkled the black surface of the harbor, and I thought, as I had so often in the past three weeks under that strange southern hemisphere sky, that I couldn't tell the difference between the stars and the lights on the water. Everything was new, strange, upside down—everything was possible. Billy and Nigel seemed to be waiting for us to say something.

"Great!" I heard Anita, Joe and I exclaim almost simultaneously, as I continued to stare at the sparklings in the harbor. "Let's do it."

Continued on page 18

Continued from page 17

II

It's been two years since that night, two years of planning, cajoling, selling and organizing—and several times the project seemed hopeless. But big infusions of money and encouragement from Cabrillo College, United Airlines and the Ow Family businesses of Santa Cruz have finally made the event a reality.

From Thursday through Saturday, May 2-4, two tribal Aborigines (native Australians still living and practicing age-old rituals on their ancestral lands), two white Australian poets and a Tasmanian writer of Aboriginal descent will present the Wartilpa Kalipurnangka in the Bay Area at De Anza College and several locations in San Jose. The month-long walkabout tour of the western United States will take the Australians from San Francisco to New Mexico and Arizona, where they'll meet with Pueblo, Navajo and Hopi Indians before returning home. The performances will consist of traditional chanting and dancing and contemporary performance poetry.

The Wartilpa will mark one of the few times tribal Aborigines have set foot in the U. S. and the first time they have extensively demonstrated different aspects of their culture in the western states.

III

Aboriginal culture is the oldest continuous, and possibly the most mysterious, human culture on earth. Some scientists estimate that the Aborigines have occupied the Australian continent for almost 50,000 years.

All Aboriginal life is connected to the Dreamtime, the basis of Aboriginal understanding of the world—the time of Creation and the great stories of Beginning from which came the laws of existence all generations of Aborigines have followed to the present.

"'The dreaming does not end,' the old men say. 'It is not like the whitefellas way. What happened once happens again and again. This is the power of the Song. Through the singing,' they say, 'we keep everything alive; through the Songs,' they say, 'the spirits keep us alive.'"

—"Power of the Song," Billy Marshall-Stoneking

The Dreamtime was the time of the Ancestor Beings, half-human creatures and plants who exploded from the earth during the Creation and traveled, hunted and fought on the barren surface of the planet. As art historian Geoff Bardon tells it, "In their journeys they created the heavens, the landscape, the mountains, the birds, the animals and all living things," including the Aboriginal people, who are their descendants. Finally exhausted, the Creators returned to the earth, their bodies or spirits sometimes turned into trees or hills or rock formations, which are sacred places to the natives of the "bush" or "outback," as the Aborigines call the still sparsely settled scrub lands and deserts of Australia's interior.

Before their departure, the mythical Ancestor Beings decreed all the rituals, ceremonies, duties and laws for the Aborigines, "creating a fixed, unchanging way of life for all future generations," who, Bardon says, "as custodians of the stories of the epic journeys have a sacred responsibility for the preservation and passing on of each legend. The stories are an homage to nature, and revere the life-giving qualities of water, of bush tucker, and of wildlife food; the truth of fire, medicine, and supernatural spirits: all vital to survival."

In the dances and storytelling songs and sand paintings, which are performed at sacred sites and on festive occasions called *corroborees*, the Aborigine summons up the vital powers of the Creation Beings, invests himself with them and passes them into the future. Each rock, plant, hill, cave and animal is remembered and celebrated for its legendary and sacred powers and the mythical creature who created it.

For 50,000 years Aborigines have celebrated the holiness of life in this way, yet their identification with the land has nothing to do with the kinship an owner feels for his property but is rather an all-pervasive reverence such as that continuously experienced by the caretaker of a sacred place.

IV

The Wartilpa performances will begin with age-old rituals enacted by the two tribal Aborigines: Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Maxie Tjampitjinpa, both members of the Pintupi tribe from the vast Western Desert of central Australia. The two will chant their songlines, perform ceremonial dances and direct communal sand

paintings for those who want to take part in a ceremony that has been practiced virtually unchanged from time immemorial.

Maxie, who had never been away from the desert before this trip, has won a number of awards, among them the 1988 Alice Springs landscape-painting prize, the second most prestigious art award in Australia.

After the Pintupi performances, Terry Whitebeach, a Tasmanian writer of Aboriginal descent, will read from her stories and poems about her children, family and the psychic dislocation those with Aboriginal identity experience in Tasmania. Terry's work has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies and was featured in *The Exploding Frangipani* and the Penguin collections *Moments of Desire* and *Contemporary Australian Stories*.

Later this year, her first book of poems, *Bird Dreams*, will be published by Penguin. Terry's presentation will also include a section of a visual-verbal performance piece about Tasmania, "its lies, secrets and silences," titled "From This Place." Standing with one foot in the native world and the other in the white, Terry represents the midpoint of the performance.

The next phase of the event will feature the two contemporary white writers who are among the best-known performance poets in Australia. The presentation will end with more stories and chants by the Aborigines.

Since that night in Sydney two years ago when plans for the Wartilpa were solidified, Billy Marshall-Stoneking has become something of a phenomenon in Australian literature. His *Singing the Snake—Poems From Central Australia, 1979–1987* is one of the fastest-selling books of poetry in the history of Australian letters. For the performances, Billy will show two of his documentaries on Pintupi life, read his poems and act as guide through the intricacies of Pintupi rituals and beliefs.

He is also the author of the play *Sixteen Words For Water*, which has already caused unprecedented excitement in England, Ireland and Australia, where it will be staged simultaneously later this year.

The other white performance poet, Nigel Roberts, has been a prime mover on the Aussie poetry scene for the past 25 years. His influence on young Australian poets is legendary. Represented in all major anthologies of contemporary Australian verse, he is the author of two books, and his third collection, *Two Miles Past Ayers Rock, Turn Left*, will be published later this year. Critic Robert Gray has said that Nigel "writes

From This Place: *Tasmanian poet Terry Whitebeach*

Continued on page 20

Continued from page 19

the funniest poetry in Australia and is a meticulous craftsman."

V

Besides the performances, the Pintupi will conduct several sand-painting sessions during their stay in the area. These sessions will provide a rare opportunity to take part in age-old ceremonies of a traditional people. Participants will sit around a canvas and paint a portion of it under the tutelage of an Aborigine, who will sing the dreamtime story being painted and describe the significance of the figures and designs.

Originally "drawn" directly on the sandy soil and on rocks at sacred sties throughout the Western Desert region, sand-paintings are now executed on cardboard-backed canvas with acrylic paints. Known as the Western Desert Art Movement, this new, permanent form of sand painting has become internationally renowned and is highly prized by art collectors throughout the world.

It was in 1971 that a young, idealistic Geoff Bardon came to the remote Western Desert Aboriginal welfare station at Papunya as a primary-school art teacher. His goal was to inspire the Aboriginal children to paint their tribal designs and patterns, hoping thereby to see an indigenous, non–European-influenced art emerge. But the children were too shy, and Bardon became increasingly frustrated until he hit on the idea of having them paint a traditional mural on the drab cement walls of the school. Again the children balked, but three male adult caretakers of the school volunteered to do the mural "in the Aboriginal way." One of the three was Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri, and the brightly colored mural he and the other two painted, "Honey Ant Dreaming," was the beginning of the Western Desert Art Movement.

Soon, in a large corrugated-tin storage shed nicknamed "The Town Hall," Bardon had the three and dozens of others producing traditional sand paintings on canvas with acrylic paints, which he sold for the Aborigines in Alice Springs. In 18 months, more than 600 seminal paintings were produced in which styles and methods were devised and perfected, and the Pintupi and the two other tribes living at Papunya had a way to make a living, express their tribal culture so it was appreciated by the white world and at the same time feel a renewed pride in who they were as a people.

VI

Early this year, Joe, Anita and I get to meet Terry Whitebeach. She has arrived a month earlier than the rest because she received separate funding from the Arts Advisory Board of Tasmania, where she lives, to do a project in America that must be completed before the tour begins.

Politically part of Australia, Tasmania is a large hilly island lying several hundred miles off the southeast coast of the Australian continent, roughly parallel to Melbourne, and as far from European civilization as one can get, since it is the last foothold of human habitation before Antarctica. Now with a population of 500,000, Tasmania, like Australia, was designated as a prison colony by European invaders. That was in 1803, 15 years after the British prison ships first breasted into Botany Bay, and supposedly Tasmania received the more incorrigible criminals. Just 73 years later, in 1876, the last survivor of the three Aboriginal groups who had lived in Tasmania for tens of thousands of years died, wiping out the native population.

"But that's the great lie!" Terry tells me. She is brown-haired with brilliantly clear chestnut-colored eyes, set off all the more strikingly by a white, at times feverishly flushed, complexion, thus showing her family's Irish background in her features and coloring rather than her Aboriginal side.

"We're the skeletons in the closet," she says. "There are five thousand of us of Aboriginal descent, but Tasmania psychically denies we exist, even in the history books. We haunt the island and the white population and ourselves because the whites of European descent refuse to recognize we are there. For that reason I'm put in a position of great uncertainty, not knowing who I am, having no 'official' documentation of my racial roots."

For Terry, being Aboriginal in Tasmania is almost a matter of choice. "It is identification and feeling rather than the degree of Aboriginal blood one has. . . . My particular burden is the retrieval of the lost language of my Aboriginal forebears, so it can be heard and read again today, for language reveals the spiritual and social temper of a culture."

But it would be a mistake of the worst kind to assign the significance of Terry's writing to her ethnicity. She is first and foremost her own person, a unique individual who writes about subjects of universal concern and appeal—her children, her friends and family, and the landscape in which she lives. All are looked at with an unflinching directness which is the touchstone of her style and personality.

When I half-jokingly comment on her astonishing verbal ability by saying that she has honed her speech to a clarity of expression that allows her to chop through the jungle of contradictions she must face each day, she replies, "It is much simpler than that: I am in love with language, the sound and feel and taste of it. It is the abiding passion of my life."

VII

It seems a long time ago that Joe, Anita and I sat in the apartment overlooking Sydney harbor. Recently I've detected a restlessness in Joe and Anita, and Dave has been calling from Sonora at the oddest hours. I'm uneasy too and keep glancing out the window.

I think all of us are ready for the Wartilpa to begin.