

2011

# Gathering points: Australian poetry: a natural selection

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## Recommended Citation

Hall, Phillip, Gathering points: Australian poetry: a natural selection, Doctor of Creative Arts thesis, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, 2011. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3471>

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*gathering points: AUSTRALIAN POETRY: a natural selection*

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*Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctor of Creative Arts  
degree of Wollongong University*

*2011*

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## ***Section One: Introduction***

As a child I lived in the Blue Mountains of NSW. My house stood a stone's throw from the Great Western Highway and railway line: noise and bustle, the Indian Pacific, Mack trucks. From our front veranda I gazed up that highway, west, all the way to Perth, while outside our back fence was a gully. I mucked up, the artful dodger escaping jobs, turning to outside-the-back-gate.

Once in my gully, I was an adventurer or an explorer, maybe even an escaped convict. At the head of the gully was a series of small rock pools surrounded by thick native bush and blackberry and filled with tadpoles, insect larvae and dragonflies. From the rock pools, the creek flowed a few hundred metres before reaching a small waterfall. At the base of this sandstone cliff line there was a cave hidden in the shady bottom of the gully. Here I kept a tarp, billy, matches and a knife. I never got permission to stay in my cave overnight, but from it such bravery was planned.

If you struggled down the creek line for about an hour, over slippery and mossy rocks, you came to the Glenbrook Gorge. Here there was much more water: fish and yabbies, sometimes turtles. Big boys told stories of how the trees around these swimming holes were filled with snakes. Snakes so big that they swung from tree to tree and from one side of the gully to the other. But the truth is that in all the time I spent down there, snakes were a rare spotting: a death adder, a diamond python, a few red-bellied black snakes, that was all. I once saw a wallaby, sometimes echidnas and lyrebirds, lots of blue-tongues and kookaburras. But the bush for me was a place of solitary wanderings. I studied moss, lichens and fungus, carved sandstone, threw rocks, made spears and sucked the honey from Mountain Devils.

Looking back on those childhood ramblings, I might wish that my joy had been less intrusive, but the wonder, the respect, did slowly tune in. Indeed, as an adult, I have chosen to make the bush, as it is found in the National Parks of South-Eastern Australia and Northern Queensland, the place of my professional life. I work as an outdoor educator, taking small groups of predominantly teenage participants into remote areas of the bush for up to a fortnight. All of my expeditions are based on a model of minimum-environmental-impact bushwalking in difficult and trackless terrain. The following, 'The Outdoor Educator', is a poem that I have written that attempts to encapsulate my approach to this type of experiential learning:

River rising as cloud, sponged  
by the frosty night,  
the bush rustling, a sound  
of snoring across the over-hang's dirt floor  
and the rolling, side-to-side,  
of sleeping-bags trapping warmth.

Hewn from rock,  
with deeply creviced trunks,  
turpentines and ironbarks  
cover the fire-scarred

and sandy slopes and ridges.

I listen to the group sleeping,  
the repeated *oom*  
of a frogmouth, the sound of water  
rapid over rock  
and beside our fire,  
now shimmering embers, wonder  
what little we really need.

In the moonlight, flushed  
with winter's dew,  
velvety white flannel flowers  
beside abandoned bloodied feathers.

Still in my bag  
out of the chill air,  
I feel content.

Tonight glimpsed through fog  
the Milky Way  
haloes our  
earth-bound  
endeavour.

While many of us who work in Outdoor Education see it as very valuable experiential learning tool, the industry is often perceived to be a high-risk expensive activity struggling to maintain a position in an already over-crowded school curriculum. This has led to much research and writing by academics teaching Outdoor Education within university Education faculties, attempting to define what Outdoor Education is, its relationship to remote 'wild places', and to explain its value for participants. Within Australia the best introduction to this research is *Outdoor And Experiential Learning: Views From The Top*, edited by Tracey Dickson, Tonia Gray and Bruce Hayllar (2005). As an Outdoor Educator, I am always asking questions about budgets, risk and educational rationale. These questions are highlighted in all my expedition and program preparations. But as I talk with schools and parents, and even more importantly, as I develop a relationship with my expedition participants, other questions become equally important:

- Why do we seek out remote 'wild places'?
- What are our 'rights', 'privileges' and 'responsibilities' in relationship to them?
- What are 'wild places'; what is 'wilderness'; indeed, what is 'nature'?

The subject of my DCA is neither childhood memories of playing in the bush nor Outdoor Education. These are my starting points, but my subject is Australian Nature

Poetry. I have written a volume of nature poetry, titled *creation reader*, as Section Three of my thesis. Section Two is titled, 'Australian Poetry: A Natural Selection', and is my reading of Australian nature poetry, examining the context and sources of my work; it is a prequel to *creation reader*. Section Four is titled 'Poetics: A Field Guide' and is my statement of personal poetics, reflecting on my poetry it serves as a sequel to *creation reader*. I read and write nature poetry, at least in part, because of my life experiences. And just as the reflections on my personal and professional experiences lead me to reevaluate my values and ideas about nature, so does my reading and writing of poetry:

- Why do I read and write nature poetry?
- What are the features – the strengths and weaknesses – of this type of writing?
- Are the purposes and values of nature poetry the same as for other poetry?
- And the big question, of course, what is 'nature'? Is it only found in National Parks, in remote 'wild places', or also in rural areas and in urban/suburban spaces?

These questions will form the basis of the remainder of my introduction and the next section of my thesis.

### *A definition of 'nature'*

As the American scholar, Arnold Berleant, reminds us, 'the very notion of environment (of nature) is problematic' (1992, p 2). For Berleant, this is because 'the idea of environment, like all basic ideas, harbours deep philosophical assumptions – about the nature of our world, our experiences, our selves' (1992, p 2). Peter Timms, the Australian Visual Arts curator and critic and past editor of *Art Monthly Australia*, has elaborated on this idea. In his book *Making Nature* (2001) Timms writes, 'we long for some sort of return to nature, and we conveniently gloss over the fact that we haven't the faintest idea what that might mean' (p 7). Timms notes that after scanning the history of Western literature and philosophy since ancient times, the classical historian Arthur O Lovejoy manages to identify sixty-six different meanings of the word 'nature' (p 38). Timms writes:

Yet basically what all these multifarious meanings have in common is their reference to something *original*. 'Nature', 'natural', 'native', 'innate' all derive from the Latin 'nasci': to be born. So Lovejoy's first and most succinct definition of 'nature' is 'Genesis-birth', which he says is 'etymologically primary'. (2001, p 39)

So a definition of the word 'nature' has much to do with the idea of 'genesis-birth'.

George Seddon (1927-2007) was another academic who investigated the difficulties in defining 'nature'. He was a distinguished Australian scholar working in the fields of Australian Literature, geology, environmental studies, and history and philosophy of science. He has done much to develop, in Australia, the multidisciplinary study of 'Place', which originated in the USA (due to the work of scholars like Arnold Berleant). I will have more to say about this emerging academic discipline later in this introduction. For Seddon, 'the problems in understanding how we ascribe meaning to a key word like 'Nature' are deeply embedded in our cultural history' (1998, p 7). Seddon synthesises the current intellectual discussion thus:

We conceptualise 'Nature' in three ways.... They can be crudely located along an axis measured off by degrees of internalising and externalising Nature. At one pole, we see ourselves as a part of Nature, a concept at which we arrive through evolutionary theory. Our species is collapsed into the biosphere, rather than set outside it. At the other pole, natural systems are seen as self-regulating and self-maintaining, with our species seen as of very minor significance in the scheme of things; our pretensions to externality, responsibility and some degree of control are irrelevant. The more common forms, however, are those implicit in much ecological writing, which is preoccupied with 'natural systems', the 'balance of Nature', and so on. Human intervention is conceptualised as disturbance, almost always seen in a negative light, which clearly externalises us from Nature itself. We operate on Nature.

Somewhere in the middle, very uncomfortably sited, is the most common conceptualisation, of our species as part of Nature, yet at the same time responsible for managing it. The paradoxes of conservation arise from this uneasy compromise – wilderness areas, for instance, are managed to protect them from disturbance, human intervention, but how? – by human intervention, of course. And, for whom? Well, for us; for Natural Man rather than Techno Man, but there is still only Us. (Seddon 1998, pp 13-14)

As with Seddon and Berleant, my own conceptualisation of nature is sited in this 'uncomfortable middle area'. I agree with Seddon when he writes that, 'the view that unspoiled environment is one untouched by humans can hardly be pushed to its logical conclusion, and in any case it is misleading, first because it sets Man against Nature, where it is more illuminating to see man as a part of Nature; and secondly, because we are not always despoilers' (1998, p 112).

Another North American scholar who has done much to pioneer the multidisciplinary study of 'Place' is Edward Casey. He has written of how the notion of 'wilderness' is often spiritualised and written of in terms of 'purity' in need of 'utter protection' (1993, p 231). This idea of 'utter wilderness' is a place where humans are literally personae non gratae (Casey 1993, p 231). For Casey, writing from a perspective of cultural epistemological theory, humans are not only welcome in wilderness; they are an essential part of it. He argues that there can be no meaningful sense of wilderness that does not include humans, as you cannot get to wilderness except by cultural means. For Casey, wilderness exists only as a cultural-literary representation (1993, pp 232-240). I believe that there is something unambiguously real about nature, but Casey is certainly right to highlight, as do Berleant and Seddon, that in our experience of wilderness 'culture and nature are always intertwined' (Casey 1993, p 240). As Casey argues, when we 'walk into wilderness we seek out the sublime, which is a cultural ideal' (1993, p 240). Casey upholds the option of that pioneering nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist poet and thinker, Henry David Thoreau, for 'sauntering – the art of taking a walk – that allows the walker to be more thoughtful and more open to the land, rather than rushing to discover or explore' (1993, p 248). This is my own ideal as well, as both an outdoor educator and as a nature poet.

Robert Dixon has also explored the way culture and nature intersect in our experience of natural landscapes. He is the chair of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney where he researches Australian literature, postcolonial literature, cultural studies and Australian visual art history. He has written that in our understanding of nature two ideas come to the fore. There is the notion of 'wilderness' and the experience of 'natural place' inscribed by generations of human use and meaning (2004, pp 299-300). In particular, Dixon discusses the argument that the Australian award-winning academic Tom Griffiths develops in *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination* (1996). In this key text, Griffiths argues that our conception of wilderness conservation is a very divisive one because of the growing importance of ecological definitions of landscape, which have introduced biocentric rather than anthropocentric issues into National Park management. In its more extreme forms, Griffiths points out, the 'ecological definition of wilderness is profoundly misanthropic, requiring the protection of natural areas from people in the future and the elimination of all signs of human influence in the past' (p 260). As Dixon shows, Griffiths' argument highlights that 'such an idea of wilderness is not only, in itself, a cultural artefact, but also anti-historical and Eurocentric' (Dixon 2004, p 300). This is because there is no 'timeless wilderness'; in a country such as Australia that has such a long history of Aboriginal occupancy as well as a history of European land use, all the continent's eco-systems are in some senses 'human-made'. Many Australian scientists have made this point; see for example Jeremy Smith (1992, pp 91-138) and Tim Flannery (1994, pp 199-241). Because of this, Dixon agrees with Griffiths when he proposes the term 'cultural landscapes' to distinguish an alternative conservation ethos, one that seeks to preserve evidence of both Aboriginal and early-European lifestyles and land-use practices (Dixon 2004, pp 300-301). As Griffiths writes, 'the idea of cultural landscapes acknowledges that an area is often the product of an intense interaction between nature and various phases of human habitation, and that natural places are not, as some ecological viewpoints suggest, destined to exist as climax

communities or systems untouched by human hands' (Griffiths 1996, p 277). Because of this, Griffiths argues that our understanding of 'place' requires recognition that our experience is concerned with the intimate relationship between the human and the non-human, between the social and the ecological (1996, p 277). Dixon, Seddon and Casey would agree with Griffiths. In my own conceptualisation of 'place', Griffiths' idea is foundational.

For most of us, the complicated way in which culture and nature intersect, as we experience environment, is more obvious. We do not live in 'wilderness', but predominantly, in suburban and urban areas. As Kate Rigby, one of Australia's foremost scholars of European Romanticism, writes:

The challenge is not to flee to the country but to reinhabit the world as it is given to us, here and now, accepting that it is in this world, with all its woundedness, that we must find happiness, or not at all. This does not mean accepting its social injustices. What it does mean, though, is seeking out possibilities of dwelling, manifestations of earth and sky, traces of the divine, in the midst of those places, however urbanised in which we dwell, tarry, or stay. (Rigby 2004, p 261)

So, the 'nature' in nature poetry is a highly contested space where notions of culture and the non-human world intersect: a 'cultural landscape'. As we have seen, the word 'nature' suggests the idea of 'genesis-birth'. Humans are part of nature, yet at the same time are responsible for managing it, for learning how to dwell in it wherever they happen to be. This is especially urgent today for as Lance Newman, Associate Professor of Literature and Writing at California State University, points out:

During the last decades of the twentieth century, it became a matter of scientific consensus that human society, as it currently functions, poses a potentially lethal threat to what Henry David Thoreau once called 'our common dwelling.' (2008, p 1)

### *Dwelling in nature*

As environmental literary criticism and writing has become more highly valued, in response to the perceived environmental crisis outlined by Newman above, Thoreau's cultural importance as a 'proto-ecologist' has been more often emphasised (see Newman 2008, p 7). Newman argues that 'Thoreau has increasingly been seen as an innovator, one who moved beyond purely instrumental ways of thinking about nature, valuing it instead as a site for intellectual and spiritual transformation' (2008, p 7). Along with Thoreau, Martin Heidegger is another philosopher who has thought about what it means to 'dwell' on the earth. As the British academic, Greg Garrard writes, 'thanks to the pivotal role Heidegger assigns to the work of art in what he calls 'saving the earth', his philosophy has obvious attractions to ecological literary critics' (Garrard 2004, p 32).

The reception of Heidegger's ideas in contemporary ecological literary criticism has been considered by many scholars, see for example Rigby (2004, especially pp 6-14) and Garrard (2004, especially pp 136-159). As Rigby writes, nature can be found wherever we are, but:

To dwell, for Heidegger, is not merely to reside: it is, as he puts it so compellingly in 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking,' to 'save the earth', by living on it in such a manner that it is allowed to unfold in its own way, released 'into its own presencing'.  
(Rigby 2004, p 6)

This sense for dwelling in place, in nature, is one that the mid-twentieth century Australian poet, Roland Robinson (1912-1992) celebrates in 'Coming With Darkness' (Elliott (ed) 1979, p 123). His sentiment is perhaps overly romantic, quasi-religious even, but to be so naively alive to the natural world echoes my childhood memories:

And, looking up, white flowers were outspread  
into the darkness all about my tent;  
making a pure religion in that place,  
a prayer that came unbidden except by Spring  
and rain that left the sandy ridges cool.  
So that I lay with all the width of land,  
in pause and flow of gullies, slopes and hills,  
open to the stars and the faint cold dew,  
at one with the night and flowers and the stars.

Bruce Dawe is one of the most acclaimed and widely published of all contemporary Australian poets. In 'Beforehand' (1983, p 226) he echoes Robinson, appealing for an experience of living in place that is generous and attentive in the way that Heidegger describes:

Treasure the burgeoning sky,  
the ample air,  
treasure the million leaves,  
the seasons where  
you walk with your loving kind  
like a child again;  
savour the summer sun  
and the tall rain.

What is to be gained by living a life so attentively to its natural surroundings? Several contemporary Australian poets have addressed this question in their verse. In 'Summer of the Ladybirds', Vivian Smith (1995, p 144) asks 'can we learn wisdom watching insects now, / or just the art of quiet observation?' For Steve Evans, in 'Contentment' (1994, p 98), it is in living generously and attentively to the natural world, that you will find the 'the antics of heaven / the contentment of ordinary miracles', while for Kevin Hart, in

'The Ten Thousand Things' (1984, p 1), it is in learning to 'look with care upon this world' that:

You will see  
at evening, dark roots  
clutching the earth, drawing new life  
from the river where you have found  
the true man's face, once hidden by your own.

Looking at nature, this 'cultural landscape' enriches our visual experience and reveals different aspects of our 'true selves'. As Chris Andrews writes in 'The Encyclopedia' (2002, p 35), nature 'comes alive' before us as 'the mountain ashes lose their grip on daylight. / Night rises to the surface of the ocean / ... [and] home shrinks to a cone of lamplight'. For Andrews this is because trees and their bark, the Nightjar, the Powerful Owl, dinosaurs and Carboniferous marshes:

All press to claim the eyes  
in the infernal walnut grain  
between the candle sockets of an upright  
ignorant of concert pitch,  
which has not quite forgotten yet  
a couple of old wartime tunes  
from an album yellowing in the stool.

In 'Pothole' (2002, p 59), Andrews continues his exploration of this theme: in focusing on nature, what is it that we seek? In this poem the persona's gaze – meditation – is 'spun down onto the river's steps' but 'just before / the water falls, it fills a pothole / with turbulence turning a millstone / ever slower: embedded bearing, / stone eyeball deep sunk in its socket, / grinding irritant pebbles to silt'. We look at nature, but as we project our own psychological yearnings onto what we see, nature looks back at us, and maybe then we then see 'the true man's face, once hidden by our own' (Hart 1984, p 1).

As Andrew Sant writes in 'Wren' (1982, p 8), many have begun meditating on the natural world, in this instance a wren appearing 'on a branch like an asterisk', 'shaking the million purple bells / of my delight' only to be 'left with a footnote of detail / towards an imminent theme'. As I will show in my next chapter, there are many poets who have sought to contribute towards the development of this 'imminent theme': nature poetry is a remarkably strong strain in the Australian tradition. But what is this 'imminent theme', what is nature poetry?

### *A definition of nature poetry*

In literary culture, nature poetry has historically occupied its own specifically defined niche. The traditional definition of this poetry includes meditative descriptions of natural settings, mournful odes to a landscape already lost and lyrical searches for an image from

the natural world to describe some human situation or choice. In defining nature poetry in an Australian context, the terms Romanticism, Pastoral, Colonialism, Ecopoetry and Place are fundamental. The reasons for this are so significant that I will examine each of these areas individually shortly, however, my reading begins by examining nature poetry in terms of its purposes and values. In doing this I will argue that there are in fact three nature poetics:

- Nature poetry of Praise
- Nature poetry of Dwelling
- Nature poetry of Image

As we have seen, the first and most succinct definition of 'nature' is 'Genesis-birth'. Our conceptualisation of 'nature' is concerned with first things, with beginnings. With this in mind, in reading the purpose of nature poetry, a useful model can be found in the creation traditions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Having created the world in six days, God rests on the seventh in order to praise and celebrate what has been made. The day of rest over, God's attention is given to the relationship between humanity and creation. Humans are given 'dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens and all living animals on the earth'. The creation account closes with one tree being symbolically charged as 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' and with Satan taking on the form of a serpent to tempt Eve and Adam to fall and forever lose the Garden. Within this Biblical meta-narrative, three purposes emerge for writing about the natural world. There is the hymn of praise where the natural world is elevated to God's Creation. This is often replaced with the Romantic's Nature, the conservationist's Wilderness or the scientist's Natural History. There is the pastoral, anti-pastoral and environmental text where the issue of human 'dominion' is explored. Many writers today, as we have already seen, would replace the term 'dominion' with 'dwelling'. As a word 'dominion' suggests power, control and exploitation, whereas 'dwelling', especially with its pedigree back to Thoreau, encapsulates a greater environmental awareness and sensitivity. And there is poetry that uses nature as image for expressing human concerns. The nature poetry of praise has nature as its subject; the poetry of dwelling has the relationship between nature and humanity as its subject; the nature poetry of image has humanity as its subject. The poetry of praise and dwelling often uses imagery in the same way that the poetry of image does. The poetry of image, however, uses that imagery from the natural world not to explore nature, or our relationship with nature, but to focus on the human concern. In the natural world it sees imagery to explore pregnancy and childbirth, domestic life and relationships, immigration and bigotry, warfare and cruelty, religious belief and terminal illness, death and bereavement, memory and creativity. The Australian nature poetry of image is a very diverse and rich group. Indeed the natural world, as I will show in my next chapter, is one of the richest sources of imagery in Australian poetry.

There are many examples of all these types of writing about the natural world in Australian poetry. And whether the poet seeks to praise, to explore 'our common dwelling', or develop nature as image, certain subjects can be seen as preoccupations. A look at these will show that far from presenting a romantic or idealised view of nature, as

it is encountered in the bush or on the farm or in the suburbs and cities, Australian nature poetry develops a far more interesting, and in many ways surprising, presentation of the practicalities of human interactions with the natural world.

It is curious, however, that for many this is in itself an embarrassing concession as Rosemary Huisman describes. Huisman is an academic and poet based at Sydney University, and she has retold a story of how a visiting Japanese professor was at a literary lunch in the Blue Mountains when he was inspired by a kookaburra to write a poem (2006, p 50). The choice of subject matter much embarrassed the local poets gathered there. In her poem inspired by this incident, Huisman asks:

Somewhere, then, I am prepared to believe  
kookaburras laughing in high gum trees  
live undiminished. In our banal snare  
of words, what image are we mocking there? (2006, p 50)

The source of this embarrassment, as Huisman highlights in her poem, is the way that academic culturalists, like Edward Casey, define 'nature': to what extent is 'nature' a cultural construct rather than an unambiguously real entity? Several contemporary Australian poets have pointed to this problem in defining 'nature,' highlighting the challenge this poses to the would-be nature poet. Peter Kirkpatrick, for example, in his 2004 Newcastle Poetry Prize winning poem, 'Bucolic Plague or This Eco-Lodge My Prison' writes, 'I understand / your wish to walk the country, and feel / its contours in your bones, its sun and shade / upon your skin', but he reminds:

And never overlook the fact that we  
invented nature when we went to live  
in words: there's nothing natural about it.

In 'Honey-eaters', John Watson (2003, pp 65-66) continues this questioning when he asks 'is language then a postcard sent in haste / from some exotic place?' While Rhyll McMaster, in 'Reverence' (1997, p 74) warns that 'animated by awe' we are so easily 'quick to conclude instant design, / we're attracted to reverence.' Carolyn Gerrish picks up on this in 'Nature poems' (2000, p 67). She writes ironically:

a sign on the jacaranda  
FOR SALE

jacaranda clouds  
surround  
the Golden Arches

poet behaving suspiciously  
stands alone  
among eucalypts

So, while many Australian poets have contributed to the tradition of nature poetry, there is little agreement, especially among literary historians and critics, about the features or strengths of this type of writing. Indeed, nature poetry in Australia, as we shall continue to see shortly, is viewed a little like the ‘muddle-headed wombat’ of Ruth Park’s very popular children’s radio serial (1951-1970) and book series (1962-1982): naïve and irrepressible, but also stubborn, conservative and predictable. As we shall see, sometimes it is seen as sentimental and antiquated; like the wombat, it can damage fences or standards and foul the pastures of other practitioners. At other times, nature is viewed as the native or proper subject of poetic activity: a romantic, idealised celebration of national identity in ‘the Bush’. By examining the purposes and values reflected in Australian nature poetry, it is possible to give an alternative reading of its worth. At its best, nature writing is not ‘muddle-headed’. It can be an exciting way of intellectually and creatively engaging with the natural world and of reorientating that sense of wonder. It is capable of giving us a different view of ourselves and of our place.

The perception that nature poetry is an inferior art form has been well described by the Sydney poet, Martin Langford. Langford has written how the ‘term “landscape painter”, “landscape poet”, attracts a vehemence of attack not produced by other generic terms’ (2005, p 70). Jill Montgomery, a historian and critic of the visual arts, has written for example, that ‘landscape art in Australia can be criticised as being narcissistic and solipsistic, revealing little to the viewer other than the paranoia of the artist and his refusal to accept a meaningless landscape’ (quoted in Wallace-Crabbe 2005, p 130). Ivor Indyk, a highly regarded academic and publisher of Australian literary culture, has also thought about the ideas raised by Montgomery. In a significant 1988 essay on ‘The Pastoral Poets’, Indyk has argued that ‘Australian nature or landscape poetry...is a tortured affair, with estrangement, isolation, and the fear of time passing among its most compelling features’ (1988, p 353). Andrew Taylor is a poet who is currently Emeritus Professor at Edith Cowan University. In his important study, *Reading Australian Poetry* published in 1987, he has also written how ‘nature in Australian literature has an antagonistic role’ (1987, p 34). Taylor shows how Australian colonial and modernist writers have never had an immanent concept of poetic imagination or nature. He defines this as the approach of that major English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, who ‘conceived of poetic creation more as discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within the natural world’ (1987, p 23). Taylor shows how this results in a literature – in Australia – where ‘nature endures, rather than protects or nourishes’ (1987, p 35). Taylor concludes his analysis with the observation that ‘in Australian writing it is unlikely that ‘nature’ will ever emerge as the vital and nourishing force she once was in England and still is, by and large, in the USA’ (1987, p 35).

These ideas have led the Melbourne poet and academic, Chris Wallace-Crabbe (2005, p 125) to ask, ‘but what is landscape that it should loom so large as a test of things Australian?’ In answer to his question, Wallace-Crabbe writes:

Seeming so easy to grasp, landscape grows more and more problematic the closer one looks at it, or tries to look at it. It keeps escaping. (2005, p 125)

Langford explains the reasons for these criticisms of landscape art as:

It is true that landscape genres are attempted by large numbers of inept and uncritical practitioners – but they are hardly alone in that. Landscape art is also particularly subject to the charge that “we can only bring who we are to the subject”. Therefore, so the claim goes, it is invalid, a mistaken focus, where people think they are seeing the landscape, but are only seeing themselves...Landscape art, moreover, is accused of being the complacent and pious expression of an identification with the status quo...Ultimately, landscape art is vilified because landscapes are insentient, because they carry in them more that is irredeemably alien than we are comfortable with. (2005, pp 70-71)

Langford begins the defence for the possibility of a ‘landscape art’ that I wish to develop in my own work. Langford contributes to this discussion in both his critical work and in his poetry. He has written marvellous praise of the natural world in such poems as ‘Mt Buffalo’ (2001, p 4) and ‘Dangars Gorge Falls’ (2001, p 5) and nature poetry of image, such as ‘Field Poem’ (2001, p 3). My readings of Australian nature poetry show that there have always been exceptions to the judgments of Ivor Indyk and Andrew Taylor outlined above, such as the hymn of celebration by Roland Robinson quoted earlier, but that since the 1980s conditions have changed drastically. Nature poetry has been written by many contemporary Australian poets: there are poems that praise nature and landscape; poems that question humanity’s ability to dwell in nature; poems that see in the landscape, in nature, imagery for exploring human concerns. So what has changed?

### *The place of science in nature poetry*

Judith Wright (1915-2000) is one of Australia’s most significant poets and commentators on the relationship between the natural world, environmentalism and literary culture. In 1956 she wrote in her introduction to the anthology of Australian verse that she edited for Oxford University Press that the ‘most important difficulty facing Australian poets has been the lack of any living link with the country itself’ (p 2) and in 1965 she added that ‘before one’s country can become an accepted background against which the poet’s imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described, and as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with the landscape before he can turn to its human figures. But in Australian writing the landscape has, it almost seems, its own life, hostile to its human inhabitants’ (1965, p xi). The late Peter Porter (1929-2010) has described this feeling well in his poem, ‘Sydney Cove, 1788’ (2010, pp 45-46). Porter writes that ‘where all is novel’ ‘Come // Genocide or Jesus we can’t work this land’. He goes on to describe how ‘The sun has framed it for our moralists / To dry the bones of forgers in the sand. // We wake in the oven of its cloudless sky’. There is no need, here, to re-examine further the traditional litany of colonial complaints about the harshness of

the Australian landscape as much has already been written about this problem (see for example Rutherford 1984, pp 9-17; Stow 1984, pp 22-24; Webby, 2000, pp 50-51; Conrad 2003, pp 41-46, 99-101 & 132-136 and Frost 2004, pp 53-66). Judith Wright has also detailed the problems it caused for the colonial writers (1975, pp 49-58). But these problems of 'first observing, understanding, describing and absorbing' the landscape are not ones that preoccupy the contemporary writer. Today creative artists benefit from the invaluable work of the scientific community, the environmental movements and of the popular media such as the ABC's Natural History Unit which was formed in 1973 and incorporated into Documentaries in 2007. Judith Wright often wrote of this need to reintegrate the arts with the sciences, especially the living sciences (1975, pp ix-xi, 196-202, 248-256). Many other Australian poets and academics have also argued for this (see for example Guthrie 1993, pp 17-20 and Bennett 1998, pp 14-19). As Jason Cowley, the editor of the British literary journal *Granta* has written, the best nature writers 'do not simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodise and commune; they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect' (2008, p 9).

The Australian environment, like any environment, will always have its own challenges, but today the writer sees the landscape differently because the work of first observing, understanding and describing has been and continues to be done. This scientific work allows the contemporary writer to avoid the colonial misunderstanding that Australia is somehow an alien land of bizarre animals and strange plants, a land worn out as though left behind by time. It allows the contemporary writer to engage with the incredibly rich natural and human history that has shaped this continent for so long, to encounter 'place' as 'cultural landscape' in the way described by Griffiths. It reminds us, as Casey highlights, that 'we can not get to wilderness except by cultural means' – wilderness is an expression of our cultural-literary-scientific understanding.

The Sydney-based poet and academic, John Bennett, has thought about what this means for the poet to 'aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect' (Cowley 2008, p 9). Bennett argues that the poet must write about nature and landscape through the prism offered by the science of ecology (1998, p 14). For Bennett this is not possible in the lyric because the shorter form does not allow room to deal with all the details. Bennett wants a 'poetics of epic dimensions...a purposive poetry of muscle and ambition which tackles history, both natural and human' (1998, p 15). For Bennett only the epic poem is long enough to deal with all the material: historical, philosophical and scientific; to position the environment as the 'background and foreground for an investigation into all the scientific and historical layers through which landscape and nature are available to be experienced and understood' (1998, pp 15-16). But is this the only way of writing about the natural world? In highlighting the strengths of one approach is it necessary to censor others?

When walking through a National Park, what does it mean to 'experience' a tree? Here is a short poem I call 'she-oak'. It is taken from a poem sequence titled 'colonial heads'. Each poem in the sequence takes on the voice of a 'colonial head' expressing the values of racism and environmental destruction so characteristic of a colonial ethical

orientation. This is not an epic poetry but it is certainly intended as more than an isolated response to a moment spent in nature:

even quarter-sawn  
like a sliced Queen  
Victoria cake the casuarina  
lacks the grain  
of English oak  
the dressed shine  
of officers in uniform

but seasoned the unruly timber  
can add lustre  
and turned as a walking stick  
decorate a gentleman's style

the hard wood is prized  
as a fence post or tool handle  
and burned hot  
produces a pure white  
ash ideal for sheet whitening  
or mixing with fat  
and scented as a makeshift soap

the tree was favoured  
by blacks for boomerangs shields and clubs  
and beneath a stand  
free of undergrowth and snakes  
the women kept their children  
while eating the trees' nuts and grubs  
they soaked the inner bark  
gargling against toothache  
and collected the oozing sap  
to be warmed and melted before eating

they could cook anything

A poem such as 'she-oak' cannot be read as only a response to nature, to an encounter with a magnificent native tree. It is an attempt to explore what Casey defines as that complicated area where culture and nature intertangle: what do scientists understand about the natural history – the evolution – of this species; how has it been viewed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and what part has it played in our economies? It is an attempt to be in the words of that leading North American environmental poet and thinker, Gary Snyder, 'nature and place literate: informed about local specifics on both ecological-biotic and sociopolitical levels and informed about history (social history and environmental history)' (Snyder 1995, p 171).

To read a poem such as 'she oak' highlights just how multifarious are our approaches, our engagements, with the natural world. It is to consider, I hope, the perspectives of 'cultural landscape', 'colonialism/postcolonialism' and 'ecopoetics'. It is now time to discuss these terms more closely and to see how they help us in defining the values and purposes of nature poetry. In doing this, it is also necessary to look at 'place', 'pastoral' and 'Romanticism'.

### *Romanticism and Australian nature poetry*

As we have seen many commentators have analysed the problems confronting the colonial and early twentieth century poet writing in Australia. Some have argued that, despite many attempts, the traditions of Romanticism and of the pastoral have been nearly impossible in Australia because of them (see for example Wright 1975, pp 49-59 and pp 59-81; Indyk 1988, pp 353-369; Kane 1996 and 2004, pp 269-285). As the Australian scholar, Anna Rutherford writes, 'it is easy to see why this notion of Australia as an underworld, a place deserted by God and to be shunned by man would be accepted...its geographical position 'at the world's worse end', its alien, barren and hostile quality, its isolation from England, the actual physical nature of the settlement as a penal colony...all this contributed to the conclusion that the 'Australian landscape was unfit for poetry' (Rutherford 1984, pp 11-13). Rutherford's sentiments have been echoed by the significant Australian poet, playwright, novelist and memoirist, Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002). Hewett has also thought about this relationship between the Australian biophysical environment and the reception of Romanticism in the early period of Australian literary development. Hewett asks 'one way for the English Romantic [to write] was to substitute the Muse as Nature, a beneficent and harmonious Spirit reflecting God's pattern in the universe.... But what happens when such a concept is transferred to an Antipodean landscape, hostile and deeply recalcitrant?' (1989b, p 245). Martin Duwell, an Australian academic, would agree with Rutherford and Hewett. He has also written of how the Australian landscape was seen as too randomly brutal and as not nurturing enough to support the development of a Romantic poetry in this period (1997, p107), but Duwell would add another reason. Noting the importance of folk literature in the development of Romantic poetry in England, Duwell argues that 'Romanticism never got off the ground in Australia because there was never a significant enough folk literature' (1997, pp 107-108). As Duwell points out, Aboriginal culture and story was ignored and convict ballads were hardly collected, and as Judith Wright has pointed out, what ballads were preserved were 'too immature to have any lasting contribution' (1975, p 73). So if the impact of Romanticism in the Australian literary tradition has only been 'registered *in absentia*' (Kane 1996, especially pp 8-46; Birns 2010, p 1), why does it continue to be so important in the study of Australian poetry?

As Edward Larrissy, Professor of English Literature at the University of Leeds writes, 'Romanticism is a big word covering many and diverse phenomena' (2005, p 665). Many canonical modernist writers, including Australian writers, might define their work in opposition to Romanticism, but numerous American and British academics have

traced the Romantic legacy in Modernism and shown how it has helped to define a Post-Modern poetic aesthetic (see for example Bayley 1957; Keith 1980, pp 3-11; Harvey 1986, pp ix-x & 1-20; Larrissy 2005, pp 665-674; Perry 2005, pp 593-604; Rose 2005, pp 1-11; and Rzepka 2005, pp 607-616). In Australia similar work has been done by Judith Wright (1975) and by such academics as Livio Dobrez (1990) and Shirley Walker in her study on the poetry of Judith Wright (1991). Larrissy has shown how:

The most influential exposition of the idea that Modernism is a continuation of Romanticism is Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* (1957), which shows how the concentration on the image... has its roots in the Romantic period: to be more specific, it demonstrates how distrust of discursiveness, and a concomitant reliance on the radiance of the image, had already begun in that period... Other critics have followed Kermode's path showing the Modernist preoccupation in exploring inwardness with the particularity of a state of mind (innocent or experienced) rather than an abstract account of it... Further Michael O'Neill in *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (1997) shows how the self-consciousness of the modern poem about its own status as artefact has deep roots in the similar self-consciousness of Romantic poems. (2005, pp 666-667)

The influence of Romanticism in Australian poetry, as defined by Larrissy, is significant and I will illustrate this argument in my next chapter when I develop my own reading of Australian nature poetry.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe has also added to this discussion in a significant way. He has shown that, as the twentieth century progressed in Australia, some of the features of Romanticism, as defined by Larrissy above, did continue, albeit in a less ambitious form. Wallace-Crabbe has defined this as the 'tradition set off by that great English Romantic, William Wordsworth, with his common insistence on the particular, local qualities of a personal experience as against traditional expectations that poetry will tend to universalise situations and emotions... The effect of such poems is to say, *this is something fresh and unique*' (1974, p 132). This is nature poetry written in a Romantic tradition, but the hymn of praise to Nature as Sublime has been replaced by poetry of small observation. When done well, as Chris Wallace-Crabbe shows, the result is a 'shapely and precise ordering of a particularised experience of the natural world' (1974, pp 132-133). This tradition continues to be a significant influence on some contemporary nature poets, including some of my own poetry, writing in the lyrical tradition.

### *Pastoral and Australian nature poetry*

Another common approach taken by contemporary Australian nature writers is to explore the issue of 'humanity's dominion over nature' through the pastoral or anti-pastoral. The British academic, Greg Garrard, has written that 'since the Romantic movement's poetic

response to the Industrial Revolution, pastoral has decisively shaped our constructions of nature' (2004, p 33). For this reason, Garrard writes, 'the pastoral trope must and will remain a key concern for ecocritics' (2004, p 33). What is pastoral and what is its flip side, anti-pastoral? The British academic, Terry Gifford, defines three kinds of pastoral: the specifically literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside; more generally, any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban; and the sense in which pastoral implies an idealisation of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship (1992, p 2). Writers who highlight the contexts of environmentalism and postcolonialism (both these terms will be defined shortly) often write in opposition to pastoral and write what they call anti-pastoral or hard-pastoral. This is defined as the attempt to expose all idealisations of rural life that have so often come at great environmental cost and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. It is now time to examine the significance of pastoral and anti-pastoral in the Australian literary context.

The Australian academic, David McCooey, has written that the classical definition of Pastoral as being the depiction of shepherd life is too narrow in the twentieth century (1995, p 157). Further, he has shown how the pastoral imagination, so often generated from a sense of loss of a more innocent world, could hardly be translated into an Australian literary culture given the facts of dispossession and the problems that colonial settlers had in adapting to life in this new continent (1995, pp 157-158). As we have already seen, Ivor Indyk has also written on the 'pastoral poets' (1988). In his analysis, Indyk defines 'pastoral' as 'the poetry of fulfilment and ease, in which the world of nature acknowledges and celebrates the desires of man' (1988, p 353). As Indyk again shows, given the difficulties that many experienced in learning to live in the Australian landscape during colonial times, it is hardly surprising to note that there are 'not many genuine examples of Australian pastoral' (1988, p 353). Besides Indyk and McCooey, others have also noted the near impossibility of writing pastoral in Australia. In describing the prevalence in Australia of a more uncomfortable and discontented approach to pastoral, some have offered the terms anti-pastoral or hard pastoral as being more accurate. John Kinsella, a major contemporary Australian poet, essayist, editor and novelist has argued, for example, that the pastoral can only be approached ironically in Australia (1996, pp 36-37). He has defined his work as 'anti-pastoral, attempting to tackle the contradictions and uncertainties, with an ecologically-inclined politics' (2008, p 4):

The Australian landscape is not European. If anything, it is really the Storm that belongs. Australia is a place of extremes. Furthermore, a sense of belonging to the land for a non-Aborigine is marred by guilt, that the European rural is laid over the Aboriginal land, working hard to obscure or obliterate memories of the past. (1996, p 37)

For Kinsella, the idealisation of rural life is not possible because the contexts of ecology and colonialism must be paramount.

To this discussion the American poet and academic, Paul Kane (2004, pp 269-285), and the Australian visual arts academic, Jeanette Hoorn (2007, pp 9-11), have offered yet another term. They argue that many of the texts and paintings that attract the label of anti-pastoral are not the flip side of pastoral at all. Rather they are an entirely different genre of art – the georgic. Hoorn traces the history of the term ‘georgic’ via contemporary commentary back to the classical Roman writer Virgil and his *Georgics*. As Hoorn shows ‘pastoral emphasises European prosperity in which nature is seen to provide wealth and leisure for its citizens while georgic focuses on the labour as the agent of that prosperity’ (Hoorn 2007, p 11). Kane defines georgic as the realistic hard look at the practicalities of farming today ‘set off with all the beauties and embellishments of poetry’ (2004, p 280). It is poetry about farming with all the detailed information about finances, crops, vines, the weather, animal diseases, the dangers of breaking in horses and dogs, dealing with pigs and the Wheat Board, and keeping bees. Kane argues that ‘in Australian poetry georgic may come to displace pastoral/anti-pastoral as a more viable contemporary genre’ (2004, pp 280-281). I will expand on these ideas in my next chapter when I give a close reading of many examples of anti-pastoral and georgic in Australian nature poetry.

### *Ecocriticism and Australian nature poetry*

It is hardly surprising that as the ecological crisis facing our planet deepens, literature that questions humanity’s ability to dwell on the earth comes more to the fore. Judith Wright has written, for example, in ‘Australia 1970’ (1994, pp 287-288):

Suffer, wild country, like the ironwood  
that gaps the dozer-blade.  
I see your living soil ebb with the tree  
to naked poverty.

Die like the soldier-ant  
Mindless and faithful to your million years.  
Though we corrupt you with our torturing mind,  
stay obstinate; stay blind.

For we are conquerors and self-poisoners  
more than scorpion or snake  
and dying of the venoms that we make  
even while you die of us.

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,  
The drying creek, the furious animal,  
That they oppose us still;  
That we are ruined by the thing we kill.

In this poem Wright is angrily aware of the pressure exerted by the developer to clear ever more land and of the arrogant belief that in technology, humans can solve all their environmental problems. Wright's poem highlights the need for urgent and committed environmental action. Many Australian academics and creative writers have argued that Wright's poetry and political activism is a very significant voice in Australian Literature (see for example Veronica Brady 1998, pp 468-527 and 2001, pp 82-88; and Fiona Capp 2010, pp 1-18 & 190-198). As the Australian poet, Graham Rowlands, writes in 'Judith Wright' (1992, p 24):

Observant, though no tealeaf reader, [Wright] reads  
in her empty cup of black coffee  
blank pages, blind eyes  
that read no printers' ink  
spilled from printeries into dying rivers.  
She abstains from paper for the sake of trees.

Rosemary Dobson and James McAuley have also made this point. They are two distinguished Australian poets and contemporaries of Judith Wright; McAuley was also Professor of English at the University of Tasmania from 1961 until his death in 1976. Rosemary Dobson has written that Wright's 'convictions on conservation...have galvanised the public remarkably' (2001, p 78) and McAuley has argued that no Australian poet has 'won wider appreciation and critical regard than Judith Wright' (1975, p 160). As the University of Southern Queensland academic, Jayne Fenton Keane has argued, 'Wright was at the centre of many literary trends [and her poetry] set the stage for several generations of poets to consider the environment as a setting for understanding cultural, political and literary concerns as well as its embodiment of human spirituality and emotion' (2010, pp 5-6). Judith Wright's nature poetry is a very important and influential voice within Australian writing because in her 'movement towards a literary social ecology...[she enables us] to reflect on the exploitative colonial gaze which sees Aboriginals and the environment as aspects of the Australian ecology that need conquering' (Keane 2010, p 5). Wright's achievement, in writing nature poetry of praise, dwelling and image, is one that I will look at more fully in my next chapter.

It is in North America, however, that much has been written to give a theoretical framework to the poet's response to the environmental crisis of global warming, habitat loss and species extinction. This new approach, known as ecological literary criticism, or simply ecocriticism, first came to prominence in the 1990s. Jonathan Skinner is an American poet and editor of the electronic literary journal, *ecopoetics* (<http://ecopoetics.wordpress.com/>). In his first edition of this journal, published in the winter of 2001, Skinner writes:

*ecopoetics* takes on the 'eco' frame, in recognition that human impact on the earth and its other species, is without doubt the historical watershed of our generation born in the second half of the twentieth century. The avant-gardes of the last decades of that century, noted for linguistically sophisticated approaches to difficult

issues, stand to be criticised for their overall silence on a comparable approach to environmental questions. It is precisely because of this historical urgency that *ecopoetics* appropriates ‘eco’ and ‘poetics’ - to return them to the drawing board.

‘Eco’ here signals - no more, no less - the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. ‘Poetics’ is used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act. Thus: *ecopoetics*, a house making. (2001, p 7)

As another American academic, James McKusick writes, ‘ecological critics have pondered fundamental questions about the purpose of literary criticism, and of imaginative literature itself, in a time of ever-increasing environmental crisis’ (2005, p 199). The pioneering American ecocritics, William Howarth and Lance Newman, have offered the following definition of their work, ‘an ecocritic is a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action’ (Newman 2008, p 2). Newman continues this definition when he writes, ‘the ecocritical project is strongly shaped by a particular analysis of the environmental crisis – most ecocritics feel that the problem we face is one of destructive habits of thought’ (2008, p 3). Newman argues, therefore, that the function of literature and the study of literature, is to ‘redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural environment’ (2008, pp 4-5). In other words, ecocritics have set themselves the task of changing minds, of convincing humanity to change the way it thinks in the belief that this will change the way we behave. This ambition has been well described by Kate Rigby. In the introduction to her major study of European Romanticism, Rigby writes that ‘the explicit topoi of her study...is the reanimation of nature, the recovery of a sense of place, and the repositioning of literature as inducting us into dwelling’ (2004, p 13). Such an ambition is certainly one that I would like to explore in my own work. In doing this, one major ecocritic whose work I would like to look at briefly here is the American academic, Lawrence Buell.

Buell has worked with others to develop a poetics with an ecological inflection – an *ecopoetics* – and has sought to reimagine the relationship between human communities and the natural world. In particular, Buell has argued that ecocriticism should be centrally concerned with ‘environmental texts’. To distinguish between environmental texts and the vast array of literary works in which ‘nature’ figures, Buell (1995, pp 7-8) has offered the following four criteria:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or given is at least implicit in the text.

Jonathan Skinner is just one poet and critic who would agree with Buell. Echoing Buell, Skinner has written in the winter 2004-5 edition of *ecopoetics*:

Eco-critics have made a useful distinction between nature poetry and eco-poetry - to paraphrase Juliana Spahr, one focuses (apolitically) only on the bird, the other considers, as well, the bulldozer about to destroy the bird's habitat. Think Mary Oliver for nature poetry, Gary Snyder for ecopoetry. (2004-5, p 127)

In this thesis, and in my own creative work, I wish to explore the efficacy of this new ecocriticism. Are the criteria that it stipulates too prescriptive? If not, and if Buell is correct in arguing that it is with environmental texts that we should be 'centrally concerned', then how do we read the value of nature writings that have purposes other than those stipulated in Buell's criteria? In prioritising a nature poetry of dwelling are we failing to appreciate what is achieved in the nature poetries of praise and image? In striving to meet all of Buell's criteria, is there a danger that the creative writer can become too concerned with a scientific approach to nature, with the importance of naming things, with fitting everything in, and thus become overly discursive, reminiscent of the botanical catalogue? And in the context of countries like Australia, what other issues must ecocriticism address?

### *Postcolonialism, place and Australian nature poetry*

In Australia, it is of crucial importance that ecocriticism be aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture and viewpoints. For ecocriticism to be a vital presence, it must be attuned to the contexts of the colonial and postcolonial. As Judith Wright has written in 'At Cooloolah' (1994, pp 140-141):

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's twilight  
has fished there longer than our centuries.  
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,  
and he will wear their colour till he dies,

But I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.  
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,  
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,  
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah  
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,  
for earth is spirit: the invader's feet will tangle  
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

As in the study of 'place', postcolonialism is a vital perspective that ecocriticism must engage with as it develops its critique. As Wright highlights, if ecocriticism fails to do this, it is just another discourse 'come of a conquering people' (1994, pp 140-141). The Indian academic, Leela Gandhi, has defined postcolonialism as 'a multi-disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and crucially, interrogating the colonial past' (1998, p 4). Given Australia's colonial past, its difficulties in dealing with this past in the present and the continued reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait dispossession and inequality, I would argue that for my cultural studies, the perspective of postcolonialism is a foundation. Ecocriticism must not only remind us of our embeddedness in the world, it must highlight our obligation to live in it rightly. And this means to act not only justly in relation to the earth but also to the people we share it with. As we have seen, Judith Wright often makes this point. Veronica Brady, Wright's biographer, argues that Wright is a major nature poet and committed environmentalist who never tires of arguing for the primary position of justice to Aboriginal people in social action (Brady 1998, pp ix-xii, 472-473 & 498-499). One approach to these issues is to adopt the strategies being developed in 'place-based writing' by such Australian academics as John Cameron and George Seddon.

George Seddon, whom we have already met as a major multi-disciplinary thinker and pioneer in the study of 'place', has described 'place-based literature' as a 'literature of intimacy with places, with country' (1998, pp 105-109). He has argued that 'being Australian in the sense of belonging to the land has always depended on an acquired skill. It is neither a right nor a given; it has always had to be learnt, once handed down by the tribal elders to the young, and then earned by them' (2005, p 240). Seddon rightly prioritises the understanding of Indigenous Australians in this process, but highlights the importance to all of acknowledging the 'delicacy and beauty of the natural environment' if they are to feel 'at home' and embedded in this place (2005, p xv). It is this embeddedness that I wish to explore in my own writing. The concept of place is one that fascinates me – what is my place: in the world? with nature? within Australian society? within time and space? spiritually? emotionally? intellectually? in close relationships, or with strangers? Within a postcolonial world, how is place important? How is place constructed culturally and politically? How does the appropriation of physical place relate to the appropriation (and obliteration) of culture? How does this relate to the current reconciliation debate with regard to issues like land rights, compensation and the management of culturally significant sites?

John Cameron is another academic who has thought about what it means to experience a place. Until recently, Cameron was a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Ecology at the University of Western Sydney where he also convened four national colloquia on sense of place. He now resides on Bruny Island, south-east of Hobart, where he continues to research place theories and options for ecological regeneration. I find his definition of place-based writing useful here:

Place-based writing is writing concerned with and arising from the experience of a particular place... The work of the place-

based writer is to hold the creative tension between fostering a depth of experience of place and developing critical ecological and social awareness.... Without the development of ecological literacy and critical understanding of the cultural and gendered constructions of place, a sense of place is no longer a force for ecological and social justice. (2004, p 35)

One of the seminal examples of this type of place-based writing is the North-American, Barry Lopez's, critically acclaimed and award-winning *Arctic Dreams* (1986). Jason Cowley has reviewed this key text in the British magazine of new writing, *Granta*; a publication he currently edits. In his review, Cowley writes:

For Lopez, writing about the North American Arctic was not an exercise in self-enronement; he was not...a romantic adventurer and wilderness was not a screen on which he wanted to project his longings and needs. As a field biologist he was engaged in nothing less than a struggle for exactitude: the struggle to find a language, free from cliché, in which to describe and explain in all its complicated particularity a landscape undergoing irrevocable change. It was a moral exercise... He moved through this landscape with wonder, but also with care. (2008, pp 7-9)

I love that taking the time to 'attend to detail', to 'struggle for exactitude', forces me to examine my place in the natural world and the responsibilities that come with it. John Cameron echoes these thoughts in his discussion of the Australian poet and natural historian, Eric Rolls', *A Million Wild Acres* (1969). In describing the best environmental writing, Cameron argues:

Eric Rolls' language comes out of long experience of the Pilliga and its inhabitants; it *informs* the reader about the bird and tree species and their surprising interrelationships; it *provokes* the reader to question received wisdom about the history of the Scrub, to wonder how human beings and animals can possibly cohabit; it *inspires* the reader to pay closer attention to his or her own place. (Cameron 2004, p 35)

So the best writing about the natural world is place-based and it informs, provokes and inspires: it compels the reader to consider the social justice and ecological implications of their lives; to connect with their environment by feeling wonder, but also respect and care. It is with this type of literature, with these aspirations, that my own project is concerned. I agree with Scott Slovic, the Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, when he calls for:

Literature – or art more generally – to help us use our senses more fully and intensely. We need to overcome the abstractness

of our ecological awareness and learn to live through such awareness, to feel our presence in the world. Writers in general – and I find this particularly true of so-called environmental writers – serve as extensions of our own nerve endings. They feel for us, they exhort us to feel more intensely, more fully, and they demonstrate the processes of sensation in a way that we can enact more consciously. (Slovic 2004, p 62)

Lydia Peelle, another North American writer, would agree with Slovic. In an interview with Jason Cowley she has argued that:

The new nature writing, rather than being pastoral or descriptive or simply a natural history essay, has got to be couched in stories – whether fiction or non-fiction – where humans are present. Not only as observers, but as intrinsic elements. I feel this is important, because we've got to reconnect ourselves to our environment and fellow species in every way we can, every chance we have. In my thinking, it is the tradition of the false notion of separation that has caused us so many problems and led to much environmental degradation. I believe that it is our great challenge in the twenty-first century to remake the connection. I think our lives depend on it. (Cowley (ed) 2008, p 12)

The 'new nature writing', as described by Peelle, is an ambitious and vital endeavour. It is a literary project that I wish to contribute to.

*gathering points: AUSTRALIAN POETRY: a natural selection*

There are the nature poetries of praise, dwelling and image. Each of these types of nature poetry have a different purpose in writing about the natural world as it is encountered in the suburbs and cities, in the rural areas and in the National Parks and State Reserves. The nature poetries of praise, dwelling and image all remind the reader that to engage with the incredibly rich natural and human history that has shaped the Australian continent for so long, we are best served to approach the natural world as a 'cultural landscape', highlighting that all places are an intense interaction between the biophysical environment and various phases of human habitation. A major strategy of this type of writing, especially the nature poetry of dwelling, is to be place-based and informed by the ethical orientation of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. This poetry can also see in the natural world powerful imagery for the exploration of many human concerns. This literature informs, provokes and inspires the reader to think about nature and the presence of humans within it. It does this by challenging the reader to consider the social justice and ecological implications of their lives and to connect with their environment by feeling wonder, respect and care. It is with this type of nature poetry that I am concerned, both critically and creatively.

Following this introduction, my work for this Doctor of Creative Arts is in three parts: my essay on Australian nature poetry is section two; my own collection of poetry and statement of poetics are sections three and four. I have chosen to integrate my creative project into my critical work to highlight how they are connected. I read before I write, and therefore it seems logical, and appreciative, that I give my reading of Australian nature poetry before I present my own creative work. My poetry could not have been written without the poems that I respond to in section two of my thesis. My reading is a prequel to my writing. Section four is my statement of poetics, an analysis of my creative process. It seems appropriate and more reflective, therefore, to include it as a sequel to my creative work. Through these projects I hope to re-evaluate the worth of the nature poetries of praise, dwelling and image, exploring the ways in which they can give us a different view of ourselves and of our place. It is my contention that the under-valuing of nature poetry is due, in large, to its being viewed as merely a response to nature rather than as a dialogue between poet, nature and the evolving ideas and understanding of ecology, natural history, science, and Indigenous culture.

*Gathering Points: AUSTRALIAN POETRY: A Natural Selection* is a useful title for my over-all project as it brings together all the elements that make up my work and reflects the idea that notions of place, whether they be geographical or the niche that an organism has evolved to fill, are not static but are constantly being challenged, altered and constructed through physical movement, such as migration and invasion; through intellectual debate and re-examination; through archaeological and scientific research which bring new insights and knowledge; and through personal engagement and reflection. Not only are our notions of place transported, they reflect and give meaning to us socially and culturally. In a sense, we gather around our constructed place. It is our campfire, our hearth, our identity.

*Section Two*

*Australian Poetry: A Natural Selection*

The best Australian nature poems of praise, dwelling and image inform the reader about the biophysical and cultural landscape. It does this by paying attention to the detail and names of ecological literacy; by provoking the reader to see the nonhuman environment as more than just a framing device for the human drama and by according respect and accountability to the non-human environment; and by inspiring the reader to pay close attention to the ecological and social justice implications of their lives. One way for nature poetry to achieve these aims is to be place-based and to be informed by the ethical orientation of ecocriticism and postcolonialism. The biophysical environment features in much of the subject matter and imagery of Australian poetry and it is now time that I considered this preoccupation with the natural world, examining the strengths and weaknesses of this type of writing.

The Australian writer Alison Croggon has written that Australian poetry has ‘an obsession with the natural world’ (2008/2009, p 98). A significant Melbourne poet, novelist and librettist, Croggon was named the 2009 Geraldine Pascall Critic of the Year for her work in theatre criticism. In her analysis of the relationship between nature and Australian poetry, Croggon has argued that ‘intimacy and estrangement: these themes wind themselves through Australian poetry’s love affair with nature’ (2008/2009, p 99). University of Southern Queensland academic, Jayne Fenton Keane, has echoed Croggon arguing that ‘in the relatively brief history of written Australian poetry, nature has emerged as a quintessential theme’ (2010, p 1). It is hardly surprising to note, therefore, that there is a significant body of writing that we can call nature poetry in the way that I have defined it:

- Nature poetry of praise
- Nature poetry of dwelling
- Nature poetry of image

Before presenting my own nature poetry, section three of my thesis, it is necessary to give a close reading of the Australian poetry described by Croggon and Keane above, examining this ‘obsession with the natural world’. This will allow me to analyse the contexts and sources of my own creative work, elaborating on the principle themes of a place-based literature informed by the values of ecocriticism and postcolonialism.

In this chapter, all of the poems that I will analyse are Australian, and most of them have been written during the last forty years. The exceptions are mid-twentieth century poets such as David Campbell, William Hart-Smith, Gwen Harwood, Kenneth MacKenzie, John Manifold, David Martin and Judith Wright; with John Shaw Neilson as an early-twentieth century example. And whether these poets and poems seek to praise, to explore the issue of ‘our common dwelling’, or develop nature as image, certain subjects can be seen as preoccupations. A look at these will show that far from presenting a stereotyped or idealised view of nature, as it is encountered in the bush or on the farm or in the suburbs and cities, Australian nature poetry develops a far more interesting, and in many ways surprising, presentation of the practicalities of human interactions with the natural world.

## Australian nature poetry of praise

Poems that seek to praise can be divided into three main categories. There is the hymn of praise to a particular place: a mountain lookout, a waterfall, a creek junction, a region or national park, a farm or suburban backyard. There is praise of a specific animal or plant, usually of some commonly encountered bird or insect. And there is the expression of wonder, of praise for nature's capacity for regeneration, particularly in the face of drought and bushfire. The effect of many of these poems of praise is well described by the Australian novelist and poet, James Bradley, in his review of Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986). As I write in my introduction, *Arctic Dreams* is a seminal example of a place-based text that incorporates the approaches of the living sciences and creative arts in the way that it responds to a landscape. In his review, Bradley writes:

Lopez's account of the Arctic is anchored in his observations of its terrain, its light and the animals that inhabit it. Yet, it is observation rendered so as to make each moment transcend its detail... By attending to detail, by learning to see things as they are, we learn to dissolve ourselves into landscapes, to become inhabitants of a shared world... one to which we owe a silent respect, and an allegiance. (Bradley 2001, p. 28)

These insights into what makes this type of place-based nature writing so consequential have some very interesting parallels as we begin to look at the Australian nature poetry of praise.

### *The praise poetry of RF Brissenden, Les Murray, Robert Adamson and Judith Wright*

One Australian poem that achieves the effect described by Bradley in his review of *Arctic Dreams* is the late RF Brissenden's (1928-1991) 'Birds About the House'. Tinged with some regret for time passing and the loss of old friends, the poem describes a house built on the edge of bushland. The poem records, and praises, the wonderful native bird life that visits the house over a ten-year period: whipbirds, currawongs, kookaburras, parrots, bowerbirds and lyrebirds. Without becoming an encyclopaedic catalogue, the poem is a subtle blending of scientific knowledge with poetic observation. Brissenden is aware of the role of birdcall in marking territory and in reproduction. The poem captures beautifully the unique and well-known whip-crack call of the whipbird; a call typically uttered by mated pairs; the long drawn-out explosive whip-crack of the male, immediately answered with a quick 'choo-choo' by the female. Brissenden captures it thus:

That year it was the whip-birds we noticed most:  
All day the forest rang  
With the male-birds' brilliant drawn-out whistling lash

And their consorts' echoing song.

The poem concludes on an unsentimental and affirmative note:

I thought how summers pass,

And how the whip-birds came – and how, although  
Their song, as it did then,  
Still rings beneath the trees, we have not seen  
The shy whip-birds again. (Brissenden 1993, pp 30-31)

Brissenden continues to praise the wild birds that visit his house in 'Winter Matins'. Here he praises the dawn, 'the best time of the day', as:

... The sun  
Flashes on emerald wings: king parrots swoop  
And settle, one by one.  
Companionable, comically grave,  
Ruffled against the cold  
They eat the brilliant fruit....

Lost in his observation and praise, the poet suddenly realises that:

... Some (of the king parrots) hang head down-  
wards, spread slow wings to hold  
Their swaying balance: in the softening air  
Their under-feathers burn  
A clearer red, their wings a leafier green.  
Beauty and grace are born  
Suddenly from the random movements of  
Birds. The incredulous heart  
Stirs at the mystery, yearning still to find  
In chance the signs of art  
And order....

The realisation of this revelation of the basic nature of our attraction to reverence leads the poet back, quietly, to his warm bed where he watches his wife asleep:

... remembering the love we made  
Last night; and wish that each  
Day could begin like this, when simple joy  
Assumes the shape of praise  
And prayer – as in that earliest and lost  
Morning of all our days. (Brissenden 1993, p 5)

Both of these poems display an accuracy of observation and naming that testifies to a mindful respect and love for the natural world. This love for Australia's bird life is the subject of many poems of praise. In 'Dead Trees in the Dam', Les Murray develops a wonderful juxtaposition as he celebrates the colour, movement and sound of the birds that visit a stand of dead trees over the course of a day (1996, p 18). These are trees that appear as 'castle scaffolding tall in moat' and 'flower each morning with birds'. But as with RF Brissenden, Murray's poem delights in an accuracy of observation and naming. Murray captures the 'resident / cormorants with musket-hammer necks', 'the clinician spoonbill', the 'twilight herons', the 'pearl galahs in pink-fronted / confederacy', the 'misty candelabrum / of egrets', the 'stopped-motion shrapnel / of kingparrots', the 'wed ducks', magpies, the 'high profile ibis' and the 'big blow-in cuckoo crying / Alarm, Alarm on the wing'.

In 'Flowering Eucalypt In Autumn' (1988, pp 169-170), Murray praises a tree that is 'all stir in its high reaches'. The tree's 'strung haze-blue foliage is dancing' as:

Bees still at work up there track  
around their exploded furry likeness

and the lawn underneath's a napped rug  
of eyelash drift, of blooms flared  
like a sneeze in a redhaired nostril,

minute urns, pinch-sized rockets  
knocked down by winds, by night-creaking  
fig-squirting bats, or the daily

parrot gang with green pocketknife wings.  
Bristling food for tough delicate  
raucous life, each flower comes

as a spray in its own turned vase,  
a taut starburst, honeyed model  
of the tree's fragrance crisping in your head.

In his praise poetry, Murray celebrates the place of rural Australia, especially of the farming and forest country of the New South Wales North Coast where he lives. Poems such as 'Once in a Lifetime, Snow' (1988, pp 18-19), 'The Flying-Fox Dreaming' (1988, pp 99-100), 'Laconics: The Forty Acres' (1988, p108), 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Cycle' (1988, pp 115-122), 'Equanimity' (1988, pp 148-149) and 'Midwinter Kangaroo Nests' (2010, p 68) are wonderful achievements. The effect of these poems is well described by the Australian academic and poet Lawrence Bourke. Writing about Murray's poem, 'The Broad Bean Sermon' (Murray 1988, pp 94-95), Bourke observes:

Murray praises the humble beans which he gathers from his garden,  
and reads in them a sermon of good humour, resilience, vitality and

variety. With a few deft similes, he associates vegetables with people, a connection also suggested by the awful buried pun of human beings. Beans, we come to see, exemplify the bounty and wonder of creation... The abundance, the continuing mystery of creation and the amazing variety, evoke an attitude of such tolerance and equanimity that the 'health' offered by the beans is demonstrably a grace bestowed by creation. (Bourke 1992, p 123)

Such celebration of the interconnectedness of all creatures and an approach to the natural world that is life-affirming, almost sacramental, in the way that it cultivates a poetry of communion with nature as a form of communion with God, is a feature of the Murray poem of praise. This is poetry that sees goodness in the world and is content to praise what has been made. This affirmative approach causes some difficulties in Murray's poetry that considers the issue of humanity's ability to dwell in rural places, which I will look at later when I examine the Australian nature poetry of dwelling, but Murray's poems of praise are remarkable.

Robert Adamson has spent a career affirming the view that all life is interlinked as he praises the Hawkesbury River and its wildlife, especially its bird life. Most of Adamson's poems of celebration develop in nature an image to explore the complexities of intimate human relationships. As Jill Jones, the Australian poet and poetry reviewer and winner of the 1993 Mary Gilmore Award has written, 'the river has become a large part of Adamson's iconography...it becomes bound up with questions about [among other things] death and language' (1995, p 192). Some poems, however, are simply hymns of praise, keeping nature as their subject. One such poem is 'Folk Song' (Adamson 2004, p 114). As well as 'singing of the mulloway' as they 'rise breaking the surface', the poem praises the river's bird life:

...Here  
the long-billed ibis go savage  
in the mangroves:  
  
Egyptians, blown in  
on some cosmic whim, they  
plunge their heads  
  
into the black mud swamp  
and drag out long bloodworms;  
the royal spoonbills  
  
shake their crowns,  
head feathers white calligraphy  
of surrender....

The poem takes delight in not only the capacity for close observation; it also celebrates the possibility for human reconnection with the natural world. Adamson's vision is one

that presents human history as intimately implicated in natural history. For Adamson, 'we live here by this / sliding water' (2004, p 114).

Another poet who has written powerfully about such interconnectedness in the natural world is Judith Wright. The now retired University of New England academic, Shirley Walker, describes Wright's attitude towards nature as 'one of reverence for life; a reverence which will treat both nature and ourselves in the consciousness of nature as one interacting miracle' (1991, p 86). Wright's reverence for nature is certainly present in her fascination with bird life. 'Egrets' (1994, p 114) is just one example of what Judith Wright can achieve in the hymn of praise to the natural world. The poem describes how 'Once as I travelled through a quiet evening / I saw a pool, jet-black and mirror-still'. The pool is lined with 'slender paperbarks' and in its water are 'thirty egrets wading'. 'Egrets' is another perfect example of what James Bradley highlights when he says that 'it is by learning to see things as they are, that we learn to dissolve ourselves into landscapes, to become inhabitants of a shared world' (2001, p 12). 'Egrets' concludes with this unforgettable stanza:

Once in a lifetime, lovely past believing,  
your lucky eyes may light on such a pool.  
As though for many years I had been waiting,  
I watched in silence, till my heart was full  
of clear dark water, and white trees unmoving,  
and, whiter yet, those thirty egrets wading.

These poems by RF Brissenden, Robert Adamson, Les Murray and Judith Wright are wonderful examples of what that leading American ecopoet and ecocritic, Gary Snyder, calls 'being nature literate: knowing who's who and what's what in the ecosystem' (1995, p 171). By taking this time, they signal their intent to accord nature respect and praise.

### *Praise poetry of unlikely living things*

It is one thing to praise the wading egret, the flashes of colour of king parrots at dawn or the quick movement of whipbirds among 'the dappling shade of burrawang fronds', but what about a 'pest' like the common garden snail? Should they be accorded a similar respect and allegiance? RF Brissenden's remarkable poem, 'The Mating of Snails' (1993, p 47) is a fusion of the intimate attention to detail of the gardener with the insight of the natural historian. For Brissenden, the snail is a 'blue blood' and an ecstatic lover who:

Then... move away  
Leaving slow glistening trails  
Across the stones,  
Each one to lay its eggs.

When the young hatch out  
They emerge entire  
As tiny snails: blue blooded, tender, moist,  
Perfect in each small part.

The poem does not anthropomorphise, which the British academic and ecocritic Greg Garrard defines as ‘the system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms by ascribing human form or attributes to non-human beings or things’ (2004, p 183). It treats the snails as themselves, separate, and as the culmination of a highly successful natural history. It is for these reasons that the poem accords the snails respect and allegiance; not because they are rare or exotic or in need of our protection. I am going to say much more about anthropomorphism in Section Four of my thesis.

This location of the praiseworthy in the most unlikely of living things is repeated time and again: snakes, flies, moths, earwigs, worms, beetles, dung beetles, the bush mouse and water rat. Some poems, like Andrew Burke’s ‘Elegance’ (1996, p 11), Steve Evan’s ‘Flies’ (1994, p 64), Peter Goldsworthy’s ‘Bushflies’ (2001, pp 28-29), John Kinsella’s ‘Warning-Snakes (Reprise)’ (2005, p 36), Jan Owen’s ‘Beetles’ (2008), Lenore Ray’s ‘Ants’ (2003, p 63) and ‘Happiness’ (2003 p 69) and Eric Rolls’ ‘Water Rat’ (1990, p 64) use humour and wit to achieve their effect; all delight in using the startling image and understatement to surprise. So Kevin Hart can write in ‘flies’:

I know you live off filth, I know  
  
you never work like bees  
and certainly never shine like butterflies;  
and yet, old friends,  
this morning as I hear your buzz  
you bring my past all back to me, like honey and light. (Hart 1984, p 22)

While in ‘Moths’, Diane Fahey writes:

Yet, multiplying as if by thought,  
they have their future strategies:  
pupae wreathed inside lids, buff wrigglers  
chiselling rice to webbed clumps. (Fahey 1993, p 29)

This is poetry that shines in its effect: the careful attention to the use of sound within each line and the way the imagery builds through the quatrain. In *Mayflies in Amber* (1993), Diane Fahey achieves this effect in poem after poem as she celebrates the world of insects: cicadas, butterflies, cockroaches, bedbugs, lice, fleas. Sometimes she writes the poem of praise, often she develops in the world of insects an image to explore the human concern: our foibles, aggressions, compulsions, and our search for a more creative and spiritual life. Fahey never falls into the trap of anthropomorphism and as the writer of the book’s blurb expresses so well: ‘as the collection unfolds, a complex

psychology is established, and we are left with both a sense of the otherness of these ingenious, fertile creatures, and a mirror to our own natures, our part in the cosmic dance' (Fahey, 1993). Fahey writes, in her book *Sea Wall and River Light* (2006), with equal assurance of the sea birds and other creatures that inhabit the region around the Victorian coastal town of Barwon Heads.

Another poet who writes in praise of these small ingenious creatures, in a way similar to Fahey, is Jan Owen. Owen writes of dragonflies and skinks in 'Seascape With Young Girl' (2008, pp 10-11); of gnats, Christmas beetles, a praying mantis and water striders in 'Insectary' (2008, pp 30-33); of echidnas in 'Echidna' (2008, p 256); of fireflies in 'Shifting the Dark' (2008, p 309) and of ants in 'Touching this Matter' (2008, pp 310-311). Fahey and Owen delight in praising the miniature in the natural world, drawing our attention to unexpected consolations. As Jan Owen writes in 'Brownhill Creek' (2008, p 176):

After the miles of dusty road, the shade  
was another season of willow, moss, dogwood.  
The blackberry-hidden creek and its creatures called.

This poetry of Fahey and Owen pays close attention to the natural world, praising the way that the human concern can be implicated in the lives of such easily over-looked creatures. This approach highlights the interconnectedness of all living things by avoiding the trap of anthropomorphism and by encouraging an attitude of respect and empathy.

Vivian Smith contributes to this achievement of praising the unlikely and easily over-looked living thing in his 'Dung Beetles' (1995, p 88). Employing humour and the clever pun, Smith praises the dung beetles as 'swift, efficient, frugal, patient, clean' as he watches them 'treat a dog turd on the lawn / with rites unfolding neatly as a screen'. For Smith, the dung beetles 'love their work, they live on what they do'. Lesley Walter, a Sydney poet and winner of the 2004 Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, has described aptly the effect of such a poem. She writes, 'Smith truly captures the *art of quiet observation* in a poem such as this...he demonstrates his keen observatory skills, coupled with a gift for distilling each subject into a set of clear and original images' (1996, pp 80-81). The poem is nature-literate. Smith's witty tongue-in-cheek location of the praiseworthy in the dung beetle, an insect Smith wishes to give 'pride of place in his new book / with emblems like the eagle and the rose', is like Peter Goldsworthy's celebration of bushflies:

Somehow  
they fall  
through the sky  
  
much  
heavier than air  
machines,

bumping  
into scenery  
like low-flying gravel.

*Eat me*  
they glint  
loudly:

glitter-blue,  
panel-beater  
green.

They overshoot.  
They stall.  
They lob

into mouths.  
They wedge  
down throats.

They cover  
steaming mounds  
like sequins:

unfit  
to survive  
by the billion. (Goldsworthy 2001, pp 28-29)

Goldsworthy's imagery, his use of alliteration, his clever line divisions, and his repetition of the pronoun 'they' to suggest the flies' anonymous crowd-like success 'by the billion' shows his rhythmic and verbal playfulness. Not all praise poetry, however, seeks such an unexpected or humorous tone.

### *Praise poetry of rural Australia*

David Campbell's (1915-1979) hymns of praise to the Monaro plains are so intense they are almost ecstatic in their will to be joined with the land, to be one with the world of nature. In 'Visitors' (1989, pp 88-89), David Campbell writes of the night visitations to his bedroom of a possum and yellow robin before:

Next night it was  
That you came in  
Walking naked

Like the moon  
That shines all night  
With nothing on.

While 'Such Early Hills' concludes with:

Bird, tree and hill with scattered coins  
Of flowers are in my embrace  
When I hold you and through our loins  
The river leaps, while in your face  
Thrown back as if to take the sun  
Shines the first wonder of the dawn. (Campbell 1989, p 66)

Campbell's sexualised personification of place echoes the subtle lyricism of the early-twentieth century poet, John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942), in 'May' (1976, p 146). This is wonderful lyric poetry that comes close to farce, but is saved by genuine feeling and by Campbell and Neilson's skill as poets. As Leonie Kramer, the first Professor of Australian Literature at Sydney University writes, 'the completeness of David Campbell's own assimilation of the Australian landscape, and the vitality of his unifying imagination are a ...perfect marriage of subject, tone and rhythmic energy' (Kramer 1981, p 160). Campbell certainly does not present the natural world as merely a framing device. His poems celebrate the natural world as an equal and legitimate interest to the human interest; he shows how intimately human history can be implicated in natural history. 'Night Sowing' (1989, p 31), one of Campbell's most loved and widely anthologised poems, is a great example of this; 'The Boongary' (1989, pp 96-97) is a little less known, but also ably illustrates the point.

Not all praise poems of rural Australia are quite as ecstatic in their tone as that of David Campbell. Nandi Chinna in 'morning cows' (2007, p 13) expresses a great love for dairying country, and identifies herself very closely with the cows about to be milked as she:

... calls their names  
like a yodeller  
like a baritone  
a Tibetan monk deeply  
calling to god

But in the final stanza the cows appear from out of the 'thick fog' before returning to it again:

the clicking of hooves  
and warm breath  
curling into morning air

In 'Out of the Dark', Sarah Day also praises this moment of 'visitation' by a 'circle of great-faced beasts'. She describes families gathered around a bonfire one cold autumn night when a 'herd of Friesians / must have approached, stealthy as the encroaching night'. Day expresses a wonderful sense of awe for this experience as her poem concludes by asking:

Who knows how, when you are gazing inwards at an ember,  
a circle of great-faced beasts can materialise

at one's shoulder out of the dark periphery? (Day 2004, p 34)

Dairy cows are the focus of so many poems. In remembering his home dairying country of rural Victoria, Philip Hodgins (1959-1995) has offered the following praise quatrain, titled 'Pregnant Cow':

Her swollen belly was a hammock,  
Somewhere to sleep, a nice warm bath.  
This morning in the foggy paddock  
I found some mushrooms, and a calf. (Hodgins, 2000, p 87)

Similarly Geoff Page in 'The Signs' (2001, p 5) writes of his love for his home country of the Clarence River region in northeast NSW. He writes of the sounds and smells, 'the signs', that tell him when he is close to home:

The mix of all these on the breeze  
Is how I know I'm home

The signs are of eucalyptus oil, of smoke from a grass fire, the smell of cow dung drying and the scent of horse sweat. The signs, mundane as they are, show an intimate attention to detail and a love for the land. The poem has a great simplicity but still captures beautifully those childhood memories of the place, the home, where the poet spent his childhood.

In 'Brindabellas' (1999, pp 60-62), Geoff Page changes his focus from his childhood home of the Clarence to the National Park around Canberra where he lives in the present. The poem begins with a celebration of rain after a long dry period:

a shower shifts in  
across the suburb  
along the silence in the tiles

down the rumour  
of a drainpipe  
out across the parched backyard

The rain reminds him again of his childhood home on the Clarence. It is 'a music made by rain on iron / across the rooves of childhood.' Later, walking in the Brindabella Ranges now 'washed and sharp', Page climbs to a lookout where:

The emptiness of air allowed  
as through some kind of lens

a separation of the trees  
a measure of their stems  
beyond all distances we knew.

And wanting more, we climbed on higher  
the magpies' sound like  
mountain water

widening the view.

The poem concludes with an affectionate recall of the gravel roads of his youth in the Clarence and of the present in the Brindabella Ranges. Gravel roads that:

... bristle under snow...  
almost any way in fact

except the view when driving them:  
those scrappy saplings by the road  
whitening with dust,

the weathering of bark in strips,  
that wooden rattle in the breeze,  
and how the gravel just goes on

and on beneath the trees. (Page 1999, pp 60-62)

Like David Campbell, Geoff Page writes with much affection for the natural world in rural Australia, a shared world to which both respect and allegiance is gratefully accorded. Both have also written of times when that respect and allegiance to the natural world has not been given, and these poems will be considered later when I examine the poetry of dwelling.

A poet who has influenced many in their approach to the pastoral (or anti-pastoral) in Australia is of course Judith Wright. She has written poems of praise to rural Australia and, as we shall discover shortly, also poems that question our ability to dwell in the world. One poet who has been particularly influenced by Wright is Peter Skrzynecki. In 'Falls Country', a poem written by Wright and dedicated to Skrzynecki, Wright challenges:

Listen. Listen,  
latecomer to my country,  
sharer in what I know  
eater of wild manna.

There is  
there was  
a country  
that spoke in the language of leaves. (Wright 1994, pp 238-239)

A post Second World War Polish immigrant to Australia, Peter Skrzynecki is Wright's 'latecomer to my country'. He has certainly learnt, like the other poets I have just considered, to 'speak the language of leaves'. Uli Krahn, a Sydney scholar and multimedia visual artist, has described this process. She argues that:

Like Harpur, Skrzynecki approaches nature as a signifier for something else...it is the vaguely Romantic idea of nature as a repository of personal and supernatural truths...where nature itself erases the differences of culture...uniting Australians of all cultural backgrounds as one; the migrant problem of making the alien land home can be neatly overcome by such a philosophy which assigns nature an active role in the process of making the new land one's own'. (2000, pp 34-35)

Lesley Walter has also described this political dimension, highlighting their role in 'linking the environment to the sense of an Australian [homogeneous] identity' (1996, p 75). Walter describes how 'like Judith Wright, and Charles Harpur before her, Vivian Smith [and Peter Skrzynecki] take up the task of recording the details of Australian nature so they become part of the heritage of the transplanted Australian' (1996, p 75). As Skrzynecki writes in 'Wallamumbi' (2007, pp 11-12) – a poem he dedicates to Judith Wright – 'the chapters are still not finished' but:

In the ancient forest of gorges  
he listened to the whisper of birds,  
heard the chant of midnight prophecies  
and a name spelt out into the darkness of gullies

A reading of this poem, along with Skrzynecki's Cowra, Jeogla and suburban Sydney poems, will illustrate the approach to nature suggested by Krahn and Walter. Throughout his career, Skrzynecki has written so evocatively of the country around Cowra, the location of the migrant hostel where he first lived after migrating to Australia, and of the country around Jeogla, the location of his first appointment as a teacher. 'Jeogla 2' (2007, pp 324-325) is a recently written Skrzynecki poem that echoes the celebration of country begun by the young Skrzynecki in 'Wallamumbi'. In 'Jeogla 2' he has written how it is enough to:

stand in the creek

out of whose heart  
a rainbow rose one afternoon –  
drenching me in golden mist  
I reached out to touch  
but couldn't hold.

Enough to be startled  
by a flock of crimson rosellas  
bursting out of a stringybark forest –  
or to fall asleep  
in a weatherboard house  
surrounded by hills and granite chasms.

In 'Summer Pastoral' (2007, p 300) he praises the 'blue wrens at play / in the homestead garden' and evokes beautifully the harshness of rural Australia as:

Red dust lifts  
on the road from the highway,  
drifts across paddocks  
of cattle and sheep –  
catches in the branches  
of red gums and peppercorns  
where long-billed corellas  
and galahs perch.

Peter Skrzynecki, however, has not only evoked the dry beauty of rural Australia. Some of his most memorable poems of praise are located in the suburbs of Sydney where he has lived for most of his life.

### *Praise poetry of nature in urban and suburban Australia*

The suburban nature writing of Peter Skrzynecki reminds us of Kate Rigby's words that I quoted and discussed in my thesis introduction: 'the challenge is not to flee to the rural countryside or bush but to reinhabit the world as it is given to us...accepting that it is in this world that we must find happiness, or not at all' (Rigby 2004, p 261). Here he returns again and again to the suburban backyard, the wild birds that visit and the trees that break its skyline. In 'Silky Oak' (1993, pp 111-112), he writes of how:

The sun's rising light catches  
in the silky oak's crown  
and fires it with a blaze of gold....

Lorikeets shriek and swarm  
in its branches, in the spikey harvest

that morning offers to the birds  
that invade suburban shrubs and trees

These observations are continued in 'The Banksia Tree' (2007, p 305). Here:

The banksia tree's  
grown straight and tall,  
full of flowers and seedpods;

rainbow-lorikeets  
screech and squabble for its nectar  
that's blossomed like gold;

plovers guard  
the lawns around it –  
claiming the territory as their own.

The morning's alive  
with singing birds  
that live in surrounding gardens –

that turn the silence  
of trees into song  
from one end of the street to the other.

A lone magpie  
ignores them all –  
releases its song of liquid vowels,

while the sun  
climbs over a papapet of foliage  
that crowns the banksia  
growing straight and tall.

'Morning Birds' (1978, p 23), 'The Frogs' (1989, pp 90-91) and 'Strawberries' (2007, pp 252-253) are equally wonderful praises to the natural world as it is encountered in suburban Australia. Since the majority of Australians live in suburban and urban spaces, it is hardly surprising to note that many poets have celebrated nature as it is encountered in these environments. Poets like Skrzynecki and RF Brissenden celebrate the colour, movement and sound of wild native birds, but they are birds that are most often encountered in suburban backyards, in suburban streetscapes and public gardens. Like many other poets, for example Kevin Brophy in 'Blue Tongue' (1997, p 37), Deb Westbury in 'Through the Garden' (1990, p 46), Judith Rodriguez in 'Reconnaissance' (1988, p 142) or Vivian Smith in 'Sparrows: Mosman' (1995, p 117), Skrzynecki and Brissenden celebrate those momentary encounters that they have with 'wild nature'. Ian McBryde also does this in 'Watching the Sprinklers' (2001, p 66). He describes the

delight that wild birds seem to take in ‘panting deliciously’ under the summer sprinklers:

A delicate voodoo, the sudden  
unexpected rain breaks  
every taboo, enters each  
secret place in wingless  
symmetry, all across the long  
slow baptised afternoons.

For some poets, however, the suburban backyard with its introduced flowering plants, fruit trees and vegetables is all the focus that is needed for delight and wonder. Bruce Dawe may not be well known as a nature poet, but he writes as well as anyone of the great abundance and shelter that can be found in the backyard vegetable patch. As Ken Goodwin, the now retired professor of English at the University of Queensland writes, ‘Dawe’s more characteristic position is that communion with nature is a form of communion with God’ (1988, p 93). The vegetable patch in ‘Apology for Impatience’ (Dawe 1983, p 35) shapes the poet’s dreams as:

Now through all my dreams  
Beans, beans are climbing.  
Between midnight and morning  
Pumpkins flower and the tomato seedlings  
Are carefully transplanted;  
Lying hunched in the darkness  
I am solicitous over  
All manner of things sprouting  
And blossoming.

In ‘Homo Suburbiensis’ (Dawe 1983, p 117) it is the suburban backyard with its vegetable patch that in fact defines the modern person with all their fears and hopes. Without becoming melodramatic, the poem beautifully describes how even in this world of constant change and loss of control one fact can be relied upon. There is:

One constant in a world of variables  
-a man alone in the evening in his patch of vegetables,  
and all the things he takes down with him there

Where the easement runs along the back fence and the air  
smells of tomato-vines, and the hoarse rasping tendrils  
of pumpkin flourish clumsy whips and their foliage sprawls

Over the compost-box, poising rampant upon  
the palings...

The poem ends, as Ken Goodwin describes (1988, p 93), with ‘the suburban gardener sacramentally offering up through his outdoor work’:

Not much but as much as any man can offer  
-time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever. (Dawe 1983, p 117)

For Bruce Dawe the small things matter, the rhythms of a life, the ordinary events and graces that give a life meaning. For Dawe it is our responsibility to be both attentive and appreciative. In ‘Beforehand’ (1983, p 226), Dawe writes appealingly of this as he reminds us that:

there’ll come a time  
when you would willingly give  
*everything*, for one hour,  
one word, one leaf,  
one kiss, one careless flower...  
and, enough being far too much,  
both heart and hand  
through which such riches flowed  
will close on sand.

Dawe’s theme might be simple, but it is no less profound for this. He summarises his concern in ‘Presences’: ‘This I would say: love life’ (1983, p 162). To this David Rowbotham (1924-2010) would add in ‘The Gardener’ (1975, p 75), ‘You can not know the kindness of a man / Till you see him in a garden with a spade / And birds about his feet.’

Sarah Day explores similar terrain in her poetry. In ‘Hens’ she writes:

I think I’ve been waiting for you all my life.  
To glimpse you through the kitchen window  
scratching between iris and daffodil,  
disrupting roots, sprawling moll-like  
in a patch of sun...

The poem, praising the significance of a chicken run in a backyard, continues:

Somehow for all the wreckage  
the garden was never more alive.  
You offer a remote conviviality....  
I’m grateful, watching you just now  
splashing about in dust  
for that reassurance you give,  
of simple notions, like goodness. (Day 2004, pp 55-56)



the long hot days too thinly shaded  
the hard hours of noon  
too far inland for change.  
I smooth the creases  
in the blue delineations of the pools  
their tinted shallows the glorious lid of sunset  
knowing what can and can't be had there  
brimming but not sliding over.

Caddy continues these reflections in 'Thunder' (2010, p 57): 'now thunder has been prowling the edges of the farm'. But all too often Caddy continues:

Sometimes very early a spatter of rain wets the ground.  
Sometimes a patch of blue sleight-of-hands a few clear drops  
but always the cough and growl  
at the back of the trees  
like a pet gone wild  
exploring the place between having and getting  
and won't come closer.

The sparseness of Caddy's lines scattered across the page so perfectly capture the wispy non-rain-bearing clouds over the Western Australian landscape. For William Hart-Smith (1911-1990) in 'Watercolour' (1985, pp 143-144), the wait before a storm's arrival is 'full of menace and foreboding', but the more imminent the arrival of rain the more we see that:

The green of the leaves of the river-gums  
is incredibly intensified: it burns.  
And the cockatoos that swarm, and scream insanely  
as the storm approaches,  
cannot bear the intensity of their own whiteness.

As Bronwyn Lea describes it in 'Drought' (2001, p 28), 'Except for the stones, / the riverbed is empty, / the water having left in early summer'. But as she also writes in 'These Gifts' (2008, p 13), we wait for rain, for days 'charmed':

Days like these – cool afternoons  
in late summer, a rain so delicate  
you can sit in the backyard & let the mist  
drizzle your face.

In 'Ordinary Grace' (2008, p 25) Lea describes a world where there is almost no 'language of the holy' - no sense of the miraculous - intense enough to capture justly the 'ordinary grace' of regenerating rain:

thunder & rain last night  
this morning growth comes as a shock  
the heightened green of the grass

a new generation of insects  
even the trees appear loftier  
overhead the deep flapping of galahs

the amorous prattle – there is no language

of the holy I think as the birds dip  
& wheel the sun hitting the soft grey  
of their wings

& flashing their pink undersides as I sink  
into the green & watery  
vernacular of the natural world

The simplicity of Lea's language and the absence of conventional grammar suggest a naivety and instinctual response in praise of regeneration in the natural world that belies what a cleverly crafted and successful poem this is. Lea writes very memorable nature poetry of praise that does not need the language of religion or of the supernatural to capture just how unique and satisfying 'ordinary grace' can be. This is praise to the ordinary grace that can be found all around us, in the world and life we inhabit now. It echoes the feeling that I wrote about before and is celebrated in Bruce Dawe's 'Beforehand' (1983, p 226):

Treasure the burgeoning sky,  
the ample air,  
treasure the million leaves,  
the seasons where  
you walk with your loving kind  
like a child again;  
savour the summer sun  
and the tall rain.

Memorable poems have been written about how Australians spend much time waiting for rain: David Curzon in 'Home' (1996, p 25), Laurie Duggan in 'Little History' (2003 p 25), Rory Harris in 'these bright' (1999, p 35), William Hart-Smith in 'Thirst' (1985, p 130) and 'Thunderstorm' (1985, p 131), SK Kelen in 'Falling Rain' (2006, p 82), Joyce Lee in 'Water in a dry country' (2003, p 122), Kathryn Lomer in 'Raintance' (2003, p 20), Judith Rodriguez in 'At the Nature Strip' (1988, p 133) and in 'Fourteen times saying rain for Tom' (1988, pp 208-209), and Vivian Smith in 'In Summer Rain' (1995, p 12) all explore this terrain. Jennifer Compton expresses it beautifully in 'The Sound of a Breaking String' (2002, p 32). She writes of the exuberant joy that comes with drought breaking rain:

The spring rains have arrived  
on the second day of spring....

Tonight it broke all over again.  
The spring rain moved in.

It has the sound,  
the absolute sound of rain.

Connie Barber writes with an equally assured sense of wonder in 'Those Mysterious Invasions' (2006, p 41):

Mice on the stairs, small claws scattering,  
an army of mice, before the tin roof sings drops  
and random drums. Gutters' single notes  
turn to an orchestra of rain:

and the smell, nothing so tender, so powerful:  
the whole house front to back, upstairs to down  
impregnated with the scent of breaking drought  
by the angle of a million scattering feet.

Kate Llewellyn, in 'Blue Mountains Christmas' (1994, p 61), explores the particular delight that comes in the summer rain that not only breaks a dry spell but also extinguishes wild bushfire. She writes:

Yesterday, smoke from the valley –  
I thought it was mist  
until I smelt it –  
and today, each leaf holds water drops,  
shining –  
it rained in the night.

The poem concludes, both appreciatively and attentively, with:

What good wind sent me here  
with black cockatoos  
screaming above like choking horses,  
where the phone seldom rings,  
the occasional car passes by  
and I'm left with no excuses  
watching sparrows in the tulip tree  
and mist in the pines.

Like William Hart-Smith in 'Blackboys In Flower', Yve Louis in 'Grasstrees' (2002, pp 10-11) and Tom Shapcott in 'Xanthorrhoea' (1989, pp 220-222), Llewellyn expresses great delight and wonder in both the capacity of nature for regeneration in the face of apparent disaster, and in nature's opportunism in adapting to changed circumstances. In 'Magpies' (1994, p 62) she describes again the summer heat and bushfire that seems to threaten all in its path. She describes how, carelessly, after leaving a garden sprinkler on:

Magpies found this fountain  
and stalked around.  
They made a midsummer opera  
and gargled water –  
it became their song.  
They sang as if to praise  
the fountain in the tree.

While all this was happening  
a hundred fires swept the State.  
Great trees exploded,  
birds and animals caught fire.  
People died and houses burnt,  
yet still these magpies sang  
around the fountain in the tree.

This is poetry of praise that sees in the juxtaposition of imminent conflagration with a defiant assertion of the continued possibility of spontaneity and renewal, a reason for celebration and pride; it is a signal of Bruce Dawe's wonderful dictum: 'This I would say: love life' (1983, p 162).

### *The praise poetry of Judith Beveridge and Robert Gray*

Before I conclude my treatment of Australia's nature poetry of praise I would like to discuss the poetry of Judith Beveridge and Robert Gray. Both are fine imagists who write, especially early in their careers, predominately in a quiet tone adopting a flexible free-verse style. Both display an accuracy of observation and naming that testifies to a mindful respect and love for the natural world. Both ask us to see things as they are, to become reconciled with landscape, to see the world as one that is most joyous when shared. Like Les Murray and Geoff Page, Gray writes most often of place, especially of the north coast of New South Wales, his 'home country'. Beveridge writes more of particular living things: elephants, lyrebirds, monarch butterflies, ladybird beetles, marsupials, caterpillars, kookaburras and pythons.

In 'Journey: The North Coast' and 'Homerun', Gray describes his train journeys home. In both poems he writes of that 'first time that you see the ocean' and of how:

there is a glimpse of the sea  
and of an estuary, before that – no matter...you know you will soon  
    come to the place I mean  
when you've left Numbucca  
and on either side there is a forest of paperbarks  
in a swamp or reed-bed,  
birch-white  
saplings, long and thin, that push up  
tightly together, and are gleaming quietly, in the softness of the preferred  
    hour.

From this first sighting of the ocean, the train 'leaps on':

into the clean  
dairying country; among the cleared paddocks,  
that stage their single great trees'  
eloquence  
to a massed audience of new-growth forest, shadow-faced.  
This bright, mown country is transformed by the steam that  
    shows over the forest,  
by the emerging light,  
as a piece of toast is with its butter. (Gray 1990, p 2)

These visually evocative poems recall the celebrations of country by Geoff Page; the intimate sensual 'signs' that tell of home. In some of his more recent poems Gray has introduced a more formal emphasis by replacing the free-verse discipline of matching form to content with the creative pressure of rhyme. This is well illustrated by the short lyric 'Dawn' (1993, p 71):

Severing the darkness  
of the wide lake, its bluish-blackness,  
  
from a backdrop  
of mountain, with which it's made one flat shape,  
  
is a single line  
of light, below the mist, that's as fine  
  
as if surface tension  
of the water, or as if within a dim garden  
  
one saw night ebb  
on the horizontal guy-line of a spiderweb.

Gray's rhymed couplets of alternating short and long lines beautifully suggest the architecture of the spiderweb strung above the 'surface tension / of the water' and the

evocative connection between the first light of day in the swirling mist against a backdrop of mountain and lake. This is an imagist poetry keenly aware of the sound of words and their capacity to generously celebrate a moment spent in the natural world. Gray reminds us of what can be gained by locating a nature poetry of praise in a dialogue between the poet and a particular place.

Judith Beveridge's poems of praise often focus on the place of a living thing within its ecosystem; in this way they recall the wonderful poetry of Diane Fahey and Jan Owen. In 'Monarch Butterflies', Beveridge describes how:

These bright lapels that are so briefly  
matched to the flowers, they hover  
for the sweet sharp scent; and tremble  
as they place along tip ends  
a weightless eyelash. They mate  
and close their wings privately a moment  
like letters. Passing from one place  
to the next they nod and lift into headwinds  
to cross over borders.... (Beveridge 1987, p 26)

In 'Ladybirds' (1987, p 27), Beveridge describes these simple insects as 'glass eyes in the soft faces of dolls', now 'rising tiny as sparks / fire-chips lifting higher than all / the safaris of ash'. For their 'silent ascension / for their colour / for their stillness in hand' the ladybird beetles are 'Easter beetles' recalling 'some lost remembered face / with a simple name and a pale peace'. As Beveridge writes in 'Last Walk' (1987, pp 42-43), she is a poet who 'loves the bush'. She loves to 'hear the creek: all that rush and trickle / through an uneven valley'. Beveridge writes:

Now, it's midday. The creek is the sound  
of pirate-red parrots crowding pockets with silver.  
I see benumbed trunks, all that paper  
rolled into cold, tablet-hard wood.

When interviewed for the book *Poetry And Gender* edited by David Brooks and Brenda Walker (1989), Beveridge is quoted as saying 'I love the visual world and am always moved to try and convey it' (p 24). She does this, she continues, by 'pitching her poetry into an upper register of voice and feeling' (p 24). In the interview, Beveridge continues: 'I want the effects of my poetry to be subliminal: as if the poems were tuning forks vibrating at a pitch just out of ear-shot, but which are secretly changing the structure of thought and feeling, cracking them like glass or setting them to vibrate with new-found music' (p 24). I would agree with the Australian poet and reviewer, Mike Ladd, when he writes that Judith Beveridge had been successful in achieving these ambitious goals. In his review of Beveridge's *Storm and Honey* (2009), Ladd writes that 'I can't think of many other contemporary poets who work so meticulously with the 'mouth-feel' of language...[Beveridge's] poetry also embodies its subjects in sonic

language, creating forms that are, unmistakably, not prose' (2010, p 37). Beveridge uses her fine ear for the 'sonic' potential of language to write praise poetry of objects, people and animals with exquisite precision.

We have already seen how rain, and the regeneration that comes with drought-breaking rain, is such a preoccupation in the Australian nature poetry of praise. Beveridge has contributed to this in her poem 'Rain' (2009, pp 66-67): listen to the abundance that she so cleverly suggests in her use of alliteration, the repetition of the word 'rain' as a refrain and in her use of descriptive language and simile. Here is how Beveridge begins her poem 'Rain':

Rain bubble-wrapping the windows. Rain  
falling as though someone ran a blade down the spines  
of fish, setting those tiny backbones free. Rain  
with its squinting glance, rain

with its rustle of descending silk. Rain, rain,  
the cascading rain outrunning its own skeins in the lilting  
dark. The loquacious rain, glissading across  
the drip-garrulous leaves.

In the visual appearance of her stanzas on the page, you can almost see the rain 'wayworn in the slippery / night, drumbling across awnings, gutters, windows, walls' (2009, p 67).

Beveridge has also contributed to the ironic and humorous praise of living things in poems such as 'Cockatoos' (2009, p 72) and 'The Mosquito, Riffs and Complaints' (2009, pp 78-79). In 'The Hive' (2009, pp 74-75) she praises a childhood memory of stumbling across a beehive in the bush. She writes:

I found in some bushland an old toppled red gum  
that was full of bee comb. When I plunged my hand  
into the mess of comb, it felt as though I'd plunged my hand  
into the furred pouch of a stunned marsupial.

That unexpected image, certainly surprises me as a reader. Beveridge's ability to develop such imagery and to exploit the 'sonic' potential of language is also evident in such wonderful nature poems of praise as 'Sinner's Marsh' (2009, p 73) and 'Hérons at Dusk' (2009, p 80). In 'Hérons at Dusk', Beveridge establishes a contemplative mood by slowing the rhythm, an effect she achieves by her line lengths, punctuation and use of monosyllabic words. This greatly enriches the extended image developed in the poem of comparing the heron with 'tai chi performers' stepping 'deftly, easily into constantly reconfigured stances'. This is how 'Hérons at Dusk' so memorably begins:

This is the time of day when the light runs down the sky  
like blueing and meets the bay, when whipbirds set acoustic

flares along the trees, when I'll stand and listen to yachts,  
a sound as if cutlery were being replenished on tabletops

As Noel Rowe (1951-2007), a poet and academic based at Sydney University has observed, 'Judith Beveridge's poetry is full of images which invite the reader to stand within a quiet centre and witness the world being threaded towards wholeness' (quoted on the back cover of Beveridge's, *Accidental Grace*, 1996). This is equally true of the praise poetry of Robert Gray.

So what is the purpose of this poetry of praise? Certainly it is not to romanticise or idealise life in the bush. Nor is it to express an urban poet's nostalgia for the simplicity of rural living. The Australian tradition does not seek to recapture some golden age, to prioritise a simple rural way of living over a more complicated and urban life style. The Australian poetry of praise is not a withdrawal from ordinary life. What it does do is highlight the advantages of living a life that it is attentive, appreciative even, to its natural surroundings, wherever they are encountered. This advantage is well expressed by Heather Stewart in 'Rain Forest' (2005, p 66):

Cloudburst soaks the earth still drinking,  
dead leaves layering slowly sinking  
my bones with them past all thinking....

Seeds are floating branches shaking  
buds are swelling flowermaking  
my heart's opening reaching breaking

Softly glowing moths are winging  
waters sparkling bird calls ringing  
my soul's waking shining singing

Stewart's unpunctuated lines which are folded around a subject and a group of evocative verbs accumulate a series of spontaneous acts of faith in the world; this is imagery that serves to connect ideas and emotions in the way that ecology is the balanced interrelationship between organisms in their environment. The purpose of this poem, as with so much of the nature poetry of praise, is to remind us of just how embedded in the world we need to be if we wish to live a life that is attentive and thankful of its surrounds. Only in this way can we 'learn to dissolve ourselves into landscapes, to become inhabitants of a shared world...one to which we owe a silent respect, and an allegiance' (Bradley 2001, p 12). This is poetry of praise that leads us into the nature poetry of dwelling and a consideration of our lives within the contexts of ecocritical and postcolonial literacy.

## *Australian nature poetry of dwelling*

The nature poems that question our ability to dwell can be divided into two categories. There are those poems that challenge our record in caring for the environment and in learning to adapt to its special characteristics. As we have seen, these poems fall broadly into the modes of the anti-pastoral, the georgic and the environmental text. The other category of poem challenges the record of white settlement or invasion of this continent, raising the social justice issues involved in black-white relationships. Many of the poems that challenge the dominion of white Australia, but not all, have been written by Aboriginal writers: Lionel Fogarty, Jennifer Martiniello, Romaine Moreton, Barbara Nicholson, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Samuel Wagan Watson and Archie Weller to name a few.

## *Postcolonialism and the Australian nature poetry of dwelling*

Nature writing is intimately connected with an awareness of place. For the poems that question the dominion of white Australia this means, as we have seen in my previous chapter, an awareness of the contexts of colonialism and postcolonialism. In a postcolonial sense, Australia is quite unique. Unlike many other places, many of its writers are not indigenous peoples rediscovering and claiming their own culture but writers descended from the original colonial power that now identify themselves as culturally separate from their colonial origins. Their problem lies in their colonial past. They are forced to explore how they can truly identify with Australia as their own if they no longer accept the ideals of colonialism. Are they not, in fact, still perpetuating some kind of colonial hold on this land? How can they reconcile their new values with a homeland that once belonged to someone else? A significant number of poems, written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, question this contradiction of belonging.

One of the first concerns of colonialism is the determination to survey, name and map the land. To a large extent it is these activities that give a colonial power control and ownership. There are several poems that question these activities as they took place in Australia. John Manifold (1915-1985) in 'The Map' (1978, p 91), for example, expresses his preference for Aboriginal place names over the imported English ones. For Manifold the 'land prefers' the place names of 'Binna Burra, Bindebango, Mullumbimby' because these are the names 'that belong'. By restoring Aboriginal place names on our maps we might have a starting point for according Aboriginal culture a new respect and recognition. For David Martin (1915-1997), however, this is not enough. In 'The Other Map' (1960, p 96) he argues that restoring Aboriginal place names might be very nice but in the end this is just another form of cultural appropriation. It can be a gloss to avoid dealing with the real issues. As Martin writes:

Gerringong is nice for rhyming,  
Illalangi, Burradoo:  
Having killed the rightful owner  
Must you pinch his handle too?

For Martin, place names are like symbols, they are important but ‘men aren’t judged by what they say but by what they do’ (1960, p 96). In this argument John Kinsella would agree with Manifold. In ‘Against Depression’ Kinsella writes, ‘small bush reserves might expand.... and be known by their indigenous name’ (2003, p 166). Martin agrees with Manifold and Kinsella, however, that the Aboriginal prior occupation of this country needs to be acknowledged and respected. Lionel Fogarty has written of this long and rich period of occupation in ‘Scenic Wonders – We Nulla Fellas’ (1995, pp 100-101). Fogarty reminds white Australia that ‘this is no scenic wonder we giving, but 1000 million layers / of Murri season – open air’. Samuel Wagan Watson has developed this challenge in ‘poem 9’ (2005, pp 67-68). Wagan Watson asks:

how do you know?  
that the mud doesn’t feel the pain  
of your weight upon its resting place  
how do you know?

like the snake that rushes before your feet  
and you the only audience  
a gift only for your eyes  
from the old people  
maybe?  
how do you know?

Unfortunately, as David Martin reminds us, ‘men aren’t judged by what they say but by what they do’, and the story of the white colonial settlement – invasion – of this country has rarely been a good one. Wagan Watson reminds us of this in ‘a bent neck black and flustered feather mallee’ (2005, p 36). Wagan Watson writes of the ‘blood soaked earth through massacre / war / and plague’. Bruce Dawe in ‘Nemesis’ (1983, p 210), John Millett in ‘Burial Mound’ (1994, pp 74-75) and John Foulcher in ‘The Death Pool’ (1983, p 51) have also written of the massacres of Aboriginal people. Geoffrey Lehmann in ‘Old Testament Country’ (1997, pp 279-280) has written of these same events. With much irony, Lehmann writes:

Where farms now jostle on the map  
my father’s father selected  
horizon to horizon.  
There were granite outcrops  
and no fences.  
The dark-skinned Canaanites  
were soon hunted off,  
leaving the wilderness  
of leaves to make his own.

The land cleared, the facts of how this was done, remain a splinter. With much anger, the pioneering Indigenous writer and activist, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993) writes in 'Acacia Ridge' (1970 p 18):

White men, turn quickly the earth of Acacia Ridge,  
Hide the evidence lying there  
Of the black race evicted as of old their fathers were;  
Cover up the crime committed this day,  
Call it progress, the white man's way.

Archie Weller feels this same anger and sorrow in 'Noonkenbah':

My mother's breast  
that nourished me  
with legends and with songs  
gives out a milk as black as I  
so from her heart it comes.  
Now in their trucks the whiteman comes  
to squeeze my country dry.  
They take our laws.  
They take our lives.  
And now they take her too...  
The earth heaves. The skies' rain falls down.  
The old men sing their songs  
but my mother weeps rich black tears. (in Davis et al (eds) 1990, p 16)

Kevin Roberts also feels this loss suffered by Aboriginal Australians. He writes in *Red Centre Journal* (1992) that Australia was 'sung / for my steps, seasoned / for my crops, insured / with snake and duck and fish' but that Europeans came and 'trampled it':

more, you planted daffodils  
and daisies where my sweet buds  
flowered and fell, grubbed  
out trees for lawns, tame gardens  
  
named my birds all again  
from your hard tongue, gold  
finch, robin, wren, bizarre  
transmutations of song and flight (p v)

Angrily, Roberts counters this sense of loss, and asserts:

I would like to scrape you off  
my island like maggots writhing  
in your dumb sheeps' eyes. (p vi)

This anger and sorrow in the face of Aboriginal and Torres Strait dispossession and inequality is described so pointedly by Barbara Nicholson and Romaine Moreton. In 'The Bastards', Nicholson writes, 'and they take our land, and they graze it and mine it and fuck it up forever. / Bastards' (in Heiss & Minter (eds) 2008, pp 204-205). With much poignancy, Moreton writes in 'Don't Let It Make You Over':

when they rounded  
us up  
took our land  
put shackles  
on our hand  
stayin' free has been  
a burden ever since

the cultural claustrophobia  
of a hard prison cell  
occupies my blood  
choruses through my veins (in Heiss & Minter (eds) 2008, p 158)

So Aboriginal people lose first their land, then their culture and identity, and finally the evidence of their prior occupation. This dispossession of Aboriginal people has been harshly criticised not only by Oodgeroo, Weller, Roberts, Nicholson and Moreton; Wagan Watson in 'future primitive' (2002, pp 37-38) and '1986' (2005, pp 62-63), Philip Salom in 'Clearing the Line' (1980, pp 52-53), Bronwyn Lea in 'Australia Day' (2001, p 34) and Lionel Fogarty in 'Ringbarking – the Contract Killers' (1995, pp 138-140) are among many who also write of this. Of course the evidence of more than 40 000 years of living in a place can never be completely obliterated. Poets like John Rowland (1925-1996) have written of the remains of the 'stone circle' in 'A Bora Ground in the Budawangs' (1989, p 3) and in 'The Peartree' (1989, p 6). Rex Ingamells (1913-1955) has celebrated the continuation of Aboriginal culture in remote parts of Australia in such poems as 'Uluru: An Apostrophe To Ayres Rock' (Elliot (ed) 1979, pp 33-36); as does William Hart-Smith in 'Moondeen' (1985, pp 87-88) and in 'Willy Willies' (1985, p 145). John Millett and Geoff Page have also written of the Aboriginal physical presence, fragmentary though it is, that has survived the colonial invasion of traditional Aboriginal lands. In 'Aboriginal tribal grounds – Mootwingee', Millett describes the loss of rituals and the destruction of sacred places that has taken place. He writes:

Here at Mootwingee I walk by ghostgums  
where old tribes dreamed. Their rituals  
are locked in the bark – their ancient myths  
grooved in deep land.

For Millett the tragedy is made worse because:

Only trees remain.

Carvings fade. Handsigns,  
rainbowsnake, the birds  
shiver in light  
grow still.  
I watch the cage unbar:  
wings convulse  
to form black hands of stone. (1971, p 64)

Geoff Page has continued this discussion. Like Judith Wright, Page has come from a farming background and like her he can recall his love and sense of belonging to the land. While doing this, however, he is always aware, like Wright, of the Aboriginal presence and of their prior knowledge and ownership. In 'The Double Dreaming' (1992, pp 78-79) he describes the construction of the Clarence River Hydro Scheme. He describes the many benefits of this project for the white farming communities of the Clarence River region. But from the point of view of a lookout overlooking the dam he is able to remember an Aboriginal legend telling of the ancestor spirits who made this land. The dam project might promise electricity, flood mitigation, and irrigation water in times of drought but ultimately the ancestor spirits will have their way:

So once a year the Clarence still  
  
will sweep away the dreams that cross it.  
Dirrangun is stone at Yamba,  
the old man dust in summer air.

Many other non-Indigenous Australian poets have also questioned the dominion of white Australia. Eric Beach has used satire to great effect in 'a map of australia' (1996, pp 72-73) and 'in th desert you remember' (1996, p 75) to write of the continuing spiritual presence of Aboriginal culture in remote parts of Australia in the face of white control and patronage; RF Brissenden writes similarly in 'Rock Climbers, Uluru' (1993, p 87) and in 'South Coast Middens' (1993, p 88). Patricia Sykes in 'blandishments and enticements, visuals of electronic speech' (2004, pp 29-30) has described the signs of the very ancient Aboriginal presence in the Mungo sands and the 'gawk' factor of white tourism to this area. Like Miriel Lenore in 'At the Water Hole' (1997, p 76), she has described how 'phoney' many white tourists feel in the presence of this very ancient culture. Miriel Lenore in 'burrow' (1997, p 73) and 'the place of the emu' (1997, p 39) and Lee Cataldi in 'goanna' (1990, p 42) have described with great affection their camping with Aboriginal women in central Australia and their search for bush tucker, while Bernard Harrison in 'Triptych: True North' (2004, pp 41-43) writes of gorges and waterfalls, broilga, kites, goshawks, curlews, mangroves, boab and paperbark as he praises the custodianship by Aboriginal people over their traditional lands in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. In questioning the assumption of non-Indigenous dominion over Australia, these poets look at the process of colonialism, the damage it has done and search for ways forward in the future, but they do not only write of Aboriginal culture as a victim culture. Aboriginal poets like Lionel Fogarty, Romaine Moreton, Barbara Nicholson, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Samuel Wagan Watson and Archie

Weller celebrate what has survived, what continues to be strong today. As Jennifer Martiniello, a poet and academic from the Arrernte nation of Central Australia, writes in 'Emily Kngwarreye':

your face  
is the grace a harsh life  
bestows on its survivors, each crease  
a bar whose notes, escaping their dirge,  
run for the high octaves like a bird  
to a joyous freedom once the doors  
of the cage are broken

deep-coloured as the millennia  
sediments that scar the cliff faces of a sacred country  
your face is as ancient a bed to flowing water  
carving its agelessness into the land the way  
wisdom enscripts its elusive dance upon  
humanity (in Heiss & Minter (eds) 2008, p 195)

Martiniello concludes her poem so memorably with, 'I see a light more eternal kindle in those you teach, / see each one, mirror-like, reflect the tireless radiance / of an inevitable grace' (in Heiss & Minter (eds) 2008, p 196). In this poem Martiniello praises the achievement of a major Indigenous painter, prioritising the insights and presence expressed in the culture and story of the First Australians; Martiniello shows us that in writing a place-based poetry of dwelling, such recognition and orientation is vital if the work is to be postcolonial.

### *Anti-pastoral and georgic in the Australian nature poetry of dwelling*

The other poems that question the issue of 'our common dwelling' challenge our record in caring for the environment and in learning to adapt to its special characteristics. Most of this poetry, in Australia, would fall into the modes of the anti-pastoral, or 'hard' pastoral text, and the georgic. As I describe in my introduction, there are 'not many genuine examples of Australian pastoral' (Indyk 1988, p. 353). In Australia the approach to pastoral is far more uncomfortable and discontented. For the most part it is aware of the ecological issues confronting rural Australia, often brought about by our own poor land management practices and of the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Indeed John Kinsella has described his poetry as 'poison pastoral' (2008, pp 132-133 and 152-153). He reminds us, however, that:

These negative pastorals...as steeped in death and destruction as they might be, are actually affirming as much as they are condemning. The value of human communication...is paramount.... Pastoral in Australia is about confrontation,

recognition, conversation, and, one would hope, reconciliation.  
(2008, pp 132-133)

I will look at Kinsella in more detail shortly when I consider the poetry of salinity (a variation on the 'hard pastoral' theme that Kinsella has contributed to in a significant way as he responds to the environmental catastrophe of salinity in parts of rural Australia), but another important poet who has considered the place of the pastoral in an Australian context, similarly to John Kinsella, is Laurie Duggan.

Jayne Fenton Keane has written that 'in Laurie Duggan's 'Pastoral Poems' we witness a direct critique of the aged and Euro-centric pastoral myth that has evolved in the bush poetry and sentimental nature poetry of Australia' (2010, p 22). Duggan began this critique in his pioneering book-length documentary poem, *The Ash Range*, first published in 1987. This poem is a careful and intimate meditation on the landscape - the natural and human history - of the Gippsland region of rural Victoria. As such Duggan's text is one of the first Australian poetic examples of a serious and sustained creative response to place as 'cultural landscape' in the way described by Tom Griffiths (1996). Duggan's 'hard pastoral', so sympathetic to the contexts of environmentalism and postcolonialism, is certainly about 'confrontation, recognition, conversation and...reconciliation' (Kinsella 2008, pp 132-133). In *The Ash Range*, Duggan intercuts his poetry with diaries, journals and newspaper stories in order to celebrate the biophysical environment of the Gippsland region and to interrogate the story of its European colonisation. Duggan is alert to the ruthlessness of this colonising story, of the occupation and culture of the Original Inhabitants and of their massacre (see for example pp 19-24, 33, 40-42, 56-59 & 75). In responding to this place, which Duggan clearly knows so well, he also maintains a sense of irony and distance, in his awareness of contradictions. A typical Duggan way of expressing himself occurs near the end of the book where he says, describing drinkers in a pub, 'There is a message at the bottom of every glass. / Dust blows off the road outside, / and the stars, Crux, Bunjil, look down / on a telephone booth in the middle of the bush' (1987, p 263).

Duggan continues this investigation of rural Australia, foregrounding the contexts of environmentalism and postcolonialism, in 'from The Cockatoo Draft' (1996, pp 10-11), 'McCubbin Notes' (1996, p 22), 'from A Skater on the Sara River' (1996, p 29), 'Blue Hills 4' (1996, p 80), 'Glenara' (1996, p 120), 'Blue Hills 32' (1996, p 163), 'Blue Hills 26' (2003, p 93), 'Blue Hills 27' (2003 p 94), 'Blue Hills 32' (2003, p 99) and 'Blue Hills 60' (2006, p 25). In Duggan's more recent 'pastoral' poetry, however, his focus has included urban and suburban sites. Duggan might label this poetry as 'techno-pastoral', which he describes in his major study of early-twentieth century Australian Fine Art, as an examination of urban space 'as a site of contention in the ongoing debate about nationhood' (2001, p xxi). As Duggan shows, Australian cities may be diversified in their built environments and culture, but this has often come at considerable expense to the natural environment. So Duggan writes in his long poem sequence 'Louvres':

From water so foul  
fish still jump

a shore of disintegrating ply  
a palm tree, washed  
to these rocks from somewhere.  
The glare, through skylights  
from the windows of warehouses. (2003, p 53)

In 'Blue Hills 38' (2003, p 153), Duggan describes the layers of suburban building and rebuilding over a previous sheoak and gum forest once rich in Indigenous occupation as a type of palimpsest. The poem begins: 'Lanes I will never trace / of sheoak and flowering gum / fork through these suburbs'. The poem continues to describe the construction of a railway and the draining of 'lowlands' before finishing so memorably:

The settlements exist under these layers;  
their clutter of architectures testify  
that paradise is momentary  
and jerry-built.

Some of Duggan's 'techno-pastorals' are, however, far angrier in tone and devastating in their environmental critique of urban development. So in 'Blue Hills 66' (2006, p 63), Duggan writes:

April 2005 toxic  
excavation ditch reveals

water table a  
bare metre down

bollards masked  
for spray paint

the last warehouse  
plastered and wired

life on the river  
(as told in

The Gumleaf Book  
of Estuarine Verse)

coloured lights  
in the cool air, the street

bounces off the ceiling

Duggan can always remind us that in urban development, despite all its conveniences and cultural attractiveness, so often all 'that's left' is 'dismantled / asbestos roofs / steel

beams' and 'dragged and burnt / concrete slabs' (2006, p 21). And when urban dwellers look to the sky, hoping to see 'purple patches / the clouds hang / then lift, rain / to the north' (2006, p 23), often what they see are the signs of even more environmental decline:

a sky dark  
with dust  
topsoil  
from the west  
coats the loft (2006, p 25)

Duggan's 'hard pastorals' interrogate the belief in careless progress and that it is in technology, rather than prevention, that we are to find solutions to the environmental problems that we cause in both rural and urban areas.

Another example of this type of 'hard pastoral' is the poetry of the late Philip Hodgins, (1959-1995) which the American poet and academic, Paul Kane, describes as 'Georgic' in its approach (2004, p 280). As I discuss in my thesis introduction, Kane argues that Georgic poets, like Hodgins, take a 'realistic hard look at the practicalities of farming today set off with all the embellishments of poetry' (2004, p 280). So poets, like Hodgins, write of rural finances and bank mortgages, of dams, crops, dairying, the weather, animal diseases and rural suicides. He evokes a human history intimately connected with the natural history that surrounds it. For Hodgins, the human interest is not the only legitimate interest; human accountability to the environment is never far from the text's central orientation. This is especially so for his verse-novel *Dispossessed* (1994). These observations are equally valid for the verse-novels of Geoff Page, which are also located in rural Australia, especially *The Scarring* (1999) and *Freehold* (2005). Hodgins and Page are also able to write though of this challenging and complicated way in which human and non-human interest is inextricably linked in their shorter poems; responding to the mutual and conflicting ways in which human history is intimately connected with natural history in rural Australia.

Philip Hodgins writes in 'European Carp' (2000, p 143) of the damage that this feral pest causes 'right through the Murray-Darling waterways' as:

In Yanko Creek they suckle at the edge.  
Lined up like rows of piglets on a sow  
they filter all the goodness from the sludge  
and cloud the water so that plants don't grow.

Typically for Hodgins, the poem concludes cleverly with the humorous rural anecdote:

the system's damage was as good as done.  
There was no way that it could stay the same.  
But how on earth did the European carp  
get into Charlie Hughes' remotest dam?

Not surprisingly, given Hodgins' rural concerns, many of his poems are concerned with rivers and creeks, with dams, drought and the wait for rain. In 'The Creek' (2000, pp 208-209), some young farm workers drink their beer before throwing the empties in the water while:

Across the far side  
a rusty forty-four  
half-sunk in mud

is leaking something  
out over the surface  
with rainbow colours.

In response to this depressing imagery of irresponsibility and pollution, the poem concludes:

And look! Here comes  
the water-rat,  
unzipping the surface,

his little dark eyes  
staring up at me  
with bitterness.

The image of the water-rat 'unzipping the surface' is as startling as our anger towards the lack of human accountability in managing these rural waterways properly.

In his poetry, Hodgins so often captures that mix of the humorous anecdote with a real sense of wonder towards the natural world and a love of detail for rural life. 'The Ibises' (2000, pp 94-95) is another lovely example of all these features. Hodgins writes that 'back home at Katandra West', the ibis is known as 'the farmer's friend':

A good-sized flock of them  
would take a ton of insects and grubs  
out of the paddock in an afternoon  
and at the same time aerate the soil.

The attitude towards the ibis is utilitarian – 'every farmer's son learning to shoot / is told to stay right away from the ibis' – but the sense of wonder is still there:

I remember one time years ago  
a flock of ibises hundreds strong  
landing all around me in a freshly watered paddock.  
The first thing I knew about it  
was when the big dappled show rushed over me;

and then the sound,  
the deepest, longest breath I'd ever heard.

The sense of wonder is countered though with a lovely lightness of touch:

As soon as each one touched down  
they were straight into it,  
pointedly investigating the wet pasture,  
turning over interesting clues.  
Real cloak-and-dagger stuff I thought.  
It was a real pointer to anyone there  
the way that some were black  
some were white  
while all of them were black-and-white  
and none seemed to notice.

Drought however, like racial tolerance, is a serious concern in rural Australia, as Hodgins captures in 'The Dry' (2000, p 116):

Last Christmas up at Yabba North  
the silos went without their grain  
and farmers watched an empty sky  
as if there still might be some rain.

Hodgins, the imagist, writes 'dams became engraved as hard / as big inverted turtle-shells' while:

Some days a willy-willy made  
of topsoil from the past would lean  
then stagger sadly back across  
a place it had already been.

The harshness of this imagery is given a brutal authenticity by the directness of the language and plainness of the poem's tone. This is neatly juxtaposed by Hodgins' use of an iambic rhythm and rhyming quatrains. The regular rhythm and rhyming scheme is as predictable as the expectation of drought and acts as a forecast of the poem's inevitable and unforgettable conclusion:

And if a sheep or cow pegged out  
its carcass darkened then with flies  
and those much darker shapes of crows  
who always started with the eyes.

In Philip Hodgins then, we see many of the preoccupations of those poets who question the dominion of white Australia in rural areas: drought, the management of farm animals, land and waterways, pollution and the damage caused by feral plants and

animals. As Brook Emery writes in 'The Distance and the Heat' (2000, p 46), there are too many attempts to farm marginal country with often tragic personal consequences:

There's no thought of mending the boundary fence,  
no talk of breaking drought, no plans  
beyond waiting through the afternoon.

And no relief at night, just dark. The stars  
are razor cuts in a tight-stretched cobalt sky:  
in bed between us the distance and the heat.

Jeff Guess writes of the same problem in 'Ruins' (2004, p 60). He describes the failed Flinders Ranges farm while Barbara Giles (1912-2006) writes of the Gippsland farm in 'Opening Up The Land' (1997, pp 44-46) and of the Mallee farm in 'Three Drylands Poems' (1997, pp 49-51) also ruined by drought and by poor land management. Warrick Wynne in 'Tank' (2002, p 24), 'The State Of The Rivers And Streams' (1995, pp 7-8), 'Rain in the Yarra Valley' (1995, p 23) and 'Three Views of an Old Orchard' (1995, pp 41-42) as well as Philip Martin in 'Building A Dam' (1988, pp 32-33) records our attempts to control the supply of water in farming districts through storage tanks, irrigation channels and culverts. While John Bennett in 'Landscape Proof' (1998, pp 21-23), Nan McDonald (1921-1974) in 'Burraborang' (1969, pp 84-85), Vera Newsom (1912-2006) in 'Oberon Dam' (1988, pp 19-20), Les Wicks in 'Wayatinah' (2004, pp 71-72), Vicki Raymond in 'Franklin River Poems' (1989, pp 30-32) and Geoff Page in 'The Double Dreaming' (1992, pp 78-79) all describe the 'drowning' of beautiful valleys for dam construction. What is seen as progress and increased productivity is so often driven by the will for greater human control.

Some poets, like Coral Hull in 'The Goat Abattoir: Driving There From Bre In The Morning' (1997, pp 51-52), are very critical in their treatment of white Australia's impact as even greater control over the environment is sought. Like Angela Gardner in 'Post Industrial' (2007, p 44) Hull describes the reality of the abattoir in very unpleasant terms, but Hull also writes of the consequences of the cotton industry on the management of our inland waterways and of the native animal victims of road accidents. In 'Bre Weir' (1997, pp 25-26) Hull gives a very moving treatment of the impact that white Australia has had on both the environment and on Aboriginal communities. The poem begins, 'Down at the weir the smashed glass around / the bases of rocks is reflected upon.' As this 'reflection' continues we are told that:

There was a time,  
when the water rushed strong & clean  
through the stone,  
beneath the cries of the black cockatoo,  
ibis & hawks,  
that flocked to watch the leap of fish.  
As river rushed on, from Walgett  
through Bre to Bourke, around the bends

towards the west.

Now however, 'there are tired old hawks by the tired old Darling / trickling down through the weir' and an Aboriginal elder remonstrates:

I'm going back about 20 years now, the river  
was even a little bit cloudy then.  
But there was a time when mussels grew  
black & strong in the duck weed & when  
the rivers were crystal clear.  
It doesn't mean it can't be like that again.

This angrier tone has also been adopted by, among others, John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942) in 'Golden Fugitive' (1976, p 266), Kenneth Slessor (1901-1971) in 'A Sunset' (1993, p 39), Bruce Dawe in 'Drought Readings' (1995, p 69) and 'When First The Land Was Ours' (1983, pp 236-237), Bronwyn Lea in 'Drought' (2001, p 28), and by Chris Kelen in 'The Explorers' (1992, p 30). Dawe gives a reading of droughts caused by our environmental mismanagement as being like 'the silent iconography of loss' (1995, p 69). While Chris Kelen writes of the 'arrogance' of the white farming pioneers:

Then smoke queued up along the valley floor.  
Anaesthetic felled the trees. To make the harvest  
time here elaborate shadows ran across a track,  
ploughed back the forest with fences.  
Chainsaw in harmony with cattletide. We only  
wanted the shirt off the hill's ungrateful  
back or a green valley hoping to survive.

If this is not damning enough the poem concludes with the sarcastic inversion of a popular white bush song:

We gave the land our voice. To make us happy  
and possible we brought the colours up out of the ground.

So pass the billy round now boys. All  
this is for our tables as they say.

For John Kinsella, Caroline Caddy and Dennis Haskell the only colour being 'brought up out of the ground' by our environmental mismanagement is 'the purity of white'. Salinity is not a problem confined to Western Australia, but it is certainly not surprising to find that this is a particular concern to writers from the West. As Kinsella has written:

Salt occurs a lot in my poetry. Its negative side is obvious, but more subtle is its beauty – a crystalline kingdom of apparent nothingness, it becomes a stage for a theatre of absurdity, a different kind of

poetic language. I write loss and destruction, lovingly (Kinsella 2007, p 3)

In his suite, 'Finches' (2003, pp 5-6), Kinsella writes:

*Salt Paddocks*

Down below the dam  
there is nothing but salt,  
a slow encroachment.

Fighting back, my cousins  
have surrounded it  
with a ring of trees

At its centre  
lives a colony of finches,  
buried in tamarisks.

Salinity, a problem so often caused by a changing of the water table due to land clearing and irrigation, is one of the most serious environmental problems facing rural Australia, see for example *The Unique Continent: An Introductory Reader In Australian Environmental Studies* edited by Jeremy Smith (1992, pp 141-162 & 195-203). So there is a terrible irony in the response to this siege, this 'slow encroachment', by the farming cousins who have 'surrounded it / with a ring of trees'. Poets such as John Kinsella, who have come from a farming background, have not shied away from their family's responsibilities over the generations in contributing to these problems, as the quotes make clear.

Kinsella concludes his suite with:

*Finch Death*

The dead finch lies on salt,  
tight-winged and stretched.

The others shimmer  
loosely in heat

the salt's white mystery  
coveting tin cans, skull of sheep.

Slowly, death rides this hot glacier  
further and further away.

The imagery, in the first stanza, describing the way the dead finch is laid out is almost ritualistic, a 'shimmering' in the desert heat; a terrible emblem of the struggle with

death. But here that struggle is as inevitably doomed to failure as an attempt to control a glacier. 'Death [salinity] rides this hot glacier / further and further away.'

Partly this struggle with 'death' and decline is to turn ever more marginal country – in terms of its agricultural productive potential – into cleared farming land. So Caroline Caddy writes in 'Great Southern' (2010, pp 10-11):

Driving between Lake Grace and Lake King  
the land takes on the light or darkness of its sky  
so quickly so easily  
marginal country  
parts of it had to be named 'lake' so the rest could be  
ploughed and harvested.

So dispiriting is it to rural communities, where whole areas are experiencing declining rainfall and the problems of long-term salinity due to unnecessary land clearing, that Caddy finds herself relating in 'Lake George' (2010, pp 12-13) how:

I hear myself explaining  
how some are salt and some are fresh  
but all are shallow  
and it sounds as if I'm excusing them.  
I feel it foremost in your mind  
as it was in mine when I first saw them  
wind edged with foam and salt  
stilled each evening  
spreading their margins a little  
to accommodate whole sunsets.

Caddy's scattering of her lines across the page echoes so cleverly the way clouds in this region of South-Western Western Australia, where she lives, so often 'do nothing / but move slowly at the edge of the land' (2010, p 56) and where people struggle 'through blistering days dusty nights' (2010, p 10) with encroaching salinity 'on the long reflective straights / where life is thinly spread' (2010, p 11).

Dennis Haskell explores the same terrain in 'Inland Sea' (2006, pp 62-63). He takes that great colonial preoccupation with the search for the inland sea as his motif while:

All over the sunburnt country  
on hills, by rivers, on flattened plains  
the dirt is turning white:  
a silent snow  
that falls from below

In this 'non-economy of salt' we can 'watch bad luck / become bad management'. The poem concludes with a terrible irony as we watch:

all Australia  
become a dry, dead sea,  
fulfilling our founding fathers' dream  
-a nation gone multicultural  
in sight of a country  
at last wholly white.

The land is stolen, cleared and irrigated in an attempt to gain control over it, to make it productive. Salinity is one consequence. As Judith Wright shows in 'Australia 1970' (1994, pp 287-288), the 'land will have its revenge':

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,  
the drying creek, the furious animal,  
that they oppose us still;  
that we are ruined by the thing we kill.

In bushfire we are also confronted by our incapacity to gain control over the land. The devastation of wild bushfire is described by Caroline Caddy in 'Fire 1 & 2' (2007, pp 40-41), 'Aftermath 2' (2007, p 42), 'Firebreak' (2010, p 60), 'the burning car' (2010, p 63), and 'Diminished Responsibility' (2010, pp 64-65); by Brendan Ryan in 'Morning After' (2000, p 13) and 'Late Country' (2000, p 14); by Jeff Guess in 'Heatwave' (2004, p 83); by SK Kelen in 'al-Qaeda Bushfire' (2006, pp 47-48) and by Jennifer Compton in her sequence, 'Wingello New Year's Day 1998' (2000, pp 44-51). As Anthony Lawrence says in 'The Fire Scientist' (2002, p 111), 'no fire-spread modelling can prepare us / for what happens when the bush explodes'. Tom Shapcott in 'Bushfire Perfume' (1987, p 11) describes the same thing:

They say best perfumes will haunt memory  
forever – they are expensive ones.  
This gumtip perfume is distilled  
from dry panic and the ghosts  
of entire townships, two thousand houses  
in one gulp. This ash smell  
shoves itself into nostrils  
with an obdurate claim.  
It is beyond price.

As Les Murray warns in 'Hesiod on Bushfire' (2010, p 63):

Never build on a summit or a gully top:  
fire's an uphill racer deliriously welcomed  
by growth it cures of growth.  
Shun a ridgeline, window puncher at a thousand degrees.

Caroline Caddy writes in 'Diminished Responsibility' (2010, pp 64-65):

Eight times this season I've caught the orange glow  
sometimes heard it first  
the crack and surge  
the high whine of green gum leaves  
engulfed by flames.

While John Bennett in 'Charred Postcard' (1998, pp 25-27) describes the fire that 'scorched the bitumen / where it crossed the road / racing down the ridge / exuberantly jumping the river // evaporating landmarks as it landed / on the far side of the moon.' But as John Bennett and Mark O'Connor (see for example 1990, pp 131 & 132) also remind us, within Australian bush ecology, the story of wild fire is not only that of destruction. Fire can also be a catalyst for regeneration. So Bennett describes in 'Charred Postcard' how after fire:

Banksia pods have popped,  
the winged seeds rest on sandy nourishment  
among thin specimens of rusted tin  
glass forms fused by the firestorm

Bennett, in this poem, continues to describe how:

In a spurt of appetite and photosynthesis  
insects will emerge, birds synchronise song  
trees and flowers shoot from their roots  
the food web spread and cue its calibrations.

While Mark O'Connor in 'Fire-Stick Farming' (1990, p 132) reminds us that:

To grow flowers in Blackheath, Australia,  
set fire to your field. Let flame  
sing the delicate dust-seeds  
of native shrubs. Soon they sprout,  
a thin patchwork of tufts, nameless and mixed,  
on ground bare as if hoed.

Robert Adamson in 'A Visitation' (2006, p 5) and 'Easter Fish' (2006, pp 10-11), Judith Beveridge in 'The Lyre Birds' (1987, pp 20-21) and William Hart-Smith (1911-1990) in 'Blackboys in Flower' (1985, p 10) all find in wild bushfire the imagery they need to explore regeneration. Within the ecosystems found in Australian National Parks and Bush Reserves, juxtaposition and the irony of locating birth and life along side apparent destruction and death is a feature that attracts the interest of many poets. As Craig Billingham reminds us in 'The Slow Path' (2007, p 32), Australia is a place where 'rhizomes hanker for fire to burst // their roots, to erupt with the shoots of new life'.

The bush is such a significant preoccupation in our poetry. When it comes to the management of the bush, few things are as controversial as the forestry industry. John Bennett in 'The Circumstance of Trees' (1998, p 5) and 'Landscape Stories' (1998, pp 41-42), David Brooks in 'Depot Elegy' (2005, pp 47-48), Caroline Caddy in 'Matins' (1985, p 40), David Campbell in 'Bellbirds' (1989, pp 195-196) and 'The Silence of Trees' (1989, pp 277-278), Louise Crisp in 'Mt Baldhead' (2007, p 64) and 'Coolangubra *high coo*' (2007, p 74), Dorothy Hewett in 'Owl' (1995, p 340), Antigone Kefala in 'Landscapes' (1998, p 47), Dennis McDermott in 'The Chainsaw Trick' (2003, p 21), David Rowbotham in 'Bird Tree Man' (1975, p 119), Tom Shapcott in 'In the Forest' (1989, p 61), Kenneth Slessor in 'North Country' (1993, p 111) and 'South Country' (1993, p 112), Maurice Strandgard in 'Without Ceremony' (2002, p 44), Michael Witts in 'The Definition' (1978, pp 6-7) and Judith Wright in 'Eroded Hills' (1994, p 81) have all described the destruction, or at least damage, to bushland areas caused by the forestry industry and land clearing. As David Campbell has written in 'The Silence of Trees':

Sometimes walking amongst  
 Trees I sense strange presences,  
 Hands, arms, torsos, inch  
 Inch by inch from the earth.  
*In a time not our time* giant  
 Forms reach for sunlight  
 Leaning over us, benevolent  
 Or as now watchful  
 For the man with the axe.  
 Pause and the  
 Silence is worse than stillness,  
 Nature has withdrawn. (Campbell 1989, pp 277-278)

Sarah Day has also described this in 'Menace' (2004, pp 12-13). She writes of how nature has withdrawn:

Between the pedestrians  
 and the DON'T WALK sign,  
  
 lengths of trees pass by, horizontal,  
 as if on their way to their own funerals,  
  
 vast cross-sections disappearing  
 into far distance, ringing out  
  
 the slow centuries of a forest.

As Paul Cliff in 'Daishowa-Harris News' (2002, p 47) and Michael Witts in 'Turning To Eden' (1978, p 5) point out, too often the destruction of forests is done to simply feed the pulp mills; fodder for minimal return. Fortunately the story is not all of

vandalism. Dennis Haskell in 'Walking to Sawpit Creek' (1984, p 63), Rosemary Huisman in 'Re-generation' (2006, pp 32-34) and Vivian Smith in 'The Restorers' (1995, p 84) celebrate the restoration, the regeneration, which can take place after logging has finished. Perhaps this is what Les Murray has in mind in his 'Noonday Axeman' (2001, pp 2-4), one of the more curious forestry poems. As so often with a Murray poem, this is unforgettable writing that seems to delight in expressing the contrary point of view. This is a glorious celebration of the generations of axemen who have worked in the forestry industry, a celebration of the lives of Murray's rural working classes. The Australian academic, Carmel Gaffney, describes this well when she writes 'Murray espouses values associated with the land, he speaks for those who have learnt peace and community values from their understanding of the land and nature's seasons' (1997, p 121). But Murray is writing predominantly of the rural white working classes who work in an industry more likely to speak of nature in terms of 'dominion' than of 'dwelling'. As a poem it must be read out loud: the slow controlled rhythm, the alliteration, the wonderful refrain. But it is a poem that seems to be premised on the assumption that forests are immediately renewable, as impossible to come to the end of as counting the stars in the heavens. Despite the generations of logging, Murray thinks that he will be 'forever coming back here to walk, knee-deep in ferns'. He writes:

coming back here on the up-train, peering, leaning  
out of the window to see, on far-off ridges  
the sky between the trees, and over the racket  
of the rails to hear the echo and the silence.

I shoulder my axe and set off home through the stillness.

The poem prioritises the working lives of the axemen over the forests: human value over environmental value. For Murray, these are men with 'gentle broad hands' who, ironically, would 'die if removed from these unpeopled places', these wild forests. To Murray, the axemen are 'truly at home in this country'. The poem loves forests, but it is a love based on husbandry not conservation. Murray's logged ridges are a long way from the degraded country of Judith Wright's 'Eroded Hills' (1994, p 81). With great honesty in confronting the consequences of her own family's environmental decisions, Wright records how:

These hills my father's father stripped,  
and beggars to the winter wind  
they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped –  
humble, abandoned, out of mind.

Of their scant creeks I drank once  
and ate sour cherries from old trees  
found in their gullies fruiting by chance.  
Neither fruit nor water gave my mind ease.

I dream of hills bandaged in snow,  
their eyelids clenched to keep out fear.  
When the last leaf and bird go  
let my thoughts stand like trees here.

Many other poets have also written of the competing interests of human and environmental value. One popular way of exploring this has been to dramatise the moral choice, the moment of deciding whether to kill an animal or not. Caroline Caddy in 'Recoil' (1985, p 42), Graeme Hetherington in 'West Coast, Tasmania' (2002, p 43) and John Kinsella in 'Warning-Snakes (Reprise)' (2003, p 36) have written of this in regard to snakes. Mark Miller in 'eel' (1999, p 50) and Andrew Sant in 'At the Rivulet' (1982, pp 14-15) have described the killing of eels. Many have written of the hunting or fishing of boys, often involving cruelty. David Campbell has described boys fishing for yabbies in 'Crayfish' (1989, p 280), Aidan Coleman has described the 'collecting' of cicadas in 'Three Poems For 1986' (2005, pp 59-62), Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) the killing of frogs in 'The Secret Life of Frogs' (1975, pp 158-159), while Tracy Ryan observes boys catching leeches in 'Leeches' so as to 'take one end / & peel it back / limp as a sock' (1996, p 24). In a rural context, Douglas Stewart (1913-1985) in 'Mahony's Mountain' (1973, p 104) and Anthony Lawrence in 'Whistling Fox' (2002, p 14) have described the curious practice of whistling 'like a wounded hare' to call up a fox so it can be shot. Allen Afterman in 'The Myxo Rabbit' (1980, p 38) and Lenore Rays in 'Rabbits' (2003, p 77) describe the attempts to eradicate this feral pest. While Robert Adamson in 'Wild Colonial Boys' (1989, p 25), Steven Herrick in 'The Birthday Boy' (1994, p 59) and William Hart Smith in 'Death of a Swan' (1985, pp 56-57) have described the sport shooting of wild birds. Of course, as Connie Barber reminds us, all living things only survive if they continue to consume. In 'Folding' (2002, p 13), Barber writes:

Only algae are like leaves  
the rest all predators: the dazzling wings,  
the great whales. They know their place:  
to edit incarnation  
is not in their behaviour book.

Robert Gray also reminds us of this in 'Bright Day' (1990, pp 35-36) as does John Foulcher in 'For the Fire' (1983, p 33), David Brooks in 'The Barn Owl' (2005, pp 9-10) and John Kinsella in 'Death of a Brushtail Possum' (2005, pp 180-181). But all of these poems remind us that the decision to kill, whether the animal is feral or native, is a moral issue, an issue that needs consideration if we are determined to be less anthropocentric.

This juxtaposition of life and death, of living being dependent on consumption, is also explored by Judith Bishop in 'Late in the Day' (2007, p 6). Bishop writes of a hawk hunting above a tree line. She describes a time when 'late in the day // arrives the moment of contradiction':

Wind has ferried the hawk south  
toward a swatch of pines.  
There, a boy with shaky hands  
shoots her down with a stone.

This violent act is contrasted by the ‘shaky hands’ of the boy who ‘in his fingers / gently takes the threads of [the hawk’s] entrails’. The wastage of this moment is emphasised in the realisation that this hawk has nestlings dependent on her. The poem concludes:

In late-shadowed pines,  
her young incline toward the sun.  
A screen of white down  
lies aggrieved by wind at dawn.

In this poem, Bishop so cleverly dramatises the struggle of life in the face of random violence and wastage. In Bishop’s poem, however, violence is committed by ‘gentle’ and ‘shaky’ hands – far from the ‘usual suspects’.

A more expected suspect and cause of environmental carnage is found in the road-kill poem, the poem that confronts the dreadful cost that our roads cause to wildlife and to domestic animals. Among others, Sarah Day, Pam Brown, Coral Hull, John Kinsella, Mark Miller, Grace Perry (1927-1987), Les Murray and Les Wicks have all written significant poems on this subject. Day describes the wallaby ‘reclining, graceful, on the bitumen / nursing the primary blues and reds / of her billowing entrails’ in ‘Wallaby’ (2002, p 54). Les Murray adopts this same strategy of juxtaposition and colourful descriptive imagery in ‘Wrecked Birds’ (2010, p 74) when he writes:

Mostly in the spring  
a trainee bird’s wing  
will wave from the roadbed.

Colours that had started  
in its feathers will clog, scattered  
by a botched evade

attempted out above  
that naked ground young birds  
don’t sense as haunted.

Mark Miller describes the red-bellied black snake in ‘Along Back Forest Road’:

The black lurex  
along his back  
to his cold, opaque glare  
splashed silver at our eyes,  
a fly buzzed

where a red-crimson droplet  
had dried near his tiny head.  
We marvelled....  
and we pedalled on,  
certain that day  
we'd not seen anything living  
half as splendid as this death  
on our long ride home. (Miller 1989, p 27)

While John Kinsella describes the death of parrots in the West Australian wheat belt in 'Parrot Deaths: Rites of Passage' (2003, p 45). Here 'the scimitar roads cull the golden grain' while 'rosellas gather about the grain offerings / and the torn bodies of the fallen.' The poem concludes with the haunting 'the orange, golden, and emerald // hearts of parrots litter the roads. I drive / slowly and whisper prayers of deflection.' These poems dramatise, in a very specific way, the cost that the natural world so often pays for our convenience and progress. They seek to jolt us from our complacency, reminding us of the ethical consequences of our actions.

In all our cities there are areas of remnant bushland, like an oasis for wild flora and fauna, and a place where children can play. Connie Barber describes this in 'Carlton High Rise' (2002, p 25). She praises the 'morning lorikeets' that have 'mistaken the city for forest'. They have an impact on the human urban dwellers. The way they 'wheel round towers / and deal with offerings' causes 'people to admire their extravagance, / Envy their displacement / Calling it freedom'. But as the suburbs continue to expand these areas where wild flora and fauna can exist are sacrificed, once again the casualty of our progress. In 'Town Planning', David Campbell records this process. He writes how:

The plover cries in air  
For the town has grown  
And hatched its brick cottages  
Amongst the stone. (Campbell 1989, pp 73-74)

John Manifold describes this same process in 'Outer Suburbs' (1978, p 135). He writes:

It seems you can't have gracious living and  
Goannas. Shiny villas multiply  
On what were quite attractive bits of land,  
And we'll be getting sewage by and by.

In 'Suburban Flow', Barbara Fisher describes how nature is able to adapt and survive this loss of habitat. Obviously there are casualties, such as the goannas, but there are always some wild fauna able to adapt, and sometimes even thrive in the new conditions. She writes:

Where they filled in the estuary

and made playing fields....  
It's a bad scene, yes – and yet,  
early morning and a mist rising,  
the spoiled bush shines with dew  
and the whip-crack of the hidden bird  
cuts into the quiet, peoples the valley with ghosts. (Fisher 2001, p 31)

Kevin Murray in 'Creeks' (2005, p 5) and John Jenkins in 'Middle Yarra Tributary' (2003, pp 12-14) also describes what can survive the destruction of estuary by suburban expansion. Jenkins writes of how:

It's said some native plants can break down poisons,  
lap up truly noxious stuff – like formaldehyde – if it doesn't  
kill them first. In summer, they'll stand dry and thirsty,  
making 12,023 a good habitat – flattened mats of native grass  
for roos, until the rain revives the silver blur of seed,  
green and yellow whorls, the microscopic wonder.

For Jamie Grant, David Malouf and Peter Skrzynecki this loss, however, is far more personal. They write, as adults, of the loss of their childhood bush playgrounds. In 'Mullet Leap', Grant writes of the loss of a lake where 'dragonflies hovered like miniature helicopters' and where 'shining fish leapt' (1998, pp 9-10). The mangrove swamp, the 'dream-clear light', of the poet's childhood has been lost in adulthood to the developers' golf course. In 'Asphodel', Malouf describes his loss of 'a chain of waterlily ponds', the place where he spent 'whole days skylarking / on an inch of blood-red water' as he 'harried black marsh birds' and collected frogspawn (1991, pp 23-24). His childhood place 'of discovery' has now been lost to 'real estate – squared street on street/of split-level houses'. In 'Duck Creek', Skrzynecki writes of similar concerns (1993, pp 120-121). Duck Creek was a place where 'paperbarks and she-oaks were remembered', where 'tortoises were found', and where 'blue-tongue lizards / rabbits, magpies / and noisy mudlarks' could all 'be named'. Today it is all lost, only 'willy-wagtails remain'. The place of play has become like childhood itself, only recoverable by memory. For some the only response to this loss is retreat. Margaret Bradstock in 'Heading North' (2005, p 82) writes:

Heading north, always north,  
shedding the cities for the great forests  
driving by the old highway  
you leave upland farms, country townships,  
the past flagging you down.

For Bradstock it is difficult to be 'at home' if removed from 'the sound of forests, / ritual flight of cockatoos at morning, / the pistol-whip of birdsong'. Because of this, Bradstock writes in 'Such Transience' (2005, p 49) 'in the wasteland of suburbia / we plant trees'.

Poetry that questions the issue of dwelling certainly does not make the mistake that Ivor Indyk describes as being ‘the poetry of fulfilment and ease, in which the world of nature acknowledges and celebrates the desires of man’ (1988, p 353). The poetry of dwelling questions and challenges, it acts like a splinter to our complacency, raising awareness and provoking us to consider the ethical consequences of our decisions. The poetry of dwelling is distinguished wonderfully by what the American academic and ecocritic, Lawrence Buell, discusses in his definition of what constitutes the ‘environmental text’ (1995, pp 7-8). As I show in my thesis introduction, Buell argues that environmental texts present the natural world as intimately implicated in human history; they understand that the human interest is not the only legitimate interest; they demand a human accountability to the natural world; and they understand that the natural world is an ever changing process, very susceptible to both negative and positive impacts by the human world. As we have also seen, however, the Australian poetry of dwelling is not only an ecocriticism. It is also attuned to the contexts of the colonial and postcolonial. It is aware of Aboriginal culture and viewpoints – indeed some of its exponents are of course Aboriginal writers. As the Australian academic, George Seddon argues, this type of literature needs to be a ‘literature of intimacy with places, with country’ (1998, pp 105-109), but this must be an intimacy based on a commitment to notions of ecological consideration and social justice. If the poetry of dwelling is not also informed by the critique of postcolonialism it is, as Judith Wright highlights, just another discourse ‘come of a conquering people’ (Wright 1994, pp 140-141).

### *Australian nature poetry of image*

The nature poetry of praise has nature as its subject; the nature poetry of dwelling has the relationship between nature and humanity as its subject; the nature poetry of image has humanity as its subject. The poetry of praise and dwelling uses imagery to achieve its effects in the same way that the poetry of image does. The poetry of image, however, uses that imagery from the natural world not to explore the natural environment, or our relationship with it, but to focus on the human concern, on human nature. In the natural world it sees imagery to explore pregnancy and childbirth, domestic life and relationships, immigration and bigotry, warfare and cruelty, religious belief and terminal illnesses, death and bereavement, memory and creativity. The Australian nature poetry of image is a very diverse and rich group. Indeed the natural world is one of the richest sources of imagery in Australian poetry.

### *Australian nature poetry of image: Judith Wright*

In relation to the poetry of Judith Wright, Shirley Walker has written:

Australian nature provides her with potent new images - the coral atoll, the wattle-tree, the flame-tree, the conch-shell - for the specifically feminine concerns of fertility and generation, both

physical and imaginative. In later poems the lake, the camp beside Split Rock, and even a tadpole or pebbles taken from a creek provide her with potent images for her more complex philosophical lyrics. (1991, p 15)

In the natural world, Judith Wright finds her imagery to explore birth and death and the struggle in between to achieve intimacy. She writes of the change of seasons, of drought and the mystery of life forms so different from the human. So the poem 'Winter' (1994, p 425) begins:

Today's white fog won't lift above the tree-tops.  
Yesterday's diamond frost has melted to ice-water.

Old age and winter are said to have much in common.

While the poem 'Memory' (1994, p 423) opens with:

Yesterday wrapped me in wool; today drought's  
changeable weather  
Sends me down the path to swim in the river.

Three Decembers back, you camped here; your stone hearth  
Fills with twigs and strips peeled from the candlebark.

Where you left your tent, the foursquare patch is unhealed.  
The roots of the kangaroo-grass have never sprouted again.

Once at the riverbank, however, 'dead cassinias crackle. / Wombat-holes are deserted in the dry beds of creeks'. Even the 'frogs aren't speaking. / Their swamps are dry. In the eggs a memory lasts'. The poem is a wonderful evocation of drought and absence: the physical decline in place caused by drought and the withdrawal of intimacy caused by separation. The poem looks forward to the return of 'wet years' when the return of love, like rainfall, will be more than 'memory' in 'the eggs', but for now 'only two dragonflies dance on the narrowed water'.

In 'Seasonal Flocking' (1994, pp 405-406), Wright describes all the wild birds that 'come out of the mountains / and the snowcloud shadows' to flock in her gardens at the end of autumn. There are rosellas, coloured like 'berry-bright fruits, the young ones / brocaded with juvenile green'; black cockatoos with 'tails fanned to show yellow panes'; 'uncounted magpies and currawongs'; and 'sharp-edged welcome-swallows'. The poem ends, memorably, with a reflection on old age and an appeal for intimacy and memory:

Frost soon, and the last warmth passes.  
Seed-stems rot on wet grasses.

At the end of autumn



lovers walking by the river 'along a crumbling bush track'. The 'air's damp and sweet' and the lovers are in need of reconciliation:

I can't ask you for forgiveness.  
Words aren't part of this landscape.  
The weight of what I've done grinds away at my knees,  
the joints of my bones scrape away the word "jelly".  
My head floats on the path beside you, its hair  
speckled pollen from flowering gums.

'Flannel Flowers For Juno' is powerful poetry that develops nature as image to explore the complexities of intimate human relationships, but it is also clear that the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device. The emotional lives of the two people walking hand in hand beside the river find vibrant resonance in 'the full moon dropping through the gums', in 'the sounds of the river' and in the tawny frogmouth looking 'unblinking immobile' from a dead branch. Indeed it is in the beautiful white of the flannel flowers 'growing from the roots of an ancient fig...against the dark' of a sandstone cave – all those layered secrets – that the poem finds resolution in its search for reconciliation and human intimacy.

Adamson continues in this approach to his exploration of intimate human relationships in 'What's Slaughtered's Gone' (1989, pp 90-91), 'Eurydice and the Tawny Frogmouth' (2006, p 21) and 'Letter to Eurydice' (2006, pp 25-26). In 'A Bend In The Euphrates' (2006, pp 3-4), Adamson evokes the archetype river – his 'Hawkesbury' – as he deals with regret and loss. His imagery is of ibis, crows, fox, lantana, duck, egret and teal. This theme of loss and regret is continued in the beautiful prose poem, 'A Visitation' (2006, p 5). Here Adamson explores childhood memory and impermanence as he confronts the 'sheer wildness and ferocity' of a momentary engagement with yellow-footed rock wallabies, once forty years ago 'when I was a kid, rowing my grandfather's tallow-wood skiff across Big Bay' and again 'this morning'. With the moment of visitation, of 'shock', passed the poem concludes: 'afterwards, the atmosphere was thick with an odour unlike anything I recognised. This morning, it's in the air again. I turn to take another look, but the rock wallaby's gone'. To these themes of childhood memory and impermanence, 'The Serpent' (2006, pp 19-20) adds awakening sexuality and renewal, the metamorphosis of a child into an adult. The imagery of summer heat gathering into afternoon storm and the sloughed snakeskin is unforgettable.

Some of Adamson's earlier poetry that explores memory, time, origins, an almost 'cosmic consciousness' that celebrates the union between the human and the river recalls the ecstatic vision of David Campbell. In early-Adamson, though, this approach is sometimes a little obscure in comparison to the remarkable achievement of his latter verse. In poems like 'The River' (1977, pp 105-107), 'The Shining Incidents' (1977, pp 96-101), 'Into The Dark Air By River Light, Full Moon & High Tide' (1977, pp 101-102) and 'Out Of Time & The Self's Dark Ring In Radiant Twilight' (1977, pp 103-104), Adamson is striving for such an intense moment of integration with the natural world that it almost forces a split between the body and spirit. The poems are

shamanistic, often taking on the form of a raptor, as they leave the body behind in search of the ecstatic vision. In 'The Shining Incidents' (1977, pp 96-101), the 'mind swims / out from its body' as a 'brown kestrel flits // between the sun and the ancient / dwellings'. The poem concludes:

The mind moves ahead of my  
body feeling the new wings, wondering  
if they ever existed before.

Its thoughts lift me above the ground,  
I look down at my body, a feeble  
creature moving through its own silence.  
Moss clings to my thighs, the kestrel  
dives into the clearing hooking  
up the creature I taught not to fear.

Adamson's celebrations of the Hawkesbury River are certainly not a retreat or withdrawal from the wider world. In 'No River, No death' (1989, pp 83-86), a poem about, among other things, the Greek idea of the transmigration of souls across 'the river', Adamson expresses it like this:

Now here in a creek on Mooney Bay all river life  
calms the head that's filled with news

of politicians oceans away, the death men:  
whose voices rattle like loaded dice

microwaved down to our side of the planet.

In 'Gang Gang Cockatoos' (2006, pp 38-39) and 'Eclectus Parrot' (2006, P 40), Adamson writes brilliant satires reminiscent of Bruce Dawe. An interesting comparison would be Dawe's 'The Ant-Lion' (1983, p 215) where he sees in the snares of the waiting ant-lion an unexpected, and only partly humorous, image for the traffic cop and the State's attempts for social control. In the Gang Gang Cockatoo, Adamson finds the perfect image for his exploration of the values and aspirations of middle class America:

Since my children left New  
York and set up house in exclusive  
suburbs – well? The colossal

phone bills, the visits maybe once  
in three years, snaps of the kids dressed  
as gang-gang chicks in a delightful garden,  
the daughter-in-law pecking for money,

private schools to teach them "Hello Cocky"

-it's swell...

'Eclectus Parrot' uses humour and a savage wit to equally good effect in satirising the politics of militarism in the West. The poem concludes:

....Now hundreds  
of budgerigars wheel across a low sky:  
the whole jumble's put together from used  
landscapes garnished with raptors.

The Minister for Defence has news for those  
creatures. He mimics the eclectus parrot –  
his face turns red like its satin belly – but *his*  
black beak's genetically engineered for speech.

I would like to conclude my discussion of Robert Adamson by looking at 'Easter Fish' (2006, pp 10-11), a poem characteristic of his mature work. This is a beautiful poem celebrating intimate human relationships within the remarkable natural environment of the Hawkesbury:

Charcoal lines from a recent bushfire cross-hatched  
the trunks of ghost gums. Outside our kitchen windows,  
a butcher bird appeared on the verandah, strutting  
the rail and capriciously fluting.

Against the reconciliation that the season of Easter promises the poem relates how:

Our minds can flower suddenly sometimes  
with monstrous kelp waving in the tide  
flowing from old wounds.

The poem explores the refugee memories of the poet's wife, and of her mother, from post-war Budapest, a place 'at the end of the world' where 'meals were scraped together / from remnants' in an 'elegant city' broken by 'famine, invasion, ruin'. Eventually the conversation, uttered so 'carefully, tenderly', returns to the river:

... Now the river's surface  
is stretched tight, marbled by a sun setting  
  
in heads indwelling in silence. Puncturing the sky  
upstream, a pair of sea-eagles spiral down to their nest.

Adamson's balancing of great natural beauty, of life, with difficult and painful personal history, of death, is wonderfully evoked in the poem's conclusion:

We steamed our Good Friday fish,

seasoned with sweet basil and the juice of lemons,  
and deliciously the taste brought back memories of its  
capture: the mauve and silver flanks fading

into a quick death, the small cold flames of phosphorous  
lapping our boat's invisible Plimsoll line, the rising  
and falling of our breath.

As always in Adamson, especially in his later verse, the imagery, the careful attention to sound within each line, the perfect matching of free-verse form to feeling, is masterful artistry. He eliminates artificiality and in its place achieves a more flexible, modern and casual form demanding great creativity.

### *Australian nature poetry of image: Peter Minter*

Another poet of whom all these things could be said is Peter Minter; a poet who, it would appear, has been much influenced by Robert Adamson. Where Adamson celebrates the Hawkesbury wilderness, Minter writes of rural Australia and of popular scenic spots like Echo Point in the Blue Mountains. Like Adamson, Minter expresses a great sense of oneness with the natural world and of time unfolding. In the 'Knitcap Sutras' (2006, pp 23-28), Minter even personifies the universe as he explores the cyclic nature of time and the unity of living and non-living matter. The title of the 'Knitcap' – the beanie of young adults? – 'Sutras' alludes to the Wisdom Literature of India that includes the Kama Sutra, but also of course, puns so cleverly with 'night cap'. Minter's 'Sutras' are exploring the human sense of time and they are situated at the end of the day as they celebrate the place of rural Australia and drink in what is around them. Their experience of time is not linear, as in the dominant Western conception. The memory here is 'of black skin, old sky', of Aboriginal culture: time that is ancient and circular, always renewing: 'time is here too, silently / unfurling in the late sun's gravity – cores ceded up / as *Seeds Fancy Local* to the soft green park'.

The 'Knitcap Sutras' opens with Minter's witty nod to wisdom literature, the irony of 'The Sutras'. Homer wrote of Odysseus late home, and here we are home late for the modern Homer, the Simpsons. Minter's use of alliteration to capture the sense of driving on gravel roads and his wonderful final image of 'five young frogmouths grunting us dusk' is unforgettable. In the second sutra, Minter's beautiful rhythm suggests a quiet calm found on some mountain lookout as we are invited to disconnect our brains, to take ourselves back to pure instinct, and completely lose ourselves in the natural environment. The poem moves from a macro-view of the galaxy, the night sky, to a micro-view of a dragonfly in dam reeds as it 'lifts & darts'. In a lovely Adamson-like touch, Minter personifies the night sky, as the stars themselves point out constellations and bits of the earth, just as we do when we look up at the night sky. The fourth sutra has us again located high on a mountain lookout with 'eagle pairs eating wind',

‘assenting to the warm lift of air’, and clouds far below which ‘hub right round the light earth’. The poem develops some astounding imagery to capture the physicality of the human body. Lungs are ‘oxy-wet nets flooding heads / with thought’s rhythm’ while our metabolism is ‘inviolable combustion in green – vegetable? – and red – meat? – parts’. The poem ends with a couple making love on a cliff top, ‘egged on, knitcap sutras, plump handfuls of heaven.’ The suite concludes with a return to the themes of decline and rebirth, the cyclic nature of time and the micro-view of life – blue wrens, fruit trees and melaleuca – contrasted with the macro-view of the universe, ‘our small planet eavesdropping oscillations dark’. In the Australian nature poetry of image, there are few examples to match the ‘Knitcap Sutras’.

### *Australian nature poetry of image: Dorothy Hewett*

Peter Minter in his poem written in memory of Dorothy Hewett, searchingly addresses Hewett – his friend and another poetic influence – reminiscing:

I asked you where we’re  
bound across the clear expanse of grass,  
I asked you of the home we saw  
out across the plains,  
what field of yellow lies grows tough & wide  
now poetry seems to fail us,  
its lies no longer big enough? (2006, pp 74-75)

Hewett’s answer, we are told, is the idiosyncratic, carefree and memorable: ‘the Official Language / is spritely as an adder in the breeze, / blasphemous tongues / saccharine in formaldehyde... // things are getting dangerous again’. Such energetic brilliance is so characteristic of Hewett and has led commentators and poets, such as Geoff Page, to observe that ‘Hewett always seemed wilder and more romantic in her work and thereby something of an inspiration to younger poets’ (1995, p 120).

Nature is a prioritised subject matter in Hewett’s work, which is characteristically lyrical and celebratory in style. Her approach to the biophysical environment is not so much to write the poem of praise, however, but rather to see in nature key imagery for the exploration of her human concerns: female sexuality, family relationships, the appropriation of folk tales, grief, nostalgia for her Western Australian wheat-belt childhood to name a few. In describing her own verse, Hewett has written that:

My struggle as a poet has been to wring the neck of rhetoric, to modernise my poetics, and try to catch the moment with a shorter, tougher economical line, centring on a driving verb.... Throughout all [my work] I have retained an interest in myth-making and struggled to reflect a female sensibility through

economy, control and an image-making shorthand. I am looking for toughness, clarity and lyricism. (1989a, pp 45-46)

In such poems as 'Modernistic Memories' (1995, p 18), 'Once I Rode with Clancy' (1995, pp 44-45), '12' (1995, pp 224-226), 'The Frogs' (1995, pp 335-336), 'Owl' (1995, p 340), 'Stars' (1995, pp 386-387), 'Inheritance' (1995, p 398) and 'Cicadas' (1995, p 405), Hewett writes of a life intimately connected to the biophysical environment, usually as located in rural Australia. Often these poems take the form of nostalgic reminiscences and deal with, among other things, the separation of lovers or relatives. So in 'The Frogs', the persona in the poem addresses her lover and asks:

Do you remember  
how at night by the tidal river  
we listened to the frogs  
in chorus in the wetlands  
behind the house?  
How they sang in the moonlight  
together sweeter than the birds  
drumming repeating the notes  
in irregular heartbeats  
till the night was shaken with sound.

The poem concludes:

you cupped one hand to your ear  
*Listen to the frogs* you whispered  
*singing for dear life*  
*out in the swamp.*

In 'Stars', Hewett writes:

that night  
you called me  
from the Hawkesbury  
the stars blazed  
and the tide turned  
that was the time  
if taken at the flood  
our life had changed  
but hesitating  
all was lost

'Stars' continues with 'I wake to the first call / of the corellas / migrating to the ranges' and concludes with the unforgettable:

dawn breaks

it's silent now  
a subtle shadow falls  
across the lawn  
is it a cloud a bough  
the flicker of a bird  
a voice calling  
from the Hawkesbury  
to share the stars...

'Cicadas' deals with the physical decline that comes with old age and the separation of that inner life and youthful vitality from the 'outer shell' of existence. The poem begins:

All that summer  
the cicadas sang in the garden  
Black Prince Yellow Monday Green Grocer

you came in from the night  
to surprise me crushing  
the shells under your footsteps

sitting on the edge of the chair  
nervous your false teeth chattering  
you said *It's better than nothing*.

Near the end of the poem, we return to the female persona and to her nostalgic recollection: 'I remembered the saying / *Your old men shall dream great dreams*'. In every decline and separation there is always some consolation. As Hewett writes elsewhere: 'we cannot stay / like the dead leaves / on the ground / we are blown away' (1995, p 396), but in the face of this reality Hewett's optimism asserts itself:

It's spring again  
the season of renewal  
I sit out in the glass garden  
doves moan a wren's wing  
brushes against my hair  
and hope dies hard

even when there is nothing  
to look forward to  
the wattlebirds ride high  
cradled in leaves  
the she-oak sighs the bay  
lulls and slides through the bright air

the poem is the reprieve  
the chime the charm the pardon (1995, p 388)

For Hewett, poetry – and ‘great dreams’ – never fail, their consolations are always ‘big enough’. Another Dorothy Hewett poem that glistens with ‘bright air’ and ‘reprieve’ is ‘Inheritance’ (1995, p 398). On the surface this poem could read as a sentimental and celebratory piece of family nostalgia; a paean for childhood and the nourishment of family love. It could read quite conservatively as a testament, an expression of the values for raising children fondly and intimately connected with the natural world, but as you would expect with a poem by Dorothy Hewett, it is much more than the compilation of either of these readings. ‘Inheritance’ is about acknowledging and respecting the people and values who make us; it is about the passing of time and the significance of appreciative reflection; it is about the evocation of place as a site of childhood. Here is ‘Inheritance’:

I have travelled a long way from my origins  
is there anything left of the child  
with the wheaten hair who listened for owls  
loved poetry and winter fires remembered  
the strange moment in dark fields  
when pet lambs grown into ewes and wethers  
trotted along the fence lines bleating to be let in?

You can never go back only onwards  
into the world leaving behind  
all the loved things the grandfather  
flying on his winged nag through the frosty paddocks  
the handsome father haloed in sparks  
roasting spuds in the ashes of the playroom fire.

Where do you go from here concealed in darkness  
glowing with the heat in the grass the hawk in the wood  
the plovers spinning in front of the plough –

to the old woman watching for her bulbs to come up  
the irises lining the path the white cockatoos  
in a flurry of wings a visitation of angels.

The near absence of punctuation in the poem (except once at the end of each stanza) and the fairly long line lengths, gives the poem a carefully controlled rhythm. The effect is that of an almost breathless rush of words; just as we are unable to slow down the passing of time, punctuation in this poem is unable to slow down and control the rhythm of each spoken line. As Hewett writes: ‘you can never go back only onwards’. Her imagery and use of juxtaposition – such as ‘the plovers spinning of spring in front of the plough’ – is so evocative. The poem intimately implicates human history in natural history: childhood memories are inseparable from the wheat farm location, just as the ‘present’ situates an ‘old woman’ in her backyard garden ‘watching her bulbs’ and waiting for that ‘flurry of wings’ – the white cockatoos – for ‘a visitation of angels’.

When it comes to the Australian nature poetry of imagery, the work of Dorothy Hewett – and of ‘Inheritance’ in particular – is an astounding achievement.

### *Australian nature poetry of image: Grace Perry*

Like Judith Wright, Robert Adamson, Peter Minter and Dorothy Hewett, Grace Perry (1927-1987) is another who has written some wonderfully memorable nature poetry of image. Perry is a lyrical imagist who, as a poet, is much underrated. She draws much of her imagery from the natural world of the rural Southern Highlands of NSW where she lived on a cattle and sheep stud. A medical practitioner, Perry founded South Head Press and the journal *Poetry Australia*, and did much to promote Australian poetry from the 1960s to the 1980s. In Perry’s poetical work, the seasons of winter and autumn, the red and golden leaves of poplar trees, granite and limestone, cattle and water birds are all celebrated. They are praised, however, in order to explore her human concerns. Perry writes few poems of pure praise for the natural world. Nor does she write many poems that explore the question of dwelling. A poem such as ‘Michael’ (1984, p 15) that is concerned with the practice of selling male calves to the slaughter yard as ‘vealers’ is an exception. Perry is an imagist, and the natural environment is the largest source of that imagery, but her subjects are the human concerns of love, regret, loss, bereavement and what is unattainable. ‘Gold hail from poplars’ (1972, p 60), ‘Thorn bushes’ (1972, p 63), ‘Few birds remain’ (1974, p 46), ‘Swans’ (1974, p 126), ‘Now in full leaf poplar’ (1980, p 8) and ‘The body of my beloved’ (1980, p 54) are all very good examples.

Perry’s approach has not been without influence on the writing of poets younger than her either, even though she has become much undervalued. Les Murray worked with Perry at *Poetry Australia* very early in his career and was certainly familiar with her work. Some of his poems, like ‘Dead Trees in the Dam’ (1996, p 18) – which I looked at earlier – are very reminiscent of Grace Perry. In his poem, Murray sees a stand of dead trees in a paddock’s dam as ‘castle scaffolding tall in moat’. The poem praises all the wild birds that visit and ‘flower’ the castle ruins each dawn. In ‘Ibis on the lake’ (1976, p 65), Perry reworks the Arthurian myth of the lady in the lake and ‘the sword lost long ago in water’ as she too celebrates the wild water birds that visit a stand of dead trees in a lake. Perry’s poem concludes:

Teal ride at anchor under willow trees.  
Ducks unroll scrolls of shadow in their wake.  
Let us be unemotional as the ibis  
nesting on the island in the lake.

Long ago the sword was lost in water.  
The surface drowned the memory of blood.  
Still the samite arm, the solitary bird  
flames white against dark skeletons of wood.

In 'None' (1963, p 33), Perry recaptures an ecstatic childhood memory:

In childhood, days were horses  
thundering down the range.  
I rode bareback  
crouched along a straining neck,  
and clinched my fingers in the mane.  
Through light and dark,  
wild horses ran like rain  
on hills that always moved from me.  
Alongside loomed vague forms of other riders  
shouting  
as black feet pounded dust upon the plain,  
and singing  
through timbered foothills to the final mountain.  
Leaving my horse, I climbed  
slowly, and more slowly.

Perry's poem concludes, typically, with the expression of regret that this ecstatic experience is a memory, unable to be attained in the present. The parallels between this poem and Murray's much loved and widely anthologised 'Spring Hail' (2001, pp 7-8) are remarkable. The persona in Murray's poem is also celebrating an ecstatic childhood memory of riding in paddocks like a 'thunderbolt':

It was time, high time, the highest and only time  
to stand in the stirrups and shout out, blind with wind  
for the height and clatter of ridges to be topped  
and the racing downward after through the lands  
of floating green and bridges and flickering trees.  
It was time, as never again it was time  
to pull the bridle up, so the racketing hooves  
fell silent as we ascended from the hill  
above farms, far up to where the hail  
formed and hung weightless in the upper air,  
charting the birdless winds with silver roads  
for us to follow and be utterly gone.

Murray's poem is also a paean for an experience that cannot be recovered in the present, but should not be forgotten:

This is for spring hail, that you might remember  
a boy and a pony long ago who could fly.

While Perry may have been influential, many have judged her talent to be second rate. John Tranter and Bruce Beaver, two major Australian poets and contemporaries of Grace Perry, have expressed this opinion in a conversation they recorded first for the

Australian literary journal *Southerly* in 2003 and later included on Tranter's website (Tranter, 2003). Murray's biographer, Peter Alexander, has also quoted this opinion (Alexander 2000, p 195). Alexander notes in his biography how the older Perry was soon seeking the help and advice of the young Murray from 1965 in editing her journal *Poetry Australia* (Alexander 2000, p123). Tranter, Beaver and Murray all had their personal disagreements with Perry, but perhaps now the time has come for Grace Perry's work to receive more gratitude.

Grace Perry's suite of poems, 'Thunderegg' published in *Be Kind To Animals* (1984, pp 17-30), would be a very good place to start reconsidering her achievement. These are poems that could have been cast to earth 'as if by lightning strike'. The suite opens with 'Blackwattle' and the expression of the classic Perry theme that life is like an 'old riverbed'. Once you have 'crossed to the far bank' there will soon 'be no sign' of your presence as 'each day fresh stars and signals / archive night animals' and 'grass crests / blackwattle lace // silent as a snowfield / over my body'. The suite continues in 'Drought'. As we have seen, drought is not surprisingly a common preoccupation in Australian poetry, but Perry's description of it stands out:

We are in drought  
at last they say the word  
after long weeks  
honeycoloured earth  
no blade no nourishment  
the keen of cicadas  
accompanies straggling cows  
creek bed to creek bed

black snakes warm red bellies  
in hotfingered sand  
roofiron guncracks drive out the last starlings  
the house a grey blister about to burst

around the argyle apple  
ten shorn rams face one another's nakedness  
hang their heads suffer in silence

drought  
slow death  
the word does not cloud sky

The poem concludes with the search for the human theme, as Perry sees in the drought an image and 'looks for language sunblind':

drought determines survival  
drought the testing and the truth

In 'Eidolon Valley', Perry juxtaposes life against the hard surrounds of limestone, blackberry brambles and barbed wire as 'this year regrowth has beaten me / too old to match myself against that force'. 'Bundanoon' is a fantastic example of how tightly controlled Perry's free-verse is by the sound of her words and by their spoken rhythms. This is well illustrated by the poem's opening stanza:

The gorge slips away under firetrail and tall bending down  
cliffs and rain lines written into the earth where another  
world's ambiguity will fail in the sheer fall of rock as I  
lie in idleness and shadow and die in the sight of a hawk  
at the gates of the skimming free and wide as I love you

In 'Bushfire', 'After fire' and 'Morning', Perry explores wild bush fire as that seemingly uncontrollable and destructive natural force leaving 'earth burnt out'. But even here the hope for regeneration will eventually win out as 'at last the fire is out' and:

The sun comes down  
to walk among ruins  
a woman combing long hair after love

The possibility of love, but the acceptance of how difficult it is to hold on to is beautifully captured in 'Song'. Here Perry also shows off her ability to use more traditional measures and rhymes:

When valleys were harbours  
under green skies  
my sailor was silver  
the world in his eyes

The lighthouse no longer  
guides great ships home  
my lover shines silver  
under smooth stone

The apparent simplicity of this short lyric belies what a perfect and accomplished achievement it really is.

The suite concludes with 'Holograph'. Here Perry gives voice to the inanimate object of her pen which addresses the poet:

And still I talk to you  
and you say nothing  
  
let me be your word in your hand  
black rivered hard

write me  
against crisp white sheets

We are indeed fortunate to have this rich river of words, this ‘smooth round script’ of Grace Perry for she has shown us ‘if not reality / marginal possibility’ (1984, p 30).

*Australian nature poetry of image: Philip Hodgins*

Another who has shown us the ‘marginal possibility’ of what poetry can be made to do is Philip Hodgins. We have already met him as a major poet who confronted the issue of dwelling in rural Australia. He also found in the natural world, however, the imagery he needed to document his own battle with leukaemia. The Australian poet Robert Gray in his elegy, ‘Philip Hodgins (1959-1995)’ (1996, pp 72-73), gives the following description of Hodgins’ poetry:

Your funeral recalled for me your poems;  
I seemed to feel your touch about it all –  
sparse trees nearby, sinuous, stringy gums,  
their leaves, rags on barbed wire; the lustrous call  
of furious magpies; clay instead of tombs;  
and low weather, with dry weeds and thistle  
that we came wandering over, scatteredly,  
to the coffin, strung above its cavity.

In ‘Leeches’ (2000, pp 58-59), Hodgins illustrates this ‘sparse’ and ‘stringy’ approach to language when he observes how leeches:

Swim like sunken ripples.  
Bloody-minded  
they come home  
to what they know –  
the single fact of blood.

In ‘A House In The Country’ (2000, pp 190-191), Hodgins describes a timber cottage being eaten by termites:

The first we knew about this hidden force  
was when a crack appeared in the masonite

This was ‘as if it were a chart of our bad luck.’ The discovery of the termites’ existence, however, is only the beginning:

I thought about the treatment this would mean:  
those poisons, vile as chemotherapy,

that they'd have to spray all around the place

Finally, there were days of remission:

spent wandering the paddocks like prospectors  
on the off-chance that we'd find the nest.

The days of remission spent in fear 'worried about / what was going on underneath my feet'. Few could record the final stages of their own terminal disease with such unforgettable imagery from the natural world. Hodgins did it in poem after poem: 'Room 3 Ward 10 West 17/11/83' (2000, pp 5-6), 'Catharsis' (2000, p 10), 'Kite' (2000, p 11), 'The Wait' (2000, p 13), 'Question Time' (2000, pp 17-18), 'The Pressure' (2000, p 28), 'The Birds' (2000, p 31), 'Walking Through the Crop' (2000, p 34), 'The Shoot' (2000, p 42) to name a few. Sometimes, as in 'The Garden' (2000, p 174), he could even find that ironic sense of humour within the conversational style he made so much his own:

There'll never be a better time to die,  
not with the garden looking so alive.  
See how that iris focuses the eye  
on filmy purple dabs, how they contrive

to keep attention on themselves when all  
around them other flowers are crying out  
in colours just as pure; a visual call  
that ranges from a whisper to a shout.

The beds will never be like that again:  
long moments of excess not knowing how  
the crumbling dirt is going to sustain  
you any more. The dying time is now.

Philip Hodgins' poetry of dwelling and image is urgent and direct. His use of humour, anecdote and imagery, together with his capacity to express wonder and insight are a dazzling achievement. He can invite a reflection on the capacity of poetry to question and affirm the sense of human and environmental history as intimately connected processes.

### *Australian nature poetry of image exploring terminal illness, death and bereavement*

Many others have also adopted this approach of using imagery from the natural world in exploring terminal illness, death and bereavement. As Eric Beach writes in 'a giant is coming' (1996, p 11) bereavement is bigger than life, inevitably coming:

across golden valley, green flats elbowed by dusk  
a scarp shot-gunned with pellets  
dead weight of blue falling back into purple clouds  
where once she told me to jump for love  
a bird's egg in my mouth

Beach concludes his poem with the uncompromising 'grief clenches in unbroken mirrors / as we walk our river road towards a spilling dark'. As Craig Powell reminds us in 'For Janet' (1968, p 61) grief often leaves us angry and beaten:

Sometimes I wonder what I've got to say,  
what it is that keeps trying to spatter  
outwards, out of blood or God knows where.  
And then I wonder if words could even matter.

Fortunately Powell, like so many other poets, know that words do matter and have continued to explore in the natural world the imagery they need to respond to this difficult subject matter in their poetry. Powell has written of the loss of a baby son in 'Burial Poem' (1968, p 60) and in 'The Web' (1984, p 50) and of the loss of a partner in 'Aubade' (1984, p 33) and 'Nocturnes' (1984, pp 49-50). Robyn Rowland has written very movingly of breast cancer in 'This present moment' (2001, pp 87-88) and 'Lake Conjola' (2001, p 81). Ron Pretty writes of the loss of independence in old age in 'Flying Ants' (2000, pp 20-21), of terminal illness in 'Crows' (2001, p 77) and of cancer in 'Summer' (2001, p 103). Miriel Lenore also writes of cancer in 'last birthday' (1997, p 57). Susan Kruss develops an incredible image in 'Angiography' (2003, p 77) of heart disease:

rivers branch into streams  
mapped white on grey  
the silting up of  
one forked joint  
scarcely enough to notice  
the kind of narrowing  
a river might make  
around a habitat tree

Ann Timoney Jenkin describes cancer and dementia in 'Jacaranda Days' (1995, p 51). Vera Newsom in 'Flannel Flowers' (2000, p 57), Margaret Bradstock in 'Cicada drum song' (2005, p 38) and Gwen Harwood in 'Anniversary' (1975, p 7) and 'Driving Home' (1975, pp 181-182) explore grief for the loss of close friends. While Michael Sariban in 'A Bush Feast' (2001, p 41) and Maurice Strandgard in 'The Silver-Eye' (2002, p 12) describe the grief felt over the deaths of animals. Geoff Page in 'Codicil' (1992, pp 76-77), Sarah Day in 'Paeans' (2002, pp 30-333), Majorie Pizer in 'Wiseman's Ferry' (2006, p 5) and Dennis Haskell in 'Again and Again' (1993, pp 66-67) describe burials in particularly scenic natural places. While Judith Wright in 'Rainforest' (1994, p 412), Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 'The Curlew Cried' (1970, p 4) and

in 'The Woor Woman' (1970, pp 46-47), Mark Miller in 'Leaves' (1989, p 28), John Blight in 'The Leopard-ash Tree' (1992, p 175) and RA Simpson (1929-2002) in 'During the Drought' (2004, p 63) all find in nature some hope for regeneration after death. As Katherine Gallagher writes in 'Cloud-eye' (2006, p 11):

The sting in a limbering spring day  
foreshadows summer. September 19<sup>th</sup>,  
my mother's death. Through her window  
roses plait themselves together beside young-  
leafed eucalypts as she, too ill to speak,  
slowly becomes my eye in the clouds, the gap  
I will see through. No one knows me better  
than she who circled my first flight.

In the cycles of nature – seasons, night and day, growth and decay – many poets have found hope for consolation in response to bereavement. As Heather Stewart writes in 'Rain forest' (2005, p 66): 'Cloudburst soaks the earth...my bones with them', but she concludes so memorably and unexpectedly:

Seeds are floating    branches shaking  
buds are swelling    flowermaking  
my heart's opening    reaching    breaking

Softly glowing moths are winging  
waters sparkling    bird-calls ringing  
my soul's waking    shining    singing

This is such a positive and edifying way to bring such a poem to a conclusion. Kenneth Mackenzie writes similarly in his beautiful 'In the Plovers' Country' (1972 p 12). Mackenzie describes:

Stony outcrops in the plovers' country,  
places where Time might halt in a day's journeying,  
have been my refuge. Here the moss is secret,  
the wind blows sadly, and the falling cries  
of the plovers are like flowers thrown on a tomb.

But Mackenzie writes, 'this land is not sad.../ for the grey skies, and the stone, and the birds' lamenting / hoard peace to multiply it'. Oodgeroo Noonuccal writes similarly to Mackenzie in her poem 'The Curlew Cried' (1970, p 4). But where Mackenzie's imagery is found in plovers, rural lands made productive by winter rains and in nuclear family relationships, Oodgeroo's Indigenous perspective draws on a culture of kinship through the extended family unit and the relationship between people and their country. For Oodgeroo the 'curlew is brother of the Aboriginal'; it is part of the 'spirit-country' of culture and story. As Oodgeroo writes in 'The Curlew Cried':

Three nights they heard the curlew cry.  
It is warning known of old  
That tells them one tonight shall die.

But Oodgeroo's poem concludes with:

The poor dead will be less afraid,  
Their tribe brother will be with him  
When the dread journey must be made.

'Have courage, death is not an end,'  
He seems to say. 'Though you must weep,  
Death is kindly and is your friend.'

For Gwen Harwood in 'Autumn Rain' (1990, p 213) bereavement's consolation is also found in the 'cry' of nocturnal birds, in the 'plover's haunting cry', 'in sodden paddocks' and in family. Harwood writes:

Chill rain: the end of autumn.  
A day of sombre music,  
a raindrop army drumming

to the plover's haunting cry.  
Grief under a gold mask,  
perhaps? More likely, joy

at the delicate abundance  
stirring in sodden paddocks  
to nourish generations

For Harwood the coming of winter and 'chill rain' may be a time 'to think of death', but more importantly it is a time to remember the promise of life and growth found in drought breaking rain and 'of children's children / inheriting the earth'. For Harwood, ultimately, we find consolation in the lives and memories of our children, and in our 'children's children'. Harwood, like all these poets, finds in the natural world arresting and often unexpected imagery for her exploration of the human concerns of terminal illness, death and bereavement. Harwood also reminds us that consolation is found not only in the world of nature but in the lives and memories of the children and friends we leave behind.

*Australian nature poetry of image exploring pregnancy, childbirth, and domestic life*

Australian nature poetry writes just as powerfully of pregnancy, childbirth and of domestic life, especially of the situation of the suburban housewife. Jerri Kroll, in 'Stirrings' (1990, p 3), captures the moment when a pregnant woman feels her baby move:

Our son jumped inside  
parrots burst from your eyes  
cerulean blues, hot corals  
feathers filled your mouth  
I couldn't make out what you said  
joy squeaked too loudly  
as parrots circled over us  
dizzying in their splendour

This praise of pregnancy is continued in Graeme Webster's 'The shininess of life' (1996, p 18) and in Yve Louis' 'Grasstrees' (2002, p 10). But as Jennifer Rankin (1941-1979) reminds us in 'Cicada Singing' (1990, p 40), the excitement of childbirth is not only about the promise of new beginnings and a parent's love. Rankin watches a bird chasing a cicada and ponders how much longer this can continue:

With your life expectancy  
six days in the sun  
eight years in the earth  
and the long slow crawl behind you?

Rankin's poem concludes with a mother reflecting on the lives of the 'singing cicada' and her newly-born child:

Ah! but the probing beak of the bird  
prizes you out!  
Quick in the swift air  
it is the urgent flap of bird-wind

and you glint green my cicada  
in this instant-wheeling-garden  
you glint green  
under the weight of the bird

you glint green and the sun shines

catching itself on your newly-dried wings  
that tear like a child's first transfer in the air.

So birth is also about vulnerability and fear. In 'Soldier Boy', Susan Afterman (1987, p 17) continues these reflections, writing of pregnancy in a most unexpected way. Poetry can always surprise:

Kangaroo lies dead by the road.  
Smiles, bloated, like a soldier boy  
in river lilies.  
The fur stops the rot.  
His big belly won't burst for a while.  
I had a bloated belly, white skinned;  
full of food, excrement  
my bloody first son.  
My belly burst and drained away,  
I bled and flowed  
a fetid river.

Kangaroo cries as his bowels are chewed out  
shot through the startled eye.

The use of juxtaposition by Afterman captures so much of the 'nature' – the blood loss, the pain, the risk - in human childbirth, but the use of the word 'fetid' and the sudden violence of the kangaroo's death 'shot through the startled eye', suggests so much more. The birth described by Afterman – of her 'soldier boy' – would seem to be a still-birth; here birth does not represent a beginning but an end in anger, pain and grief. In the natural world, Afterman finds powerful imagery to respond to this emotional crisis in poem after poem: 'The Mirror I' (1987, p 3), 'Kiss My Son' (1987, p 4), 'Winter' (1987, p 5), 'The Mirror II' (1987, p 7), 'Into the Rock's Current' (1987, p 9), 'Prunings' (1987, p 11) and 'Child Song' (1987, p 20) to name a few.

As Andrew Taylor writes in 'Sheets' (1991, p 60):

Somewhere, say in the middle of its song  
a bird stops. Its silence  
is a twig still springing  
in the empty air.  
And say  
somewhere a bed is empty, though a body  
appals its sheets. Nowhere  
more than here, before a body  
becomes a ceremony of loss, is emptiness  
heavier, thicker in the throat.

In wild birds, many poets have found the imagery they need to explore fecundity in the suburbs but as Taylor reminds us here, they can also illustrate the sudden and unexpected entry into a life of loss and grief. For Taylor, as with Rankin in 'Cicada singing', it is more often the possibility of loss and grief that is to be feared: 'it's natural



The place of birds in the biophysical environment and in the consciousness of urban-dwelling humans is also regularly explored, such as by Jan Owen in 'All Birds' (2002, p 41). In bird life, poets see an image to explore fertility and growth in the suburbs. Bruce Beaver and Peter Skrzynecki often do this. I have already looked at the suburban praise poetry of Peter Skrzynecki and how it so often focuses on wild birds. Bruce Beaver is equally interested in the birds that we share our suburban and urban spaces with.

In 'Something for the Birds' (2005, p 3) Beaver praises the wild birds that 'call up the sun' over our suburbs each morning. Beaver's richly evocative poem has magpies 'bouncing their raucous callings' in concert with the 'currawong's wolf-whistling' and 'the mynah's noisy double-talk and jazz' even as the 'technicoloured lorikeets that swing / in every which way upside down and sing / out loud, far wider in their equipoise'. Beaver memorably concludes his poem with:

The muslin magpies call above and carol  
in and out of the same recurrent day  
over the human lives that hardly matter  
in worlds of wings and envelopes of air.

This conclusion brings us to Beaver's more common approach to the nature poem; he writes of, and praises, the world of nature – especially this suburban bird life – in order to explore the human concern. Beaver writes significant nature poetry of image. So in 'Round-up' (1991, pp 263-264), 'Push/Fall' (1991, p 274), and 'Marauders' (2005, p 108) he sees in the interactions of suburban currawong, magpie and mynah populations an image to treat schoolyard bullying and overly competitive human behaviour. In 'Singers', Beaver (1991, p 270) praises the suburban fecundity of the red-whiskered bulbul, an introduced showy little bird with a delightfully jaunty singing voice:

One second of song and the bulbul  
tips the scales of time in favour  
of a lyric. An overlarge  
eunuch's sweet voice interleaves  
the radioed advertisements.

The brilliant suburban song has a purpose though:

Obviously the small bird  
advertises house and home,  
the making of fertilised  
eggs, the arduous ardour  
of it all....

The poems concludes:

The bulbul shrieks his love  
above a set of sotto voce

fellows in the self-same  
thicket. Lustrous leaved,  
he bursts with eggs  
and bounces towards the sky.

Robyn Rowland, in 'Separation' (2001, p 16), also sees in wild life an image for exploring the concern of parenting in the suburbs. Her wonderful poem concludes:

Within the ordinariness of groceries, nappies,  
the routine harshness of the working day,  
the animal heart howls wounded  
searching for the screaming place of the soul –  
isn't it here, isn't it there?  
who cares, who cares.

Then into the open sky between the broken rain,  
four Crimson Rosellas  
a shock of scarlet in their deep sea blue,  
aflame  
in the naked apricot tree,  
singing,  
god only knows about what –  
maybe the spare apples  
still hanging from the apple tree they gorged on;  
maybe that the cat found outdoors too cold;  
maybe just that there is  
today  
and tomorrow  
and tomorrow...

Vera Newsom is also concerned with this experience of parenting in the suburbs and with the isolation and endless domestic chores that it so often involves. In 'Woman at Dusk' (2000, p 9) Newsom writes:

All night it will keep up its prattle.  
We can hear the swish of a breeze  
releasing itself from its wicker cage.

Limp clothes hang like ghosts on the line.  
A woman, come to unpeg them,  
smells them for freshness, then

touches a garment to lips and cheek  
as women for centuries have done.  
The clothes are too moist and cold, she says.

They have waited here too long.

Like Rowland and Newsom, many poets have followed the example of Gwen Harwood and Judith Wright, and have seen in the natural world a context and a source of imagery for exploring the situation of the suburban housewife. As Newsom concludes in 'Lying Awake at Night' (2007, pp 169-173), a poem dedicated to the memory of Gwen Harwood:

I turn the pages of your book and read your thoughts.  
Carried by the flow of rhythm, image, light and shade,  
my heart lifts in response. The moment  
when I take your books down from the shelf  
and read, I feel you warm again.  
This is the living now, the present tense.

Harwood has brilliantly written of this 'living now, the present tense' in 'An Impromptu For Ann Jennings' (1975, pp 76-77), 'Oyster Cove' (1975, p 81) and 'Driving Home' (1975, pp 181-182). These poems may not be quite as well known as Harwood's 'Suburban Sonnet' or Judith Wright's 'To Another Housewife' or 'Eve To Her Daughters', but they graphically use imagery from the natural world to illustrate the same situation. 'An Impromptu For Ann Jennings' begins:

Sing, memory, sing those seasons in the freezing  
suburb of Fern Tree, a rock-shaded place  
with tree ferns, gullies, snowfalls and eye-pleasing  
prospects from paths along the mountain-face.

Nursing our babies by huge fires of wattle,  
or pushing them in prams when it was fine

The poem concludes by showing the lives and dreams of women, even if willingly, consumed in their children:

Before the last great fires we two went climbing  
like gods or blessed spirits in summer light  
with the quiet pulse of mountain water chiming  
as if twenty years were one long dreaming night,  
  
above the leafy dazzle of the streams  
to fractured rock, where water had its birth,  
and stood in silence, at the roots of dreams,  
content to know: our children walk the earth.

There have been few examples in Australian poetry where traditional metres and rhymes have been used so masterfully as in Gwen Harwood, but her poetry is no conservative retreat from the issues of contemporary life. Many writers, while perhaps writing

predominately in free verse, have followed Harwood in this concern with seeing in the natural environment an image for the exploration of domestic concerns. Diane Fahey in 'Easter Monday' (2006, p 26), Margaret Scott in 'The House Where I was Born' (2000, p 30), Judith Beveridge in 'Orb Spider' (1987, p 18) and 'Catching Webs' (1987, pp 16-17), Susan Kruss in 'Missed Breakfasts' (2003, p 12), Bronwyn Lea in 'The Snake Nest' (2008, p 21) and, as I have shown, Vera Newsom in 'Woman at Dusk' (2000, p 9) are all good examples. Newsom also writes of flannel flowers, scribbly gums and fairy wrens in exploring the enriching friendships between women and the consolations that this can bring in her poems 'For Heather Falkner' (2000, p 41) and in 'Flannel Flowers' (2000, p 57). Judith Beveridge's 'Orb Spider' is a particularly unforgettable piece of writing. To see in the orb spider 'pegging out her web / thin as pressed flower in the bleaching light' an extended image for the exploration of 'domesticity' is astounding. Beveridge's poem concludes:

Each night  
I saw the same dance in the sky,  
the pattern like a match-box puzzle,  
tiny balls stuck in a grid until shaken  
so much, all bright marigolds  
of that quick year, the hour-long day,  
she taught me to love the smallest transit,  
that the coldest star has a planetesimal beauty.  
I watched her above the flowers  
tracing her world, making it one perfect drawing.

In her poetry Beveridge does not shy away from the political dimensions of how we arrange households and child rearing, nor from the monotonous nature of so much of our domestic housework, but she also sees in this an image for the continuance of family relationships and love. In the monotonous nightly activity of the orb spider, Beveridge highlights for her male and female readers, a 'dance in the sky' and a sense of awe for 'the smallest transit' as we watch the orb spider 'tracing her world, making it one perfect drawing'. Beveridge's poem reminds us that it is in our family relationships that we gain so much of our joy and vitality.

### *Australian nature poetry of image exploring old age and family relationships*

In the natural world many have seen a focus for examining life's choices and their consequences. This is often dramatised in the reflection that comes in old age. In 'Bird's Eye View', Kevin Murray (2005, p 44) studies his garden 'like the birds', 'close reading the leaves of strange texts'. He is 'head down in a bush starred with white flowers'. His poem concludes:

The young stringybark is stretching to the west,  
straining from its senior's shade. Damn. I wish

I'd watched my own kids' days like this. But I  
was busy then.

Similar terrain is explored by Nan McDonald in 'The Travellers in Autumn' (1969, p 81), Dorothy Hewett in 'Inheritance' (1995, p 398) and 'Cicadas' (1995, p 405), Rosemary Dobson in 'Summer's End' (1991, pp 17-18), Michael Dransfield in 'portrait of the artist as an old man' (1974, p 29), Pam Brown in 'This Old Angel' (1984, p 89), Robyn Rowland in 'Boned' (2004, p 17), James McAuley in 'New Spring' (1971, pp 103-104), Russell Erwin in 'Wild Cherries' (2001, p 61), John Rowland in 'Morunda' (1989, pp 42-45) and Kenneth MacKenzie in 'In the Plovers Country' (1972, p 12). For the physical decline that comes in old age Antigone Kefala, in 'Botanical Gardens' (1998, p 20), has developed the following wonderful image in the form a 'proverb':

Past old trees, glass butterflies  
fluttered their wings along the burning  
surface of the waters.  
Look at the dragonfly, you said.  
See how it still holds on. Like us.  
A little longer.  
Only the shell was there, transparent,  
full of marvel of its hollow wings.

Against this physical decline that comes with old age some have sought regeneration in grandchildren: Manfred Jurgensen in 'Pensioner' (1999, p 65) and Miriam Lo in 'Silver' (2004, p 132). In 'Rhyme for a granddaughter', Fay Zwicky (2006, pp 41-42) has described the hesitation, fear and expectation of a grandmother meeting a very young granddaughter after absence:

I took my years into my hands  
And flew the wide salt seas,  
To meet my frill-necked tadpole,  
My heart beat with unease.

Would she know me?  
Would she love me?  
Old frog a-wooing went.  
Rowley, powley, gammon and spinach,  
My heart with worry spent

Such sleepless nights,  
Such fretful days,  
Why did I ever smart?  
No sooner had we met again  
Than straight into my heart,  
Heigh ho! she leapt, my brown-eyed girl,  
We'd never lived apart.

Such a wonderful and spontaneous expression of love and acceptance; the wit of Zwicky's writing style is so cleverly contrasted with the emotion she celebrates. In 'Tadpoles', Kate Llewellyn (1999, p 46) sees a grandmother and grandson in a backyard garden:

We are digging a pond  
beside the young fig tree.  
Frogs are what we want.  
What I've got  
cannot be described  
but when I look at him  
my heart's  
a bucket full of tadpoles.

Andrew Lansdown in 'The Grasshopper Heart' (1991, p 72) celebrates the same emotion, the love between a father and his baby daughter. They are swimming together and 'he is smiling / and I know his heart is like a grasshopper- / leaping and landing spring-loaded to leap again.' Similarly John Millett in 'First Speech of a Daughter' (1999, p 50) offers praise as:

A swallow  
used your mouth to breed  
and when you spoke  
blue eggs formed sentences –  
the young birds  
were poems on your tongue.

When you sang  
they flew  
from your lips  
like the first song  
your voice gave  
to a forest.

Jeff Guess in 'After Rain' (2004, p 84) and Rodney Hall in 'Tree-children' (1975, p 111) express the same love and gratitude for mothers; Jean Kent in 'Flannel Flowers at Avalon' (1998, pp 22-23) and Deb Westbury in 'Down Middle Ridge Road' (1990, p 5) and 'Rituals' (1990, p 53) do the same for grandmothers. Jean Kent, in 'Flannel Flowers at Avalon', describes a granddaughter, now an adult herself, remembering being out walking with her grandmother as they talk and share their lives:

She softened the sun-cracking earth round her house,  
and walking beside her I found shade.  
Her lost voice is in me now, and the light  
of her dry, determined ridges, as pragmatically promising

as the secret gleam on the wings of a migratory  
bird in the moonlight, returning –

ghosting back to these gullies where you  
and your children  
rush

and stop,  
your dream hands forever  
unfurling shade

over all the faded felt flowers.

This poem, as with all of these celebrations of close relationships that use imagery from the natural world, reminds us to be attentive and appreciative to such moments of spontaneous love. They are a perfect illustration of Bruce Dawe's dictum in 'Presences' (1983, p 162): 'this I would say: love life'.

### *Australian nature poetry of image exploring romantic and sexual relationships*

Not surprisingly, the natural environment is also often used to explore romantic and sexual relationships. The link between romance and beautiful locations is an obvious one and there is a tendency in some of these poems to employ the biophysical environment as merely a framing device. Some of these poems, however, go much further and begin to show how human romantic relationships and history might be also implicated in natural history. Peter Minter does this in 'Quiet Hunt' (2006, p 22). Isobel Robin also achieves this, for example, in 'Frogs' Eggs' (2002, pp 1-2). In exploring the awakening sexuality of 'pre-pubescent' schoolgirls on a summer excursion to 'tadpole creek', Robin creates a commonality of purpose and sensual experience between the girls and the aquatic life in the rock pools:

Later, at the tadpole creek  
She let us paddle, gather, seek  
In cool, wet eddies on cool, pale stones,  
Slim in our toes and joy in our bones

The poem continues:

Tadpoles flicked between our legs,  
Squirmy, spermy, fruit of eggs;  
In still, dark pools near mossy logs  
Lay spotted jelly, promised frogs.  
Vestigial truths from mysterious places  
Stirred, untaught, across our faces.

This experience might be less intrusive, but Robin sees in the rock pool a fascinating mirror for the exploration of this part of female psychology. The poem concludes on the affirmative note that sexuality like reproduction, and by inference the life in the rock pool, are good things and worthy of celebration.

In 'Sunday', Brook Emery (2003, p 10) recreates a beautiful natural environment on a lake for his celebration of romance. A couple are out in a rowboat while dragonflies:

mostly grey, almost transparent, more movement  
than thing, one with highlights of orange and blue –  
skitter from point to point.

The man reflects:

I watch you sitting in the stern, your upturned face,  
eyes closed in full sun, your thighs a bric-a-brac  
of leaves, your long white toes tipped with mud  
and the haphazard water that's washing them clean.

In 'Land Window', John Graham (1998, p 3) celebrates the morning after lovemaking:

Love and lovers are diamonds falling to the earth  
while the bower bird dreams of rain

You and the blind man sit by the fire again  
and laugh to keep warm from the cold  
She knows, you were by the window of her soul  
Spiderweb tight, pieces of sunrise  
you broke the webs by the window of her soul

In attempting to encapsulate what love is, Warrick Wynne in 'Love Poem' (2002, p 59), also resorts to the natural world:

Love is like those yabbies  
that lie at the bottom of dried up dams  
for years and come alive after rain,  
intact, wriggling, alive, as if there was never any doubt.

It's the landlocked slithering of those eels  
that return to a secret place by faith or knowledge,  
rediscovering old pathways by touch alone.

Vera Newsom also finds in the possibility for regeneration in nature an image for physical intimacy. While Wynne turns his attention to drought breaking rain, Newsom

in 'Two Poems' (2007, p 200) juxtaposes the destruction of wild bushfire and the complementary role this same fire plays in germination:

On dry brushwood  
fire buds spring.

Draw the curtains,  
climb into bed –  
ghosts at my elbow  
urge me on.

I wrote earlier of Susan Afterman's seeing in road-kill a startling, almost shocking, image for pregnancy and childbirth. Geoff Page continues this inclination to surprise in his poem, 'The heart is like a lazy lizard' (2001, p 20). Like Graham, Wynne and Newsom, Page is celebrating what love is. Where Graham looks to diamonds and spider web, Wynne to yabbies and eels and Newsom to fire buds, to Page:

Love is just a roadside crow  
flattened in the sun,  
  
the kind of accident that might  
occur to anyone.

Page's approach is witty and light hearted, his image startling in its observation. Such imagery from the natural world offers powerful opportunities for the exploration of love, an approach continued by MTC Cronin in 'Your Body In My Hands' (2002, pp 15-16) and 'For You, A Fern' (2002, p 23), Luke Davies in 'Creek' (2004, p 56) and 'Brim' (2004, p 61), Max Harris (1921-1995) in 'An Elizabethan Song' (1996, p 23), Dorothy Hewett in 'Stars' (1995, pp 386-387), Manfred Jurgensen in 'at one' (1995, p 81), Kathryn Lomer in 'Bats' (2007, p 3), John Shaw Neilson in 'Under a Kurrajong' (1976, p 186), Kate Llewellyn in 'The Satin Bower Bird' (1988, p 112), Vera Newsom in 'Silver Poplar' (2000, p 12), Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 'Gifts' (1970 p 39), Jaya Savige in 'A place for the rain' (2005, p 6), Leon Trainor in 'Crossing Over' (1999, p 30), Chris Wallace-Crabbe in 'Childhood' (1980 p 25) and Graeme Webster in 'December evening solitude at the edge' (1996, p 47) and 'Cliff-side love' (1996, p 41). In the act of love making Kathryn Lomer, in 'Travels in the high country' (2007, p 9), compares the thighs of her lover as being like the 'variegated / trunks of snowgums' while his eyes are like 'tannin-fed tarns'. Lomer asks 'how is it then that under my sheets / is snared the air of the high country?' As the two lovers come together:

The semen scent of baeckea under early summer sun  
weaves itself into weft and warp. Names fall  
and drift like snowflakes massing over dolerite  
as you recall each step along a twenty-year-old trail,  
the way nature unfurled, orchestrally.  
You encompass wild and lonely places

where I could never trek,  
their essence fitting inside you as snug as love.

In Lomer's bold and musical poetry we certainly do not have a sentimental or clichéd approach to the celebration of love.

Of course many poets write about the separation of lovers and the ending of relationships. In 'Seasonalogue', Peter Minter (2006, p 98) has written a beautiful reflective piece that captures this emotion. The poem opens in the past tense, reflecting on a rural home:

Leaning against an Oregon post  
I think back, remember a small field,  
a sapling ring on a ridge way  
high above Wollombi

where I tried to keep warm each day,  
iron bath under ironbark branches,  
bed a small nest by the fire.  
That was twelve years ago.

The poem is an intimate celebration of the memory of place: the changing phases of the moon, pine trees, inland heat, 'a stray breeze on water' that 'slips bright crescent scales / between reeds & then literally away.' The persona is separated from this loved place because 'now cities / full with happy fear / are where I choose to live'. The sense of nostalgia, however, is not only for place. We discover that distance has separated a significant relationship as well: 'now, your voice is there, or from / a place near there. Telephones / shrink space'. Minter's focus is not loss or estrangement; as he evokes the memory of place and person, the passage of time, the poem concludes by praising the present:

I write at night, hear bats & clubbers  
flying through the crisp dark streets,  
words moving lines in trees.

Penelope Layland in 'Within miles of you' (2005, p 5) and Vera Newsom in 'Flannel Flowers' (2000, p 57) also explore separation and the possibility of reconciliation while Jennifer Strauss in 'Bienvenue' (1981, p 29) praises the moment that her lover will return home. As she drives to the airport in anticipation of their arrival, the sky is 'suddenly clear and sharp as joy', 'trees are surprised like bells in the gusty wind' and:

Those birds  
For weeks to come will weave and weave again  
Their ancient patterns of departure,  
but I  
drive now on Kingsway straight for Tullamarine:

This is our day, to-day you are coming home.

Love, however, does not always last. Bronwyn Lea captures this in 'Born Again' (2008, pp 42-43) as does Kathryn Lomer in 'Snug Falls' (2007, pp 30-31). In 'Snug Falls' Lomer writes how sometimes 'when he looks into your eyes he tells you / the cracks are beginning to show.' The consequences of arguments are often pain not easily moved on from. As Wilga Rose writes in 'Storm Silences' (2001, p 59):

I should have known when the wild storm  
blew in from the west  
flaying washing, scouring silences  
as the sheep huddled under gums,  
that your words were cut glass

Marcella Polain puts it this way in 'so many hard things' (2000, p 72):

all these years  
we are face to face to coalface  
in the winter  
you give me leaves  
red as wounds  
crowded together dying

For Dennis Haskell, in 'The Recollection' (1984, p 4), the hurt caused by argument has the possibility for reconciliation:

Last night we argued.  
In the kitchen I set down the plate and mug of tea  
Brought to me in bed.  
Ants scatter in a thousand directions.

What a fantastic final image, its unexpected entry into the poem mirrors the effects of argument itself. Reconciliation of course is not always possible, as Dipti Saravanamuttu shows in 'Lyric' (1993, p 67). She describes the ending of a relationship while two people walk a 'well worn track to Echo Point' amidst 'the scents of dampness, / of wet earth and eucalypt'. She describes how:

You tried to heal  
the hurt you couldn't explain  
by seizing it in your hands.  
And still I can't believe  
what self-imposed  
violence it took to make you  
leave, and in significant ways  
a childhood, so I guess  
that on some level you desired to be

at the mercy of another separation  
this time as blind  
in its captured fury  
as a wild hawk.

Saravanamuttu's line divisions and punctuation cleverly create a rhythm that is as difficult as the emotion she is exploring.

### *Australian nature poetry of image exploring conflict and warfare*

The treatment of conflict is not always seen in such private contexts. Not surprisingly, as the British writer Andrew Brown shows, since Darwin's insights into 'the survival of the fittest', Tennyson's dictum of 'nature red in tooth and claw', and Richard Dawkin's startling idea of the 'selfish gene', the natural world is seen as fertile ground for the imagist's exploration of warfare and public conflict (Brown 1999, pp 23-44 & 101-122). In Australian poetry, however, this often takes unexpected directions. Gerry Turcotte in 'The Flying Foxes' (1990, p 34) describes a colony of these noisy fruit bats 'overjoyed with food / their small red mouths illicit with the pregnant fruit'. In thinking about the noisy competitive behaviour of the bats, Turcotte wonders:

But if the joy of season's plenitude is fact,  
Then how explain a low cloud sky filled  
With foxes ten rows deep and ten rows wide  
Flying soundlessly like bombers over Germany?  
Perhaps they saw the world, for one brief moment, as it was.  
And even their blissful raucousness  
Was nurtured by a silent doubt and stilled.

John Millett has become one of Australia's most significant war poets. In many poems he remembers his experiences of being inside one of those bomber-planes as it flew over Germany during the Second World War. In 'Homeland' (1994, p 41) he wonders if he will survive to return home. He describes how from inside his turret he would think of Australia:

country of the red fern and the feral fox  
high country of wombat and platypus,  
my 'king's home' where the lyrebird  
mocks the invincible minutes of summer

In 'The Hungers' (1999, pp 15-16), he also describes a young Air Gunner who is always 'looking home' to:

wild country – farmland of wheat,  
bird-call country,  
brother of sleep –

in the fierce hills of a born country –  
dingo gorges and river-cut  
and the crooked finger  
of the Southern Cross.

The poem powerfully concludes:

Now in a different darkness  
I watch convoys by radar –  
cross the stepping stones of the dark,  
over submarines packs  
to the “Atlantic Gap”.

I know where U-Boats hide,  
the way I felt fox presence  
in the bracken nights,  
the brolga dawns, the deserts,  
black-brush forests  
and the hungers, where I was young.

In ‘Planting Seeds’, Jan Owen (1990, pp 6-7) brings one of these Second World War Lancaster Bomber crewmen home. She describes how ‘he came home with a heavy limp / and a passion for growing flowers’. In ‘working with earth there was much he could forget’, but his children working with him in the garden ‘were fierce to know’ and would beg ‘Daddy, tell us about the War!’ All he would recount, however, was the roar of the Lancaster engine and the ‘young mess girls in grey, / gathered to wave each crew goodbye’. Poignantly the poem concludes:

I think now that his larkspurs and sweetpeas,  
foxgloves and bluebells, always English flowers,  
touched that recurring scene,  
the unfailing strangers standing for home  
each dangerous setting-out.  
I think they were his return.

The idea of the backyard garden as retreat from world affairs had also been described by Rosemary Dobson in ‘The News and Weather’ (2000, p 47), by Elizabeth Riddell in ‘Visiting Hobart’ (1992, p 99) and by Margaret Scott in ‘Bird Life’ (2000, p 160). The garden does not always turn out so comforting though. Andrew Taylor in ‘Clearing Away’ (1988, p 25) has written how:

Today I chopped back irises  
spear-sharp  
layers of leaves  
long as memories –  
Vietnam, savage green

in the March decline;  
paler, lank low leaves  
almost brittle – Korea;  
then a tangle of grey –  
dusty, forgotten rubbish –  
the last war, Second World War –  
crumbling to the blade.  
Beneath –  
the red-back spider  
angry at being disturbed.

The quality of that final image expressed in such plain and simple language, what an unforgettable surprise. Dorothy Hewett in 'Echidna in a Parking Lot' (1995, p 97) adopts the same approach. As a mother worries about her son's conscription papers for the Vietnam War, the son greets his mother with:

'Well, I've done my good deed for the day,' he said.  
'I rescued an echidna from the parking lot.'

'I had a wonderful afternoon,' he said.  
I watched some wild mice making a nest in a tea-tree.'

As the poem continues, the mother fears the punishment that her son will be given for being a conscientious objector to the war and offers the following very simple plea:

I wish he was an echidna or a wild mouse  
who could hide in a parking lot or a tea-tree.

In 'Gypsy People', Rosemary Dobson (1991, p 199) sees beside the road 'just out of Boorowa' a paddock full of sunflowers. They are so 'gold' that they 'dazzle' with their 'gypsy petals, / warm smudged faces'. But they are also 'upright, crowded, / so many to a hectare' and this causes 'statistics [to] flash back at me'. In this scene, Dobson juxtaposes an image of great floral beauty with a consideration of the terrible cost to civilian populations of twentieth conflicts – all those 'massacred innocents'. Similarly in 'Scarlet', Lizz Murphy (2000, p 78) sees in wild birds the perfect image for an exploration of the modern tragedy of land mines while in 'Round-up', Bruce Beaver (1991, pp 263-264) sees in the activities of the Gestapo and suburban currawongs – those 'wolves of the air' – an opportunity to focus his attention on bullying, both in the adult world and in the world of the playground. In 'The Secret Life of Frogs', Gwen Harwood (1975, pp 158-159) shows the cruelty of boys in 'blowing up and spiking' frogs as an image for treating war atrocities. In 'once was a rifle range', Samuel Wagan Watson (2005, pp 69-70) reveals the cost of war service on the children left behind. Before leaving for war, a father takes his son to a rifle range to shoot and talk about what the future might hold:

finally the man took his calibre rifle



Kerry Scuffins, in 'Black Panther in the Blue Mountains' (1995, p 79), adopts a similarly light-hearted approach. She writes of how:

One was sighted dropping from the sky on to a  
full-grown kangaroo, cracking its neck with a  
blind expert paw. Another left its spoor once  
around a farmhouse at the bottom of a mountain,  
then the footprints vanished like a devil's. A man  
became lost for some days in the bush and returned  
unable to speak, smiling, his eyes filled with the  
vision of some unimaginable beauty or death.

While infrequent, there are of course fatalities in the bush. John Foulcher recounts the accidental drowning in a mountain creek of a child in 'Creed' (1983, p 10) while Heather Stewart describes a woman falling to her death in 'Media Coverage' (2005, p 47):

Eyes pecked out  
by currawongs  
she hung four days  
up a gum tree.

The bush is also a place where murder has been committed. Dorothy Hewett in 'The Murderers' (1995, p 399), Carolyn Gerrish in 'Hume Highway, Mittagong' (2000, pp 33-34), Jennifer Compton in 'The Murdering Forest' (2000, pp 54-55) and Geoff Page in 'Belanglo' (1997, pp 63-64) all write about the 'back packer murders'. On wilderness we continue to project our nightmares and our dreams. For Gwen Harwood (1975, pp 214-215), as she watches a sea eagle 'turn and drift', her 'heart lifts from old Hesperian sadness':

Night voices wake as night comes on  
and conjure when the last light's gone  
the always known, always surprising  
flight of the mind that soars to share  
his pathway in cold shires of air.

SK Kelen feels the same in 'The Eagle' (2006, p 31). He writes 'sun haloes an eagle / diving to earth':

So let the eaglets  
find a nest in my heart  
to grow, safe from the dark  
gravity beneath waves.  
A slimy thing crawls  
on the seabed, calls  
'Come die and live with me'.

Soaring, winds roar  
& whistle above the clouds  
where blue is thin air  
- up here – and the Earth,  
the sky is my gymnasium.

Many are inspired by the beauty of wilderness from mountain or coastal lookouts, but are cautious about entering it themselves. A hesitancy remains about what might happen if the safety of the path is left behind. Andrew Sant in 'Tasmania' (2004, pp 225-226) beautifully describes this mixed emotion of attraction and fear:

In the forests red waratahs open like claws;  
bottle-brush flowers tally a hundred domestic chores.  
High shine and danger combine in black snakes.  
Around the coast and inland there may be species,  
it's claimed, that elude being sighted and named.

This poetry highlights the ambivalence that so many feel towards wilderness, to what exists beyond the safety of our 'city walls' and 'civilisation'; the dialectical relationship, that I explore in my thesis introduction, that is often perceived as existing between nature and culture. This feeling has been defined and explored by many poets who are interested in the relationship between language and reality.

### *Australian nature poetry of image exploring the nature of language*

For Peter Kirkpatrick in 'Bucolic Plague or This Eco-Lodge My Prison' (2006, pp 59-63), there are reasons other than risk for not entering the bush. The risk is there, the 'planning every footfall, on the lookout for snakes' but 'the pointlessness is worst'. Kirkpatrick wonders why 'these friends of mine go in for this', 'just because it's there' when for him 'such forest rambles / are as boring as wombat shit: just a difficult / and dull inspection of brigades of trees / each in camouflage fatigues'. Kirkpatrick hypothesises that they do it for 'the consolation of a view', for 'some kinship with the wild, / the quest for a completely artless brush / with scenery', or perhaps it is 'simply gymless exercise / to jog the body's memory of muscles'. There are always different points of view as Kirkpatrick's witty poem acknowledges when he addresses 'PC', one of the bushwalking mates who has most 'needed nature – heard its call':

For your sake, mate,  
I'd like the setting sun to singe the west  
to crimson embers, and the valley catch  
along the great snake of the cradling scarp  
until it gleams red gold, as you return  
in muscle-glowing triumph and sore feet  
to this, your natural estate, where wombats  
- poets – safely graze. May crickets pipe

you home, the stars confetti-like be tossed  
across the sky, and dusk-grey wallabies  
come bounding out in mute marsupial joy...

Still addressing 'PC', Kirkpatrick continues, 'I understand / your wish to walk the country, and to feel / its contours in your bones, its sun and shade / upon your skin', but he reminds:

And never overlook the fact that we  
invented nature when we went to live  
in words: there's nothing natural about it.

Having highlighted that great conundrum, the relationship between language and reality, Kirkpatrick reflects on a white cockatoo, 'his faintly peeved, anarchic *joie de vivre*', before concluding:

Bugger bushwalking.  
Who treads the least treads lightest on the earth.  
I say, go take a leaf from trees themselves:  
lie still, and let the landscape come to you.

John Watson continues this questioning. In 'Honey-eaters', Watson (2003, pp 65-66) sings of wattle-birds and their 'rat-bag call', of Kookaburras like 'overloaded Lancaster bombers', of whip-birds 'fooling about' and of wrens in the tree-fuschia. He postulates that 'it is impossible to see their paired flights / as other than supremely original play' and asks:

But what is the purpose of these repeated  
Attempts to put you, O Reader, here,  
In the picture, at the forefront of

This scurrying flurrying sun flitter, this flattery  
Of all that's here, to filter out features  
And relay them to you almost physically

So that the page resounds to the fleet wings,  
The plop of heavy landings and take-offs,  
The ribbons thrown out horizontally?

'Wouldn't it be better', Watson asks, 'to be silent and allow / the reader to see for himself' or 'is language then a postcard sent in haste / from some exotic place the reader could not hope / ever to see?'

In 'The History of Australian Verse', Watson (2003, p 79) sees another difficulty for nature poetry as well:

The problem is that almost all the time  
The paddock's empty. Nothing much occurs  
For hours. Birds mess about. The burrs  
Are useful chiefly to supply a rhyme.

Watson continues, 'while nothing else is happening, nothing seems / to offer very much in terms / of things to say. We've seen it all before.' Watson's observations are harsh, but his insights are underwritten with such a sly humour and brilliance of image that his challenge is difficult to dismiss: why write nature poetry? Is nature poetry just a 'postcard sent in haste / from some exotic place'?

### *Australian poetry: a natural selection*

Not all nature poetry is held in high esteem, but as we have seen throughout this chapter, it is easy to understand how one might argue that Australian poetry has 'an obsession with the natural world' (Croggon 2008/2009, p 98). There is much Australian Nature Poetry. Australian poetry praises the natural world where it is encountered in the suburbs and cities, state forests, national parks, and rural areas. It questions the capacity of humans to dwell in the natural environment, critiquing our record in caring for it and provoking us to reflect on our history of colonialism. It sees in the natural world powerful imagery for the exploration of human issues like terminal illness and bereavement, birth and family, love and conflict. In this chapter I have shown just how much of this nature poetry there is in the Australian tradition. There are really significant nature poets like Robert Adamson, Judith Beveridge, RF Brissenden, Caroline Caddy, David Campbell, Sarah Day, Laurie Duggan, Robert Gray, William Hart-Smith, Gwen Harwood, Dorothy Hewett, Philip Hodgins, John Kinsella, Geoffrey Lehmann, Peter Minter, Les Murray, John Shaw Neilson, Jan Owen, Geoff Page, Grace Perry, Peter Skrzynecki, Vivian Smith and Judith Wright. None of these poets write nature poetry exclusively but as I have shown throughout this chapter, all of them can be considered as major voices because of the quality and number of nature poems that they have written; most have also written important nature poetry of praise, dwelling and image. But the richness of Australian nature poetry can not be found in these few poets alone.

Because I have described in this chapter the sheer number of Australian nature poems written by so many different poets, it might be apt to look for an analogy in natural history with regards to the importance of diversity. In researching Australian ecosystems, the scientist Tim Flannery has observed what he describes as 'the diversity enigma' (1994, pp 92-101). This enigma says that in the biophysical environment, resource richness equals monoculture, whereas resource poverty encourages biodiversity. This means that in areas where the productivity rate in forming new plant material – through photosynthesis – is high and where nutrients such as nitrates and phosphates are plentiful, the species that are best at utilising these ideal conditions can out-compete all other species and thus create a monoculture ecosystem. In most Australian ecosystems, not significantly impacted on by the intensive cultivation methods of gardens and agriculture, there is rarely a high productivity rate or plentiful

supply of nutrients, and therefore, no one species can outcompete all rivals – the harsh conditions, ironically, encourage rich biodiversity. Given the current trends in the marketing and promotion of poetry within the Australian publication industry and the perceived declining readership and market for poetry – even as the numbers of writers is increasing – it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to view poetry as being placed within a fairly harsh commercial environment. Numerous Australian academics, poetry reviewers and poets have made this point, see for example Noel King (2008), Mike Ladd (2008/2009), Bronwyn Lea (2008/2009), John Leonard (2009), Ron Pretty (2010) and Dane Thwaites (1992). This harsh commercial environment is also one that, ironically, encourages strength in variety. So in addition to the major poets listed above, in reading the strengths and weaknesses of Australian nature poetry, it is more accurate, as I hope I have shown throughout this chapter, to seek richness in diversity. Only in this way is it possible to see just how important, and well represented, nature poetry is within Australian writing; it is certainly not just some ‘postcard sent in haste / from some exotic place’ (Watson 2003, pp 65-66).

The Australian nature poetry that I have examined in this chapter provides much of the context and ideas that I explore in my poetry. I write not only as a dialogue with the natural world that is around me but as a response to the poetry that I read. This is poetry that, like my own, praises the natural world where it is encountered, in the suburbs and cities, state forests, national parks, and rural areas. It questions the capacity of humans to dwell in the natural environment, critiquing our record in caring for it and provoking us to reflect on our history of colonialism. It sees in the natural world powerful imagery for the exploration of human issues like terminal illness and bereavement, birth and family, love and conflict. Australian nature poetry vividly shows how human history is implicated in natural history and how there must be human accountability to the environment. It is no urban nostalgia for rural simplicity or withdrawal from ordinary life, though it does remind us that the small things matter, the rhythms of a life, the ordinary events and graces that give a life meaning. Nature poetry is no rushed postcard of second hand experience, and if nature was only ‘invented when we went to live in words’ (Kirkpatrick 2006, pp 59-63) then poetry has played a significant role in this invention. Peter Kirkpatrick might want to – ironically – ‘bugger bushwalking’ (2006, pp 59-63) but readers and writers like me would be lost without the poetry. In reading and writing the poetry we intellectually and creatively engage with our environment, we are reminded to be attentive and appreciative, to see in our privileged position a responsibility to share and respect.

## *Section Three: Creative Project*

## ***CREATION READER***

## Common Wombat

Walking down  
the rocky scrubby spur,  
leaving behind a tool grinding site,  
farm ruins and the remnants  
of a cedar-getters' track,  
the landscape seemed cut back, weathered  
to a loss like the hand stencils  
of the Wodi Wodi blown  
intimately onto sandstone walls.  
But, of course, here  
were the signature scats  
and burrows; all those hallmarks  
of a living whose presence  
is now a dry-stone-wall in ruins.  
And where I sweated  
on finding water holes  
before dark, weighed down  
with my pack,  
my direction measured  
by compass and map,  
these animals remained  
cloistered and solitary, earthed  
just beneath my feet.  
They shunned our sun,  
shunned the vision  
we saw as so far-sighted.  
They never perspired  
never panted  
but waited for evening's cool  
relief and security;  
a vista of scent  
for their open-air habits.

And looking for signs  
of natural history, I thought  
of the other histories, of stories dug  
from earth's fragments – all those  
scats, tracks and traces left behind.

***SECTION ONE: PRAISE***

## **Creative Tension**

*for my parents, Ray & Joan Hall*

With the latticework of web suspended,  
over the lower branches of a peach blossom tea tree  
by a labyrinth of threads  
flushed with morning dew,  
my breath was caught, drawn down  
through sheets of web  
to the funnel-shaped retreat, down  
through ground branches and grasses  
to the burrow of this basement dweller,  
*Corasoides australis*, engineer  
of this sky-gazing silken radio telescope:  
its dish-platform glistening, tactile, waiting  
for any entangled struggle, any tripped vibration,  
any light-waves tracked in a Hubble's wake.

**Asian House Geckos**

*for Sian Jillian Hall; cik cak*

On fingers and toes broadening to pads,  
like spirit levels, they scuttle the walls  
then upside down across my ceiling;  
a pantry where they hide by day,  
patterned grey and striped dark,  
but at night, animated and pale, they forage  
with large unblinking eyes, velvet  
delicate skin and their clicker-toy  
*chuck chuck chuck*  
a squeaky mischief.

*Hydromys chrysogaster*  
for Ceinwen Jillian Hall

Somewhere in the creek, hiding in shadows,  
not of Gondwanan birth and always nervously watching  
their backs, these flotsam stowaways have prospered;  
hunting and burrowing their way into the market, investing

in webbed hind feet and eyes placed high  
in their head, which has been flattened  
for feeding under rocks and ledges -  
their platypus niche.

But most Australian, they have slowed  
their reproductive cycle, opportunistically adapting  
to the vagaries of this new life.  
With rich seal-like fur in regional colours

and a tail of survival like a camel's hump  
(a white-tipped and bushy pennant)  
Hydromys has been maligned  
like a sewer rat transported in convict hulks.

But having passed the toughest of migrant intake tests  
(walking on water) Hydromys  
boarded our migrant ark  
long before we walked out of Africa.

These shy and unobtrusive beaver-rats  
have been hunted for pelt and pest  
but now can be revalued  
as the farmers' eco-friend:

eradicators of yabbie which honeycomb irrigation banks,  
protection against pond snail and liver-fluke host.  
While we judge the offering of new arrivals  
Hydromys, the first fleet to land, can take its place

celebrated side-by-side with the platypus,  
its native born heraldic rival.

## **The Creation**

*for Graham Abbott*

I hear them at dusk,  
those spectacled flying-foxes wheeling,  
streaming to pockets of remaindered rainforest,  
an archipelago paradise where hardwoods are flowering  
with syrup, easing pollination, and musky  
squabbling camps for those black-leathered angels seeding  
a Daintree, gallantly reclaiming the Garden.

## **Pressure Points**

*for Rhiannon Jillian Hall*

### *Line Storms*

unequal summer oceans  
of air static  
and the Sydney sky rising flashes  
pole to pole

### *Cicadas*

fed on air  
to a high pressure fanfare  
a splitting rave

### *Mozzies*

zipping up storm fronts  
as Zeroes sloughing hailstones  
warm blooded targeting

### *Snakes*

sequined suntraps  
summer-clutched to breed  
a spurring urgency

### *Fire Control*

summer offerings of sclerophyll  
fuel this currawong nest  
cuckoo timed

### *If Unmetered The Sun*

mutates a monster  
the film over-exposed, an itchy  
flash, metastasis

*These 7786 Species Of Australian Flies*

seasonal swarms fed  
decay, breathed filth hovering  
in iridescent eyes

*Sclerophyll Canopy*

sinewy edge-faced scanty  
foliage knotted in all its evergreen  
hallelujah

*Barometric Readings*

lapis lazuli rolled  
glassy picnic days, a high  
subsiding pressure

## Sentry Duty

A reveille sounds  
and fades; but when the season's urgent  
the dawn-prompted solo rises to a raucous *a cappella* chorus.  
Territory is volume:

and co-belligerently sounding your place,  
casting off your coat of kingfisher splendour, preying  
silent in ambush, striking  
faster than snakes,  
bustling like a sergeant-major,  
the parade reveller's hustling  
*news-to-the-world* rallying  
as regimental colour.

Hailed as dawn's lamplighter, this kingfisher raises alarm.  
The kookaburra laughs aggression.

**willie**

in the backyard  
in and out and under  
the tortured  
willow  
the willie  
wagtail  
flutters and darts  
between  
the leaves and branches  
hoping to disturb  
any insect into  
flight  
the jewelled butterfly  
never one to  
disappoint  
rises  
to the twisting quick movement  
and once caught  
is turned  
up  
side down  
like any hunters'  
kill  
for an easy carriage  
home

## **Galahs Rising**

the seed harvest  
    screeching  
        scattered  
    a twisting  
        skidding  
    myriad flight –  
towering over in menacing upsweeping circles  
    a wedge-tail's  
barbed silhouette

## **Gilly-Wattler**

from throats  
clearing  
rasps  
and clefts of syrup  
easing  
impregnation  
drawing  
dusted gold coloured  
with tongues and combs of honey



## At Wentworth Falls

*for, and after AR Ammons*

I followed Darwin's Walk again this evening  
to the falls,  
from the ridgetop's open forest,  
    contouring  
    around the furrowed boughs of black ash  
and the smooth pale stands  
    of peppermint and blue gum flaking  
over banksia, mountain devil and waratah:

    zigzagging  
        down to the over-  
        cliff track where  
    clumps of button grass  
and a holly-like grevillea blooms  
    among the sedges of hanging swamps,  
soils like peat collecting  
    along shales and sandstones,  
the sponged seepage zones  
    of a fernery's rare collection:

    along to the lookout at the falls:

a bush fire haze still burnt  
over the escarpment's western rim whilst drizzle  
    swirled about the communication tower  
as a halo:

the forecasted change  
    heralded  
to an alert line of towns  
    threaded along the railway and Great Western Highway,  
    the length of the Mountains' navigable central ridge,  
    the shape  
of a wilderness' threatened destruction:

    from the brink  
of the lookout's precipice, in Darwin's *grand*  
    *amphitheatrical depression*, the drama  
    unfolded  
and from this podium, I counted in  
    the change,  
a smothering mist pouring over  
even as the volumes of smoke swept

across the track,  
    a catalyst  
like the secret stowed away on the Beagle,  
    a pillar of cloud  
    leading Darwin to his promised land,  
a sighting that laid bare our origins and opened eyes  
    to change.

## ***SECTION TWO: DWELLING***

## Palimpsest

Scraped again  
and again  
down  
through accumulated  
sandstone years,  
the Budawang Range  
is a complex  
of pricked and folded gullies  
embellished with monoliths;  
once bora grounds  
– illuminated tors –  
their eminence now fractured  
and made to bear transported gatherings:  
Sturgiss, Nibelung, Donjon;  
whilst the Budawang's signature,  
Dithol – *woman's breast* –  
was coyly named Pigeon House  
from the Endeavour's helm –  
a clear sailing,  
white washed over  
and over –  
palimpsest.

## Promised Land

The Erskine and its tributaries have dissolved  
    fault lines into a labyrinth of lifted  
And folded ridges. Recently burned, the glossy  
    blackened trees are shooting green,  
The scrub returning, the grasstrees fired  
    into flower. Commanding ground,  
Nebo Point and Pisgah Rock stand like towering lamassu,  
    bell miners chiming at their feet.  
At Pisgah, past the Attic Cave, a navigable track bends  
    down to Monkey Ropes Creek,  
The Land of Gad, a gully sheltering stands  
    of coachwood, turpentine, sassafras.... Epiphytes  
Sunbake in the catwalk canopy and sundews cluster  
    among lichens like miraculous wounds.  
Continuing down the yabby line,  
    from creek junction to creek junction  
The Erskine Gorge opens to a sandstone escarpment,  
    its vast precipice consumed  
By the water of this promised land  
    taken by The Warrigals, landlopers  
Who came after the timber getters, and hauled  
    packs and crafted mud maps intimately  
Measured. Amidst the profusion of tracks and scats  
    The Warrigals lived from their packs, surveying  
Their wilderness – a canvas yearning pitched  
    over the Dharug's stone hearth glow.

## **In the car park overlooking the grave of John Flynn, Alice Springs**

...and whilst an AIM chaplain sits in the white gravel glare,  
this outback talkback splits with a whining  
invective inciting a world gone  
*mad with Mabo*; it has bite this new appeal for the grave-  
stone's return, collecting a sermon's thoughts to lull  
white wash grey:

*Flynn is the inland Apostle Paul.  
He civilises and we follow, flying  
in his footsteps to raise a fitting  
memorial, lifting a prize for one  
man's life well run; a Devil's Marble  
became the stone of the empty tomb.*

But these stones are Karlu Karlu, the eggs  
of the Rainbow Serpent whose creation breathes  
through the land; and now the sacred clutch torches  
the outback's airwaves with white warnings  
of desecration and vigilante revenge. As lawyers meet,  
the reverend ponders his superior's *apologia*:

*Flynn strides through this forsaken wilderness  
a neglected prophet raging against the dread.*

## colonial heads

### i. black boy

useless  
like a botanical decoration  
the battle was to find any native  
resource to make all this  
empty space worth while

and we did receive one patent  
to crush and render the cores  
into crystal sugar  
but introduced cane prospered  
so we burnt  
the black boys to the margins

typically this excited the *blackfellas*  
who found the pest  
exceptionally useful  
but what they prized  
we found  
too easily mistaken  
for a spear-bearing native  
a presence spooked  
though in the light of day  
easily eradicated

ii. cabbage tree

their crowns are spherical and bunched  
arranged like rosettes  
and lifted high on smooth trunks  
scarred above the constant fires

the hearts are a wholesome  
cabbage and sweet  
like new hazel nut

their fibrous skin a fine  
coarse cloth and thatch

leaves can be boiled  
bleached and split  
into strips and plaited  
to make hats

whilst its timber grows  
in such convenient grains  
and lengths as to be much  
distinguished as fence railing  
and flung across a creek  
as a makeshift bridge

iii. burrawang palm

upside down  
like everything here  
the trunk is subterranean  
only the spiny fronds and fruit  
are game to surface  
and the fruit  
a macabre imitation of  
something useful  
grow so accessibly  
close  
as to be the *blackfellas'* favourite  
who grind  
the seeds to a paste before  
cooking and eating or baking  
as a loaf  
a savage staple this plant  
is poison inducing  
in us and our cattle  
such vomiting and cramping  
as to be near to death  
and must be added  
to our list of complaints  
for the native  
palm will never  
line our boulevards

iv. she-oak

even quarter-sawn  
like a sliced Queen  
Victoria cake the casuarina  
lacks the grain  
of English oak  
the dressed shine  
of officers in uniform

but seasoned the unruly timber  
can add lustre  
and turned as a walking stick  
decorate a gentleman's style

the hard wood is prized  
as a fence post or tool handle  
and burned hot  
produces a pure white  
ash ideal for sheet whitening  
or mixing with fat  
and scented as a makeshift soap

the tree was favoured  
by *blackfellas* for boomerangs shields and clubs  
and beneath a stand  
free of undergrowth and snakes  
the women kept their children  
whilst eating the trees' nuts and grubs  
they soaked the inner bark  
gargling against toothache  
and collected the oozing sap  
to be warmed and melted before eating

they could cook anything

v. red cedar

a bastardised mahogany  
and almost as good  
it could be polished to a classic coffin finish  
cured and easily worked

what a shock to see in a native  
the lure of the boardroom  
the dark rich tones of London  
fashion maintaining deciduous standards  
and easily spotted by its spring  
pink foliage above the puny  
straggling evergreens

a gentleman gone awry  
in a sunburnt scrub  
the cedar kept to its own kind  
occurring in rich  
sheltered gorges made accessible  
by providence

to a penal labour surplus  
well cut for hauling  
as escarpments were made bridle tracks

a wilderness finally ruled  
and measured as bountiful

## At Fitzroy Falls

From the lookout eagles circled, my vision  
raised to a sweeping splash  
of gang gang cockatoos just over the railing  
of the escarpment's ruptured rim; lined  
with silvertop ash keeping close  
the faint remains  
of a cedar-getters track, a precarious  
footing down  
where cedar are ancient stumps  
but where burrawang palm grow  
in spine-tipped colonies once fired  
to give abundance.  
From the knoll, the track continued  
past fruiting geebung and native  
cherries, sarsaparilla and apple-berries, down  
to the fall's boulder-choked climax – the Wodi Wodi's  
*place of giant trees – Yarrunga.*  
From a cliff overhang draped  
with umbrella fern and mountain heath a survey  
of the timber remaining – blue gum and mahogany,  
peppermint, turpentine and oak –  
fixing the eye on a canopy of value  
hardly worth the haul.

**Red Gold**

*for Rhiannon Jillian Hall*

The bush seemed a green  
Waste made better  
When valleys cracked  
With the cedar-getter.

\*

Where soft-spilling  
Rainforest giants once  
Starred, a misty silence  
And gold-grained stumps.

## **Griffin's Farm, Kangaroo Valley**

*for, and after RF Brissenden*

No-one lives in the valley any more,  
not since the Water Board moved in:  
for millennia, dingoes bayed as sandstone escarpment dissolved  
in the frosty nights; and the lyrebird's teeming  
dawn mimicry now competes  
across failed paddocks and ring-barked trees to spill  
echoing down the eroded and boulder-choked creek.  
Sometimes a school hike group breaks in  
scratched and tired from all day bush-bashing.  
After making camp, there's always one who ignores  
the play with frisbee or hacky-sack  
and stands listening to the distant calls.  
Colonies of lantana and cycad stand head high  
and razor-spiked at the clearing's perimeter  
while stinging nettle crowns  
the knoll's dry-stone wall ruins  
and a crumbled chimney glowing orange  
in the flat late sun.  
When the group explores the creek's far side  
they find the ancient hand-sawn stumps and fence posts  
now weathered to jagged crowns and lichen green –  
broken she-oak hardwood, stockaded,  
and cabbage-tree railings rotted away.  
Under our fingers the wood splinters (light shivery veins)  
and we see abandoned paddocks once wilderness, growing  
bush again. The geebung fruit has tart  
clean flesh and I wonder why the native  
sour fruit should taste so good  
and why I long for those lone hands  
who built a farm and cut down all those trees.

## **Habitation**

*for Aidan Hall*

Remaindered to the rocky, steeper edges  
of farms, rainforests are a strangler fig's  
host, slipping through our fingers,

even as you trudge waist-deep through barbed  
cycads and vine thickets, past giant stinging trees  
and Moreton Bay figs with lianas wreathing canopies,  
like carpet pythons, festooning the way.

A green catbird forages ahead, yowling  
from a tangle of vines. It's mating  
season and the males are grandstanding  
across the rainforest airwaves.

You break in on a stand of ironwood and turpentine  
and all that ancient furrowed towering worship  
of the sun is crowned with epiphytic orchids, mosses and ferns.  
This site of upswept fallen paradise is also abundant,

if like a cancer, with mistletoe, packed  
with sugars, carbs and nesting sites leeches  
from their hosts' sap – a commonwealth,  
a commonwealth disturbed.

## Save Behana Gorge

*for Judith Wright*

To town planners, the granite gorge traces like a wound  
across this scythed and hothouse landscape;  
its water a sprawling spray-storm in the Wet  
spitting and exposing steep barriers to advancement.  
Against the creek's current, tadpoles attach head-first  
to rocks and on the banks, burrowing frogs chorus  
in the leaf litter while leeches stand erect  
on their sucker-rear-ends, longing for blood.  
Sometimes we see a cormorant or a heron, or hear the shrill  
staccato notes of a whistling kite circling treetops.  
You watch catfish guarding nests of stones as water rats slip  
through a strainer of flood debris. People come here  
to swim or spray graffiti. Sometimes,  
though, when I spend time in the gorge, all I hear is the zeroing-  
in of mozzies, all I see is the spray of the torrent  
as I wait for curlew to call their drawn-out wailing  
*weeer-eearr*. Often I'll just stare into the canopy  
as dragonflies manoeuvre their fabulist films in the flickering light  
or I'll watch the orb spider strung golden between trees  
and spotted with silver dew, or follow the line  
of swimming holes, lichen, fungus and fern,  
now proposed as a pipeline by the Cairns Water Corporation.

## **Suburban Bush-Thicknees**

*for, and after Judith Beveridge*

This is the time of year when even the air at night turns  
into vertical streams of heat; when the rain collapses  
in columns; when I stand and watch  
ibis and plover pick their way through the parks;

but most of all when I listen for the wail  
of the curlew from somewhere in the bush reserve,  
its ululant *wee-loo will-a-roo* quickening  
to a staccato chorus of whistles and pipes.

I imagine one covered over in what remains of the bush,  
a gangly teen in drab fatigues, on the move, noisy and drawn,  
so often prone to prostration and easily pressed  
into furtive head-lowered retreat.

Another, yellow-open-eyed and sharp-sighted, is shying  
in an earthbound scraped nest; I hear its eerie rising trill  
below a deep *kook* and cacophony of squawks hawking  
above the tree line (a laughing owl poised to kill).

As the thicknees busily step out  
their nocturne encroaches on my block:  
evasive, edgy, competing to place,  
unheeding any clear-felled suburb's sprawl.

## Cairns Esplanade

Sun flashy, shimmering  
on imported sand and lawn; promenades  
reclining under palm, fig and mango;  
development's prolific resort  
all-voice and café-market aroma  
absorbing mudflat, swamp and bay:  
a fine place  
to escape to as lovers  
ardent for any fallen evangelism,  
for any sign, like a panting sweaty flush  
and hallelujah, for confirmation.

The following noon, clinging and chic,  
we step out on board-walks, translucent  
beside the retreating tide.  
Sea-eagles soar, circling  
the marina dredging the bay  
whilst mudflats cleared of mangroves  
are grazed by mudwhelks, mudskippers,  
cockles, crabs and nertid snails.

Our bodies reborn  
we pass the pools, playgrounds and twitchers  
with their slender egrets. We follow, instead,  
the line of joggers and (yes) other lovers  
on king-tide eroded paths  
past reinforced full-faced signs:  
*Warning Achtung Crocodiles.*

***SECTION THREE: THE SIXTH DAY***

## **Bridal Falls**

*after Robert Adamson*

To Walsh's Pyramid, that mountain-mound  
of Djarruga, the scrub hen, we returned each year.  
The source of Bridal Falls. Torres Strait pigeons courting,  
deep *ooms* haunting the air.

We talked through the Wet seasons thinking it  
meant something; the tropical heat sticking  
to our bodies making clothes difficult, the UV  
extreme. Life in this glaring glasshouse

grew as though on steroids; a stifling  
virility before decay. I had an affair  
with work, grew barbs, pretended. You bitterly  
waited. (What *should* we have said?)

Fruit bats flew screaming, crash-landing the canopy,  
disturbing neighbouring bats into noisy fights.  
One day two great coastal taipans blocked  
our path, they were mating, coiling and uncoiling

in ritualised wrestling by necessity brief.  
We were on the edge of a sugar plantation  
and whatever we feared rose up into the plovers'  
plaintive cries. Sometimes aggression when nesting

reminds us of what we share. Fruit bat lovers  
enveloped in wings – hanging –  
we're a hair's breadth from contentment, a field of sugar  
in exuberant, humid and suffocating air.

**Camping in Yarrunga Gorge, beyond the Fitzroy Falls**  
*for Jillian*

The ridgeline drops here steeply  
to a swampy and sandy gully,  
thence to the creek flat. From our campsite  
we can see the shiny palmate leaves  
of cabbage trees emerging above the canopy.  
Now and then a plane passes, its vapour trail  
snaking beyond the trees.  
One night there was a fracas  
in the fig tree near our campfire, a brawling  
flare-up of flying foxes.  
Snarls and snortings are possums  
though the gurgling chatter  
might be sugar gliders. Each night they volplane  
into my dreams as they warily  
excavate the sap from trees, and I,  
holding you close, toss and turn.  
These webs of orb spiders glisten  
each morning, while cold night air drains  
from the edge of the plateau  
making this dawn a chorus-in-mist.  
We haven't seen goannas yet, even though  
when we fish, we lay  
the carp in lines on the warm  
river sand. Yesterday two bullish  
kangaroos in a clearing 'threw down the gloves', kicking  
the fur, making it free to fly.  
We've had grass ticks and leeches in every cranny,  
keeping the first aid kit handy  
and reminding us we're not at home  
though in the afternoon warmth  
we swim and daydream on the sand  
before making love in the creek, washed  
in its clean brown flow. Above, high  
in the sky, there's a swinging rusty hinge;  
and it's gang gang cockatoos uplifting  
our hearts. The water's surface is a glaze  
with the sun's glare whilst the current eddies  
and flows. These swirling  
hazy mountains cloister us as we touch  
until we see only our expansion  
in each other's eyes. Around the campsite  
blooming geebung, wattles and figs. And at night  
frogs congregate, vibrating drum-like, as we stoke

our fire's embers, releasing sparks  
in plumes of rising heat.

## **A Humble Fire**

(Aidan, nearly three)

He's going down the hall with his mother  
and calling, *Good night Dad, cuddles!* jumping  
on to a bed, still singing laughing  
silly. I follow, smiling warm but

keen to leave him in bed to have my turn  
to have some space to myself and to be  
with his mother. *Daddy cuddles* he sings  
as he snuggles down with blankets baby pillow

dinosaurs and stuff. *Aidan* I glow as I  
wrestle him down in his bed. *I am so glad  
that you're my son.*

Not pausing and still feeling  
my eyebrows and nose comes his unbounded rejoinder:

*And I'm so glad that you're my moon.*

**Red Ferrari**

(Ceinwen, aged 3 ½)

*Dad, wanna cup of tea?*

Stirring and shaking she swings  
back to the plastic iron,

tapping a toy car –  
*the blue spoon's so silly* –  
colouring and stirring the iron

with the wand's broken handle:  
*here you are dad*. I kneel  
to my daughter's stirring lines, her

handcrafted magic, accelerating  
the luxury of a leapfrogging heart.

## **Sperm Wars**

Once more David Attenborough's spectacular  
*Sperm Wars* lights our living rooms.  
I watch my offspring watch their mother  
as gannets rise in promiscuous if monogamous desire:

“Males will do anything to ensure the success  
is theirs: grow huge testes, scrape  
a used vagina clean, pull out leaving  
a seminal plug – an ingenious chastity belt – or  
copulate with one and all.

The gannet mate for life so  
when returning to their partner from fishing  
far out at sea, they copulate furiously mounting  
their partner's back and holding on for dear life  
with their beak – frequency maximising their chances.”

*Boy mum, lucky you never do that to dad!*

## **Waiting in Penrith South**

*for my partner, Jillian*

This househusband life has me toddler-sized, waiting  
for the Spring outside. Afternoon, paroled  
from rushed, cramped domesticity into a world

where space is a ceiling of sky  
and suburban front yards ornaments, warm in acclamation  
and animated by the urgent droning of cicadas

and the *Pee! Pee! Pee!* of magpie larks skirmishing  
in a bird bath...

I continue walking, unhurried,  
absorbing this radiance

before the school bell hurries in  
and time is overtaken (surrendered)  
and I find myself waiting yet again –

waiting on my house and children,  
for 7pm, flowers and my tactful wife.

**There she left him, for Yahweh**

*(1 Samuel 1-2:11)*

*For Samuel Aaron Gordon Hall 9.11.92*

The only time I might have held you  
you were merely half my hand; your body,  
your blood, no longer viable. Now  
I will never hold you.

Just hours before  
we had been pregnant and now  
our hope was killed.

At the hospital we wept, and your mother told me how  
she had been shocked from afternoon sleep to blood,  
fear and the loss.  
Years later she still dreams of your delicate hands like filigree lace,  
of that loneliness and grief at the foot of the cross.

When she rested, I went home to you.  
At the bedroom door I knew dread  
and bawled. Forced on all fours I was afraid to open  
the treasured mess I knew to be inside.

I remember the white sheets – the deeply blotched  
bloody stains – all tightly balled-up around you and left  
where we would lie.

Ashamed, I cling to your mother's calm centre  
in our room where she knew our most Holy of Holies.

## **For They Shall Be Comforted**

*(The speaker is a widower)*

### *i. Annunciation at the Dubbo Base Hospital*

Sleepless, I dream of you alive  
smiling, eyes closed, lying  
on your back, your head resting on shoulder and breast,  
your legs drawn up, knees almost touching your chin, arms  
crossed in front of you, one hand  
feeling your breast.

Sleepless, I dream of you alive  
while I hold you, watching and praying as you die.  
I hear the *click*  
*click click*  
of the ventilator's valve  
mechanically opening and closing: your final breaths.  
I see the bridal white that first claimed  
your ears and lips  
and slowly crept to your cheeks.  
I see them come and interrupt my vigil  
to apologise and confirm, you have died.  
The curtains are drawn around us  
and I lie with you, cover you  
with my hands, face  
and sobbing mouth.

*ii. Fucked*

Fuck I want you.

All through this night I touch and smell  
your negligees, running  
them across my face and down my belly.

In the shower, I imagine you washing me  
and pressing yourself to me.

My hands on your bottom, kneading  
your thighs, feeling you.

Your breasts in my mouth.

All those years of breastfeeding, I would fill my mouth  
with the sweet leaking overflow.

In bed, I hold your sagging belly  
as you crawl up over me. Your tongue  
playing with me as you come.

Tomorrow, I'll go to your grave.

*iii. Wind chime for a winter garden*

Where you are out of town  
the horizon seems to go on forever  
(into nothing, I suppose).  
It is quiet, still, unbroken blue; cross-stitched  
by the near ecstatic swerving  
and wheeling of galahs.

Out there, a solitary galah  
is fretting by the side of the road, its partner driven  
into tar, one wing  
worked about by the breeze  
as though the highway  
would take to the air.

*iv. In the Upper Room*

And now they sidestep  
me, avoiding my eye.  
Less awkward is the sympathy posted  
    *(Safe in the arms of Jesus,  
    Safe on His loving breast)*  
gloating like a bounced cheque.

Consolation piles up, easily ignited  
by my angry fear, as God  
looks on from his burning bush.  
During your final months  
came moments of relief.  
After our last Holy Thursday mass  
our church became the Garden.  
We knelt before the altar hewn from local granite,  
beneath the oak panelling of the upswept ceiling  
and the Glorified Christ.  
You prayed.

I knelt beside you  
– exhausted, doubting, shamed –  
my broken Pentecost;  
cold and salty  
mirrors of me.

*v. To have and to hold*

I see your body, smell you, feel you.  
I open my eyes in prayer  
and take your breasts in my mouth; licking  
both nipples, cupping  
my hands around your breasts  
drawing the nipples together into my mouth.  
You lift your head,  
stretching your throat upwards, inhaling  
like some ancient Cnossos queen.  
I breath deep and luxurious,  
holding on.

*vi. Dubbo picnic ground*

picking through his fears  
a father's brood baulking  
as emus morning parade

\*

in the winter dawn  
a father's brood gathering  
flannel flowers flushed with morning

*vii. Freeze-frame*

Our last family portrait  
shows us happy, captured  
in winter sunlight:  
the late-afternoon shadow  
a forecast freeze-frame.

And yet male emperor penguins, enclaved  
and starving with their eggs  
band together while the Aurora Australis burns  
their horizons. Below this crack  
in the descending bitterness  
fathers shuffle  
and wait.

*viii. Dubbo graveside*

blue streaked  
with near ecstatic swerving  
and the wheeling of grey and crimson flight  
a galah harvest rising  
screeches to life



## RAISING THE COLOURS

(boarding at Djarragun)

### i. The Wet

In the evening outside, a canefield rat scurries  
from hooting students;  
a resident carpet python, coils  
round a wall joist, waiting, still,  
whilst Comrie throws stones at fruit bats:  
*No Mr Phil, I'm not gammin,  
they're good to eat, kill cancer too.*  
Well, a *migaloo* in black country, Mr Phil's pissed off.  
So boys scatter and the bats circle me, screaming.  
Across the playground girls are hip-hop hollering  
and boys are playing footy - Torres Strait v Cape York.  
Amidst all their tackled affection,  
I'm alert for any slamming crack of tempers  
as I listen distractedly to Asian house geckos  
feeding on moths: *chuck, chuck, chuck*  
and cane toads warbling as small engines.  
To these kids how do I call? Exhaling, I centre  
my energy. Then Mulga helps: *You're funny  
colours Mr Phil, all pinks and whites shut  
in nice flash shoes.*

Blessed and deadly,

I dream of bats as another starry night is swallowed  
in the tropical low; this glasshouse of stifling drizzle  
and fog, a butterfly sanctuary raising flags:  
whites and blacks, ultramarines, cadmiums and flames.

ii. The Dry

Late night is my time, listening,  
the dorms finally quiet. Playgrounds (long cleared  
from fields of sugarcane) are visited  
by resilient rainforest life.  
Frogmouths sit like stumps near lights.  
On lawns stone-curlew freeze before retreating,  
their drawn out wailing *weeer-eearr*  
disturbing cane pheasants into clumsy flights.  
On the edge of a bush reserve  
bettong and bandicoot break cover whilst  
insectivorous bats are hunting,  
silhouetted above the floodlights.

It's the Dry, and the Milky Way is again  
a revelation, rapture points amidst the black blaze.

I turn and look to where Khunburra should be  
(if she hadn't been murdered by an uncle)  
and across to Mulga whose uncle died  
in custody. Trauma is their epidemic (well one of them)  
and I yearn to find in nature signs of poise  
and order. Yet, in the warm night air, I stand  
alone watching the stars and bats, wishing that each  
day could end like this, as flags emblazon  
verandas: Cape kids having tagged  
bora rings of gold on their epic blacks and reds,  
whilst the Island kids had painted Dharis on  
the blues and greens of paradise,  
to welcome in their *Coming of the Light*.

iii. Amongst Sugarcane

In this courtyard's quiet, between  
dinner and homework,  
I watch the lightning charged glasshouse evenings  
closing in and Kruby spots me from the oval:  
*Hello Mr Pinkie homework hah!* (he blows a fart)  
feigning to shoulder charge before turning, clamouring  
after Dakatir's wild misdirected kick.

Rickety films of butterflies  
flicker across the courtyard's gardens  
and overhead, tacking bats are  
shrieking to work; this nightly warm-up  
before their exodus is my second wind:  
a musky scrape of squabbling rapture,  
a stream to seed forests, to colour our dawn.

## The Outdoor Educator

River rising as cloud, sponged  
by the frosty night,  
the bush rustling, a sound  
of snoring across the over-hang's dirt floor  
and the rolling, side-to-side,  
of sleeping-bags trapping warmth.

Hewn from rock,  
with deeply creviced trunks,  
turpentine and ironbarks  
cover the fire-scarred  
and sandy slopes and ridges.

I listen to the group sleeping,  
the repeated *oom*  
of a frogmouth, the sound of water  
rapid over rock  
and beside our fire,  
now shimmering embers, wonder  
what little we really need.

In the moonlight, flushed  
with winter's dew,  
velvety white flannel flowers  
beside abandoned bloodied feathers.

Still in my bag  
out of the chill air,  
I feel content.

Tonight glimpsed through fog  
the Milky Way  
haloes our  
earth-bound  
endeavour.

## **Hiking with a school group in the Morton National Park**

And there was that time scrambling  
through difficult trackless scrub,  
we became lost on dusk;  
collapsed good will and splintering  
crankiness casting me the blame.

Down to a valley we climbed with shaking knees  
and finding some flattish ground  
I checked the lean  
of trees, the possibilities of falling  
limbs. We erected tents, dug our fire-pit  
and toilet, collected logs  
for seating and gathered  
round the hearth for cooking.

And as we eased  
into this moonless summer evening  
countless fireflies flickered,  
like coded homing beacons,  
all around our tents.

## Toasting Marshmallows

The day has almost been too much.  
We break in, cranky, to the creek flat, coming  
in from the swamp, leaving the hakea's  
*old-barbed-wire* behind.  
Back up the ridge, fog is settling  
with air pressure at tipping point, the wind  
is swinging round; soon we'll be bundled  
under bivvies in the mud.

Making camp, we read  
the drainage lines, hoisting our plastic sheets  
against the slanting rain. We secure  
our packs like water-proof safes, seeking  
consolation in polypropylene, gortex and silk.

Later we dig our toilet and hearth, bunching  
browned-off bracken for ignition.  
Tonight, we'll be beset by smoke and drizzle as we stand  
to cook and talk; our marshmallows  
toasted treasure-troves on sticks.

## Learning on the Line

(Walking Katoomba to Mittagong)

for Alan Wearne

Their parents gone, we start  
gathering around, the line  
of a fortnight's *challenge-by-choice* measured  
in meals and scroggin, socks, blister-packs, fuel.  
We allocate the group gear – bivvy sheets, billy can  
and tarp – adjust our packs, compare  
their weight. Studying maps one  
more time and, measuring the route  
(touch wood) set out.  
Cliff Drive to Glen Raphael's and Narrow Neck Plateau  
where morning mist is spilling over  
swampy heaths and packed pygmy-  
eucalypts bottlenecking our postcard scenes.  
Like marauding gang gang cockatoos  
the kids start frivolous: *Let's napalm  
these trees and snatch a view.* We walk  
into sclerophyll, the odd face  
of sandstone and shale too sheer  
for growth; the richer green  
of watercourses and east-facing walls.  
I look at maps, orientating my high spirits, teaching  
navigation basics and joking: *Into this measured beauty  
as we soar...* and it's Holly cutting in:  
*C'mon 'Corridor', while rescue choppers circle  
we'll just bush-bash lost all day.*

At last the end of Narrow Neck  
and we climb the cliff line, down  
to Medlow Gap and two hours more  
to the Mob's Swamp cave, our camp.  
*What bastard promised this would be our 'easy' day?*  
With sugar levels low, the careless  
push for camp fractures certain tempers  
so amidst some cranky laughter I readdress the rules,  
motivating our final effort when freed of packs,  
a coffee and a freeze-dried meal will make  
the relief of conversation around  
the fire at night, before the luxury  
of an overhang's dirt floor,  
the Milky Way and the full moon lighting  
its veneer outside.

We wake at dawn, or thereabouts,  
a cold fog in the casuarinas  
outside. Breaking camp a little later  
than I might have liked we look  
at maps, measuring the angles  
of our route and set to climb  
Warrigal Gap; contouring round  
the western edge of Merrimerrigal  
we traverse Mt Dingo to the Bushwalkers'  
War Memorial – Splendour Rock.  
Lunching with views of the days  
ahead – the Cox's Gorge, the Gangerang Ranges  
to Kanangra Walls – a grasstree – *Xanthorrhoea australis* –  
high on conglomerate rock collects  
our attention like regimental colours  
and provokes Smithy: *Come off it Phil, it's a blackboy,  
a spear throwing blackfella, quick, let's souvenir the shaft.*  
I sweet-talk the group with the adventure  
of bush tucker and craft, a one plant supermarket –  
spears, fire sticks, sugar, grubs and glue:  
*You think this is wilderness. It's 'Country'.*

Readying for a long afternoon's  
steep descent past fruiting geebungs,  
gums and sarsaparilla, turpentine, stringybark  
and angophora, I keep the strugglers  
near the front, sharing the navigating;  
the distraction and group momentum carrying them.  
On chocolate breaks the sugar gliders crash  
in wonder; I look to trees, withdrawing, while drinking water.  
Our way soon brings us to stands of blue gum,  
with that aromatic eucalyptus trait and towering  
marble columns peeling rough dark bark  
at their bases: *Ah, the stockinged pillars of Rivendell.*  
But, *Shut-up 'Corridor'*, it's Boaty chipping in, *forget  
the view, we're scratched and tired.* Yet as packs hit  
the ground their grins shut tight –  
one perfect snapshot view.

On dark we make the river flat and two ks  
more to camp, in knee-high stinging  
nettle and wet boots, to trudge  
an hour more – a canvas castle  
and our pit-fire star-vaulted hall.

That night we lay below the mountain,

creek side, like trout facing upstream, still,  
against the flow and waiting.  
At dawn we crossed Kanangra Creek  
for two days climbing, then another with burning  
aching knees, gingerly down. Our transit over  
these Gangerang Ranges – Mt Strongleg,  
Mt Cloudmaker, Stormbreaker, High and Mighty,  
the Rip, Roar and Rumble Knolls – we debriefed  
each night, grim if elated. Our camps were eyries  
along the Gandangarra's ochred line,  
and as I spotlighted their middens  
the kids mimicked me, hooting open-eyed;  
at the campfire Denash (in parody) stoked the embers:  
*This is journey as metaphor,  
the summits lighting with tolerance and testing  
with fire.* At last we climbed the Bullhead Ridge  
and Cabbage Spire down to the bushwalkers' grail –  
water running cool and clear over  
river sandstones, cream and pink, the breeze singing  
down kurrajongs and myrtles, casuarinas and figs –  
our prize, the Kowmung Gorge. Setting a base camp, we swam  
and explored: the Chiddy Obelisk and Red  
Hands Caves. Climbing Mt Armour's columnar basalt cap:  
*This perfection was valued  
as limestone slurry* I preached. The kids broke into  
'Love Is All Around' whilst Boaty chimed:  
*C'mon 'Corridor', aren't you finished  
with yourself up there?*

We stand about the fire tonight  
and talk, in drizzle, joyful for  
three days rest, the balm  
of being wild. It ends  
tomorrow, breaking camp, weighing down  
our packs as muscles tighten.

Next day climbing, in rain, the Bolga Cone  
and Axehead Mountain to Yerranderie, a silver city  
ghost town built on lucky claims and bitter  
strikes; a sanctuary with arsenic pools.  
Late that afternoon, we find the lodge and resupply,  
closing the door against the cold outside  
as the kids collect each other with food and games,  
drying around the hearth and cheering:  
*Tonight we sleep in beds!*

Early next morning we leave Yerranderie  
for King Billy's Tree and a rock grinding site  
where basalt was scraped to axeheads  
and chert flaked by percussion into edges and points;  
a scarring in Country sloughing (yet again) the *terra nullius* lie  
as the kids sit foot-sore in quiet, learning from the land.  
After, to savour their redolence,  
we crush sassafras leaves by the handful  
and walk on.

Fording the Wollondilly we seek sustenance  
in scroggin, tuna and flat bread before climbing  
the Wanganderries and down to the Nattai on dusk;  
a casuarina-and-wattle-bloom gorge, so sandy poor,  
yet teeming with scribbly gum, coachwood and silver-top ash.  
We camp in a grove of ancient  
paperbarks, stinging nettle cramping  
us in. For five more days we make-and-break camps,  
hiking on. Often we wade in the Nattai's nourishing  
brown flow, secure in water-proofed packs and maps;  
as well (we joke) a resiliency born in blister-packs.

Our final campsite: tonight  
the kids string their bivvies together  
and celebrate tall stories: a thunder-and-blood  
Black Panther and Cannibal Kev, the near misses,  
their rolls and rolls of strapping tape. They prepare  
each other meals, a billy of tea  
and amidst rounds of song forecast  
the luxury of their next fast-food, nights off the ground.  
At the fire each evening  
we've climbed our mountains and bounced  
back, reorientating our senses  
and values. With anyone, the trick is reaching  
summits, the challenge descending  
home with so much more than just a dream of takeaways,  
a craving for beds.

## Notes

**Common Wombat:** the Wodi-Wodi are the Aboriginal Custodians of the Illawarra who spoke a variant of the Dharawal language.

**Asian House Geckos:** Cik Cak is the Indonesian for house gecko.

***Hydromys chrysogaster:*** the scientific name for the Australian water-rat.

**Gilly-wattler:** also known as the barkingbird or red wattlebird because of its red fleshy neck-wattles, is one of Australia's largest honeyeaters. It plays a vital role in the pollination of many Australian plants throughout south-east, south and south-west Australia. This bird is far better known, however, for its harsh voice that is often described as sounding like a throat clearing cough or alarming 'chock'.

**At Wentworth Falls:** the Charles Darwin Walk, located in the Blue Mountains of NSW, ends at the Wentworth Falls and its magnificent lookout over the Jamison Valley. The walk has been named after the great English naturalist who visited the site in 1836 as part of his voyage around the world on the Beagle.

**Promised Land:** the name 'Warrigals' refers to an Aboriginal word for wild dog. The Warrigal Bushwalking Club's aims were to promote 'Comradship, Bush Land Exploration and Preservation'. The 'Promised Land of the Warrigals' refers to the area now known as the Erskine Gorge, located in the Lower Blue Mountains National Park of NSW. The Warrigal's were among the first non-Indigenous people to explore this inaccessible gorge that also came to be known as the Blue Labyrinth. Reflecting their late-nineteenth century colonial outlook in respect to mapping and place naming, the group favoured names of a classical and biblical origin. Along with much of what is now known as modern day Sydney, the Erskine Gorge is Dharug Country, the Aboriginal Custodians of this Country.

**In the car park overlooking the grave of John Flynn, Alice Springs:** John Flynn, a Presbyterian Reverend, was the founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) and the Australian Inland Mission (AIM). AIM was founded by the Presbyterian Church of Australia to reach those 'beyond the farthest fence' with God's Word and to ensure that 'hospital and nursing facilities were provided within 100 miles of every spot in Australia where women and children resided' (quoted in Kay Batstone 2003, pp 70-71).

The Warumungu and Kaytetye are the Aboriginal Custodians of Karlu Karlu that have been appropriated by a colonial way of thinking as the Devil's Marbles.

**Colonial Heads:** in his work, *Illawarra & South Coast Aborigines: 1770-1850*, Michael Organ (1990) quotes a colonial prejudice that on first contact with Europeans it was believed that 'Aborigines were a sickly-looking set...who were practically paupers' (p 349). Organ also quotes George Washington Walker, who wrote in his 1836 journal: 'The blacks do not appear to have been acquainted with all the roots, or vegetable productions calculated to afford sustenance to the human race. Among others the Cabbage-tree appears to have been unknown to them as a means of food, until they were taught to eat it by Europeans' (p 208). Organ continues this discussion, by quoting James Blackhouse, who wrote in his *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies* (1843) that: 'One of the Natives ascended a Cabbage Palm, and with a hatchet, cut off its head, which he soon stripped of leaves, to afford us the opportunity of tasting its heart...

The Natives informed us that they were not aware that the hearts of these palms were wholesome, till White people came to live among them' (p 210). In fact, as Sue Wesson (nd, p 5) shows, the Aboriginal people of the Illawarra are the Wodi-Wodi who spoke a variant of the Dharawal language and they brought the Dharawal or cabbage tree palm with them from the north and are named for this sacred tree. The Dharawal knew the cabbage tree intimately. From a postcolonial point of view, such dismissive and bigoted prejudices, as those quoted in Organ's book, can be seen as feeble attempts to justify and excuse the colonial enterprise.

**At Fitzroy Falls:** the Wodi-Wodi are the Aboriginal Custodians of much of the area now known as the Morton National Park in NSW. This park includes the Yarrunga Gorge and Fitzroy Falls.

**Red Gold:** also known as red cedar, or by its scientific name of *Toona ciliata*, was one of nineteenth century Australia's earliest exports and primary industries. The rapaciousness of the forestry industry led to the near extinction of this native deciduous tree by the 1870s.

**Griffin's Farm, Kangaroo Valley:** hacky-sack is a popular camping game where participants stand in a circle and kick or head a small footbag to one another; the idea is to keep the footbag off the ground without the use of hands or forearms.

**Habitation:** mistletoe is a native aerial parasite that is a significant indicator of landscape health. In balance it provides nesting sites and encourages tree hollow formation; it also grows nutritious fruit and leaves all year round. When abundant, however, mistletoe indicates an absence in an ecosystem of native consumers such as sugar gliders, possums and butterfly larvae. When over-abundant, because it is a parasite, mistletoe contributes to dieback in the tree hosts and to the degradation of ecosystems.

**Suburban Bush-Thicknees:** bush-thicknees are a large wading bird also known as bush stone-curlew or, by one of its Aboriginal names, willaroo. The wail of the curlew is celebrated in Australian literature.

**Cairns Esplanade:** twitchers are keen amateur birdwatchers.

### **Raising the Colours:**

*Gammin:* an informal expression amongst North Queensland Indigenous people meaning something deceitful or joking; something that is inferior or less than it appears; to make pretence; an expression of disbelief or amazement.

*Migaloo:* an informal expression amongst North Queensland Indigenous people meaning 'whitefullas'.

*Dhari:* Torres Strait headdress.

The Festival for *The Coming of the Light* marks the day the London Missionary Society first arrived in the Torres Strait. The festival is held each year on July 1.

**Learning on the Line:** scroggin is a combination of dried fruits, grains, nuts and chocolates developed as a snack food to be taken on outdoor hikes.

## Acknowledgements

The poems in this volume could not have been written without the inspiration and encouragement of such writers, publishers and teachers as: Graham Abbott, Robert Adamson, AR Ammons, James K Baxter, Judith Beveridge, RF Brissenden, Bruce Dawe, Kate Fagan, William Hart-Smith, Dorothy Hewett, Jill Jones, Olga Masters, Les Murray, Peter Minter, Geoff Page, Grace Perry, Noel Rowe, Gary Snyder, Peter Skrzynecki, Vivian Smith, William Stafford, Andrew Taylor, James Tulip, Alan Wearne, Elizabeth Webby, Geoff Wheaton, Tim Winton and Judith Wright.

Alan Wearne has mentored the project from its conception and his contribution has been enriching and decisive.

My grateful acknowledgement to the editors of the following magazines where many of these poems (often in earlier versions) first appeared: *Five Bells*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Quadrant*, *Rhizome*, *Southerly* & *Westside*.

The following science books and field guides have informed much of my imagery and ideas and have shown me how to write of 'nature' and 'place' as 'cultural landscape':

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The love and generosity of the following people is so life-affirming (*such a glorious mob; they are my place*):

my parents, Ray & Joan Hall  
my partner, Jillian (*to be so wanted...*)  
my children: Rhiannon, Aidan, Ceinwen & Sian (*for what other reason do I live...*)  
my sisters (and their families), Melissa Peters, Rachel Powell & Nicky Judson  
the students with whom I have worked & walked  
and in memory of my son, Samuel, and my brothers, Matthew and Danny.

*Section Four*

*Poetics: A Field Guide*

I write nature poetry that praises, sometimes ironically, the natural world as ‘cultural landscape’; that explores the environmental record of caring for the Australian continent from a postcolonial perspective; and that discovers in the natural world imagery to comment on the human concern, on human nature. I write about the world where I live and work from a humanist perspective, and it is a world where the human presence and experience is an essential part. I am not drawn to a notion of wilderness that spiritualises it as a place of ‘utter purity in need of utter protection’ (Casey 1993, p 231). All Australian ecosystems are, as the Australian academics Dixon (2004, pp 300-331) and Griffiths (1996, p 277) argue, in some senses ‘human-made’. We need a conservation ethos in the way that we approach the natural world that, as Griffiths writes, ‘acknowledges that an area is the product of an intense interaction between nature and various phases of human interaction, and that natural places are not, as some ecological viewpoints suggest, destined to exist as climax communities or – in other words – as systems untouched by human hands’ (Griffiths 1996, p 277). Because of this, my understanding of ‘natural places’ highlights what is often a competing interest in the relationship between the human and non-human, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, between the social and the ecological. The best writing about the natural world remembers that all such creative endeavour is a moral exercise; it can move through the landscape with wonder, but not at the expense of care and respect.

As the Australian academic, John Cameron reminds us, environmental writing *informs* the reader about its subject; it *provokes* the reader to question their assumptions and prejudices about the natural world and to wonder how humans and the non-human world can possibly cohabit; and it *inspires* the reader to pay closer attention to their place, to consider the social justice and ecological implications of their lives (Cameron 2004, p 35). These perspectives often represent competing interests and values, but these are tensions that I insist my work must maintain, and I approach them from the perspective of the politically active and committed environmentalist. The implications of this for my writing are many.

My poetry must be, in the words of that leading North American ecopoet and ecocritic Gary Snyder, ‘nature and place literate’ (Snyder 1995, p 171). I trust that my poetry does not anthropomorphise the non-human world; this is important because as the British ecocritic and academic Gerard Garrard shows in his definition of this term, anthropomorphism is a ‘system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms’ (2004, p 183). It does this by seeing in the non-human world; a void, a blank space – a type of *terra nullius* – on which it can project its own values and aspirations; an act of colonisation. These values of anthropocentrism are ones that my poetry rejects. I will have more to say about this shortly. Another implication for my poetry of this commitment to the values of postcolonialism, is a concentration on the names we assign to things, our labels for place and living organisms, and how this reveals so much about our values and prejudices: the replacing of Indigenous names with European ones, often so derogatory – *Blackfellows Creek*, *Blackfellows Cave*, *Blackboy Lake* to list but a few. It is now time that I examine in a more detailed way the above ideas and to consider some of the relationships between ecology and poetry, between environmentalism and creativity, between postcolonialism and place that I wish to develop in my work.

## *Ecology and creativity*

Charles Birch is a distinguished and prize-winning Australian philosopher, writer and scientist. He is Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney where he was Challis Professor of Biology for 25 years. He has defined ecology as the branch of biology that studies the connections between things: the interrelationships between organisms in their environment. Birch has observed that his scientific perspective and experience has ‘increased both his sense of wonder and mystery for biology and the riddle of life’ (1999, p xiv). He has also written that ‘life is a struggle against enormous odds...and that change, not stability, is the rule’ (1999, p 92). The work of scientists, like Charles Birch, makes it possible for us to become ‘nature and place literate: informed about local specifics on both ecological-biotic and socio-political levels and informed about history (social history and environmental history)’ (Snyder 1995, p 171). For the writer interested in contributing to the nature poetics of praise, dwelling and image these insights of Charles Birch provide much to think about on the relationship between ecology and creativity; on how one area of human endeavour can enrich another. Birch highlights the significance of the *connections* that we make in our observations, experiences and perspectives; he encourages us to value a sense of *wonder* and *mystery* and to see *change* as the natural state of play. He emphasises that we must be *multidisciplinary* in the way that we write and think about the natural world for ‘science finds its facts from the study of the objective aspects of nature, but science can find no individual enjoyment in nature, no aim in nature, no creativity in nature...this is because science deals with only half the evidence provided by human experience’ (Birch 2008, pp 124-125). From the second half of the twentieth century numerous Australian poets have explored the natural world as a source of imagery to illustrate their creativity, and hence to consider some of the relationships, suggested by Birch, between ecology and creativity in their verse. Some of these poets do this in a way that tends towards the strategy of anthropomorphism, an approach I reject in my own poetry. This means that what they have to say about the natural world is limited by their perspective, because they are prioritising the human outlook, but the way they use the natural world to explore human creativity does highlight some interesting connections between ecology and creativity.

Gary Catalano, for example, writes in the prose poem ‘Sentence’ (1988, p 57):

To compose a sentence which has never been written before is much like crossing a mountain stream by leaping from stone to stone: as the torrent foams beneath you and beckons you down into its engulfing void, you need to possess not only a pair of nimble feet (clad, if possible, in rubber-soled shoes) but also a firm belief in the wisdom of stones.

The tone in Catalano’s clever use of humour and simile reveals his admiration for the natural world and for the challenge of creativity and clear expression. For many others, it is in wild birds that imagery can be found to explore creativity. For Amy Witting in ‘Flight’ (1991, p 75) ‘flying is the most laborious of all methods of progress’ but in the

flight of hummingbirds, hawks, currawongs and fairy martens Witting sees the triumphant spirit of the 'bloodied feet of the dancer, the poet's long / waking.' William Hart-Smith also explores the creative use of language and communication in his short imagist piece 'Lake Monger' (1985, p 76):

On Lake Monger a black swan  
makes of its neck an interrogation mark  
punctuating a sentence of ducks.

While in 'Bird Sanctuary' (1995, p 3) Vivian Smith writes that it is in coming down to a 'tideless bay' that you can find:

these water-birds moving  
in an area of meaning  
wings folded from flight -

or that swans on water glance  
and settle into meaning  
as thoughts and poems  
on the edge of silence.

Rosemary Dobson in 'Dry River' (1991, pp 115-116) faces away from the bay and towards the 'burden of the Dry River' where the:

Strange illusion that such a creek-bed  
May seem to brim and shine at dew-fall,  
Or ripple with shadow, or sound like water  
With the cool, clear notes of the bell-birds' making.  
Mirages deceive: I wait with longing  
A flood of poems, a rain of rhyme.

And Judith Wright in 'Lyrebirds' (1994, p 176) laments that:

I'll never go.  
I'll never see the lyrebirds -  
the few, the shy, the fabulous,  
the dying poets.

Wright concludes her poem with:

No, I have never gone.  
Some things ought to be left secret, alone;  
some things - birds like walking fables -  
ought to inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart.

David Brooks also sees in lyrebirds a mystery, an image to explore language and the way we make meaning. The fragmentary structure of Brooks' poem, 'The Lyrebird' (2005, p 60), is achieved by his punctuation and line division and seems to echo the way we construct meaning in language. In his poem Brooks writes that driving by 'early / on the way to a meeting in Bateman's' he glimpses a lyrebird enter the bush and 'become dry branch, scrub- / shadow.' Brooks' poem concludes:

Later  
writing this down  
I wonder what part of the self it is  
hides amongst language

- looking at  
these words, this  
page,  
trying to find where I entered.

A little more naively, Andrew Lansdown celebrates in the imagist 'Birds of Light' (2004, p 66) a moment of ecstatic union in a way that is reminiscent of David Campbell's praises of the Monaro Plains:

Exquisite, these birds of light  
on the lake's smooth surface.

Ibises, herons, spoonbills -  
each joined by spindly legs

to a three dimensional replica  
rising into the radiant air.

Many others have also seen in the world of nature, imagery to explore language and creativity: Chris Wallace-Crabbe in 'An Allegiance' (1973, p 40), Peter Skrzynecki in 'Diamond Snake' (1975, p 29), David Campbell in 'Snake' (1989, pp 191-192), John Rowland in 'King Parrots' (1989, p 5), Mark Miller in 'Kangaroo' (1989, p 14), Jan Owen in 'All birds' (2002, p 41), Jeff Guess in 'After Rain' (2004, p 84), and Marjorie Pizer in 'Leaves and Poems' (2006, p 39). Every writer of the nature poetics of praise, dwelling and image would, I think, love to create poetry worthy of the following observation from David Campbell:

Snakes are like a line  
Of poetry: a chill  
Wind in the noon,  
A slalom in the spine  
Setting ears back, hair on end. (1989, pp 191-192)

It is now time to consider my own nature poetry of praise, dwelling and image and to see how I translate the ideas discussed above into my verse. The challenge to achieve the sort of poetic impact, described by David Campbell, is one I ambitiously – idealistically – accept.

### *My nature poetry of praise*

Some years ago I was hiking with a school Duke of Edinburgh group in the Budawang National Park, in southern NSW, through hakea – the ‘bushwalker’s nightmare’ due to its stiffly erect and very scratchy shrub-like quality – when I came across dozens of miraculously sculptured knee-high webs. Designed to catch flying insects attracted to the blossom of the hakea and tea tree, these webs certainly took my breath away. When I returned home I had to consult my guidebooks, to identify and learn about the spider responsible for making them. I enjoy taking this time, to become what the American eco-critic and poet Gary Snyder describes as ‘nature and place literate – to know who’s who and what’s what in the ecosystem’ (Snyder 1995, p 171). It is a way to show respect and to work equally with care and wonder. The spider, I discovered, is called *Corasoides australis*; so little known is this small brown arachnid that it appears to have no common name.

The poem that I wrote in response to this experience, ‘Creative Tension’, has its origins in a reading of such poems as Judith Beveridge’s ‘Catching Webs’ (1987, pp 16-17) and ‘Orb Spider’ (1987, p 18) and Jeff Guess’ ‘After Rain’ (2004, p 84). In ‘Creative Tension’ I am praising creativity, but my focus remains the natural history of this species and the place or niche it has evolved to occupy. So here is my poem, ‘Creative Tension’:

With the latticework of web suspended,  
over the lower branches of a peach blossom tea tree,  
by a labyrinth of threads  
flushed with morning dew.  
My breath caught, drawn down  
through sheets of web  
to the funnel-shaped retreat, down  
through ground branches and grasses  
to the burrow of this basement dweller,  
*Corasoides australis*, engineer  
of this sky-gazing silken radio telescope.  
The dish-platform, glistening, tactile, waiting  
for any entangled struggle, any tripped vibration,  
any light-waves tracked in a Hubble’s wake.

I hope that this poem is a little more ambitious than the ‘poetry of small observation’ as described by the Melbourne poet and academic Chris Wallace-Crabbe (1974, p 132). Poems of mine such as ‘Willie’ and ‘A Humble Fire’ are certainly well defined by the idea of ‘poetry of small observation’ but ‘Creative Tension’ is more. It is not only a

‘shapely and precise ordering of a particularised experience of the natural world’ (Wallace-Crabbe 1974, pp 132-133). It is also informed by science that gives the initial experience a context and richer understanding. This is equally true of poems of mine such as ‘*Hydromys chrysogaster*’, ‘The Creation’, ‘Sentry Duty’ and ‘At Wentworth Falls’.

This connection between science and nature poetry is very important. As Gary Snyder reminds us in his essay, ‘Unnatural Writing’, ‘a nature poetics must not fear science...it must go beyond nature literacy into the emergent new territories in science: landscape ecology, conservation biology, charming chaos, complicated systems theory’ (1995, p 172). As I will show shortly when I consider my nature poetry of dwelling, to Snyder’s list I would add such academic disciplines as anthropology, archaeology and history that are discovering so much about the lives and culture of the First Australians both in the past and today; in this way the poet has one avenue for beginning to accept their responsibilities as a citizen living in a postcolonial world. By doing this nature poetry becomes so much more than just a response to nature. It becomes a dialogue between poet, nature and the evolving ideas of ecology, natural history, science and Indigenous culture. As the British academic, Greg Garrard argues, ‘ecocriticism must promote the poetics of *responsibility* that takes ecological science as its guide’ (2004, p 71).

In my small poem, ‘The Creation’, I am not only celebrating a moment in nature, an observation of a wild animal as though it is a welcome distraction in an otherwise busy urban life. The poem is an acclamation of the role that the flying fox plays in the ecology of rainforest tree pollination and seed dispersal. This much misunderstood native animal is much maligned as an agent of unwelcomed noise, as a raider of orchards and as a spreader of disease, but as the Australian scientists Leslie Hall and Greg Richards show ‘the continued loss of populations of primary pollinators and seed dispersers (such as flying foxes) can only have a long-term negative effect upon eucalypt forests in eastern Australia’ (Hall & Richards 2000, p 93). There are very important reasons for managing and conserving these animals that are of far more consequence than issues of human convenience. My poem wishes, in a celebratory way, to highlight some of these reasons. So ‘The Creation’ reads:

I hear them at dusk,  
those spectacled flying-foxes wheeling,  
streaming to pockets of remaindered rainforest,  
an archipelago paradise where hardwoods are flowering  
with syrup, easing pollination, and musky,  
squabbling camps for those black leathery angels seeding  
a Daintree, gallantly reclaiming the Garden.

I locate this poem in my nature poetry of praise, and not in my poetry of dwelling, because the flying foxes are the poem’s subject, and not the relationship between these fruit bats and people, but the poem still has an ambition to be part of the important ecocritical project. The poem is informed by the science, the role that this animal plays in rainforest ecology, and it also seeks to accord respect and care.

Another poem of mine that seeks to work in a similar way to ‘The Creation’ is ‘Sentry Duty’. It is also not only a ‘poetry of small observation’ (Chris Wallace-Crabbe 1974, p 132) but is informed by science about the role of bird call in reproduction and in marking territory. The poem does not anthropomorphise the ‘laughing kookaburra’ but rather seeks to be ‘nature and place literate’ (Snyder 1995, p 171) celebrating one aspect of this remarkable animal’s evolution. Thus ‘Sentry Duty’ reads:

A reveille sounds  
and fades; but when the season’s urgent  
the dawn-prompted solo rises to a raucous *a cappella* chorus.  
Territory is volume:

and co-belligerently sounding your place,  
casting off your coat of kingfisher splendour, preying  
silent in ambush, striking  
faster than snakes,  
bustling like a sergeant-major,  
the parade reveller’s hustling  
*news-to-the-world* rallying  
as regimental colour.

Hailed as dawn’s lamplighter, this kingfisher raises alarm.  
The kookaburra laughs aggression.

This poem is not only a response to nature; it is an attempt to enter into a dialogue between nature, poetry and science. By being aware of the role of bird call in reproduction and territory marking, the initial observation of the natural world is greatly enriched; the poem’s imagery is located in ornithology.

Most of my nature poetry of praise focuses on an individual animal and the place or niche it has evolved to occupy: spider, gecko, water rat, flying fox and many birds. My poems that explore a geographical place tend to do so from the points of view of post-colonialism and environmentalism and are located in my poems of dwelling. This is because these poems tend to emphasise ‘the intense interaction between nature and various phases of human interaction’ (Griffiths 1996, p 277): the matters of power, control and exploitation. While I have not written many poems of praise for a particular place in the natural world, others certainly have. I love reading these texts and it is these that have inspired my place poem of praise, ‘At Wentworth Falls’, whose specific model is AR Ammons’ widely anthologised ‘Corsons Inlet’ (2001, pp 147-151).

I have already written about the praise poetry of place by such Australian poets as David Campbell, RF Brissenden, Judith Wright, Bruce Dawe, Judith Beveridge and Sarah Day. The New Zealand poet, James K Baxter, and the American poet, Gary Snyder, are also favourites of mine. Such poems by Baxter as ‘Wild Bees’ (1979, pp 82-83), ‘Poem in the Matukituki Valley’ (1979, pp 86-87), ‘Prospector’ (1979, pp 91-92), ‘Clutha River Song’

(1979, p 270), 'The Cherry Tree' (1979, pp 317-318), 'The River' (1979, p 353), 'The Pass' (1979, pp 390-391), 'The Paddock' (1979, p 408) and 'The Millstones' (1979, p 409); and by Snyder 'Piute Creek' (1992, p 6) and 'Above Pate Valley' (1992, p 9) are exceptional in the way that they evoke an experience and memory of place. But, as I have said, the specific model for my poem, 'At Wentworth Falls', is AR Ammons' wonderful, 'Corsons Inlet' (2001, pp 147-151).

AR Ammons (1926-2001) is an American poet who studied science at Wake Forest University before eventually becoming Professor of Poetry at Cornell University. In his poetry, so often centred on the natural world, he develops a very distinctive style where he uses the colon as an all-purpose punctuation mark. The colon allows him to emphasise the linkage between clauses and to postpone closure. He also often uses lowercase letters and the colon to stress how something always comes before and after each phrase; it creates a kind of continuous stream. Ammons employs all these features in writing 'Corsons Inlet' where he also develops one other innovation. 'In Corsons Inlet' Ammons highlights what the Sydney academic and poet, Rosemary Huisman, describes in 'Reading with the Eye' as the concept that 'design is central to contemporary poetry [because] reading with the eye implies a poem which can be seen, the literary domain of visible poetry' (Huisman 2009, p 64). Ammons develops this effect in 'Corsons Inlet' by his line division and by his placement – his scattering - of each line across the page. So 'Corsons Inlet' (2001, pp 147-151) begins:

I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning  
to the sea,  
then turned right along  
    the surf  
                                rounded a naked headland  
                                and returned  
  
    along the inlet shore:  
  
it was muggy sunny, the wind from the sea steady and high,  
crisp in the running sand,  
    some breakthroughs of sun  
    but after a bit  
  
continuous overcast:

These lines by Ammons remind me of an essay by Chris Wallace-Crabbe where he examines the importance of line division in contemporary poetry:

Some poets, some of the time, will use metrical and even rhyming lines, now that formalism no longer seems disgraceful; many will write free verse (often in stanzas of regular size) which brings a tetrameter or pentameter base hoveringly to mind; while others yet will push *vers libre* further toward the



Mountains of NSW. The walk has been named after the great English naturalist who visited the site in 1836 as part of his voyage around the world on the Beagle. I love the bush and it is Charles Darwin and his insights into the evolution of life that, I like to think, enable me to 'see it' with some degree of insight and understanding; to have some appreciation of the natural history that has resulted in it. My poem is an expression of love for Darwin's ideas and life. In this poem I praise a wonderful American scientist-poet, a great English naturalist and one of my favourite places in the Blue Mountains. Bringing all this together is a celebration of change, of innovation.

### *My nature poetry of dwelling*

The values in all my poetry are shaped by the critiques developed in ecocriticism and postcolonialism; for my poetry of dwelling this is explicitly so. These poems explore the relationship between the human world and the non-human, both positive and negative. They are concerned with the experience of place. John Cameron is an Australian academic working in this field of place-based writing whose ideas I discuss in the introduction to my thesis. Cameron has defined the purpose of place-based writing as:

The work of the place-based writer is to hold the creative tension between fostering a depth of experience of place and developing critical ecological and social awareness.... Without the development of ecological literacy and critical understanding of the cultural and gendered constructions of place, a sense of place is no longer a force for ecological and social justice. (2004, p 35)

This is what I intend all my poetry to be; for my poetry of dwelling it is specifically so.

The Erskine Gorge, located in the Lower Blue Mountains National Park of NSW, is also referred to as the 'Blue Labyrinth'. It is Dharug land, the traditional owners of this country. Because of its rugged inaccessibility, non-Indigenous land use in this gorge has been restricted to bushwalking and camping. The first non-Indigenous people to explore and map the gorge were the members of the Warrigal Bushwalking Club, just prior to the First World War. So taken with this 'wilderness' were club members, that the area was always referred to by them as 'our promised land' (Cameron 1992, pp 9-28). One club member was the founding professor of English at Sydney University, John Le Gay Brereton. The colonial values of Brereton and his students are reflected in the many place names they ascribe to the area of Biblical and Classical origins; recognition of Dharug prior ownership is ignored. One place name that especially stands out is 'Pisgah Rock'. This is the highest lookout with spectacular views. The place name, 'Pisgah Rock', has a Biblical origins and refers to the high location outside the Promised Land on Mt. Nebo where God reveals a glimpse of the Promised Land to Moses after forty years of exodus in the wilderness. It is with these values of colonialism – reflected in the process of mapping and place naming – that my poem, 'Promised Land', is concerned. I have also

written about this in 'Palimpsest'. The challenge of course, as for all poetry, is matching the form and technique – the shape – with the feeling – the idea.

Marcella Polain, a poet and teacher of Creative Writing in Perth, has described very well the challenges involved in employing the techniques of matching form with feeling. She has defined these free verse techniques, like the ones I have attempted in 'Promised Land' and 'Palimpsest', thus:

Writing free verse well involves highly developed skills in the management of many slippery and potent elements of technique. (It may be opportune to remind you of some of these: image; diction, i.e. language choice, upon which such complexities as tone rely; musicality, i.e. sound, dynamics, rhythm, rhyme - including interior and slant; layout; enjambment, i.e. line break; point of view.) It is through these elements that free verse will create its own form... (2007, p 136)

Kevin Brophy, the poet and teacher of Creative Writing at Melbourne University, has also contributed to the discussion. He has declared that 'I still hold to a sense of poetry's commitment to imagery, to metaphor and simile as a way of knowing about the world' (2003, p 45). The leading contemporary Australian poet and poetry editor of the literary journal *Meanjin*, Judith Beveridge, has added that 'the poem is a structure that helps us think differently, and one of the ways it does this is through imagery and metaphor, and through the patterning of sounds, images and symbols' (2009, p 58). 'Promised Land' sets out to create its 'form' and 'feeling' by a description of geological and botanical features, by its line division and by the layout of indenting every second line, giving the impression of the layered ancient weathered sandstone of the Erskine Gorge. Thus 'Promised Land' begins:

The Erskine and its tributaries have dissolved  
fault lines into a labyrinth of lifted  
And folded ridges. Recently burned, the glossy  
blackened trees are shooting green,  
The scrub returning, the grasstrees fired  
into flower. Commanding ground,  
Nebo Point and Pisgah Rock stand like towering lamassu,  
bell miners chiming at their feet.

As can be read in this extract, the poem employs alliteration, such as can also be seen in the lines 'Epiphytes / Sunbake in the catwalk canopy and sundews cluster / among lichens like miraculous wounds' and it juxtaposes the Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern imagery, suggested by the Warrigal Bushwalking Club's place names, with the geology of the ancient sandstone gorge. It does all of this, as suggested in the irony of the poem's title, to prioritise the position that this is Dharug land. The poem attempts to make order out of this commitment. As the Queensland-born poet, novelist, librettist and anthologist, Thomas Shapcott writes:

For all their energy and disorder, poems bring us a gift, some intimation of order. Incantation is order. Rhythm is order. Consonance and alliteration are the early cladding of order. Order is not indestructible but the first house was an apotheosis of order and it still represents one of those leaps of imagination and conception and application that changes us. (1992, p 139)

In creating this order, the poet must work with care and respect; conscious of their value judgements and crucially, interrogating them constantly. This is such a responsibility, especially when we remember that poetry is 'one of those leaps of imagination...that changes us'.

### *Poetry of dwelling, postcolonialism and anthropomorphism*

As I have written earlier in this chapter, the British academic and ecocritic, Greg Garrard, defines anthropomorphism as 'the system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms by ascribing human form or attributes to non-human beings or things' (2004, p 183). It does this by seeing in the non-human world; a void, a blank space - a type of 'terra nullius' - on which it can project its own values and aspirations; an act of 'colonisation'. This anthropomorphic process is more common in Australian children's literature as John Foster, Ern Finnis and Maureen Nimon (1995, pp 137-152) and Elizabeth Webby (2000, pp 67-68) show. There are also examples of this, however, in Australian poetry. Before I look at the poetry though, it is necessary to give a reading of the book *Douglas Stewart's Garden of Friends* (1987). This will highlight the negative values that such an anthropomorphic approach has towards the natural world.

Douglas Stewart (1913-1985), a non-Indigenous writer from New Zealand and Australia, published many books of poetry, verse plays, criticism, and short stories, and edited several anthologies. He was literary adviser to Angus & Robertson Publishers and the literary editor of the Sydney based *Bulletin*. His book *Douglas Stewart's Garden of Friends* (1987) is a daily diary, written in verse and prose, recording twelve months spent in his garden at St Ives, Sydney. In the book's introduction, Stewart explains 'I started writing as a daily record of garden happenings... I am very much an amateur gardener and naturalist but have enjoyed watching and writing about what I have seen' (1987, p 2). The book grows out of Stewart's sense of ownership, control and rights. He often records with some regret the decline, even absence, of numerous wildlife species over the twenty years spent in his St Ives house: bandicoots, blue-tongue lizards, green tree-frogs, antechinus (1987, pp 3-4, 8-10, 44-45). But he will then excuse the behaviour of himself and of his neighbours in unnecessary land clearance, the nightly raids of pet cats, and the destruction of ponds to stop the 'dreadful nightly noise of frogs' (1987, pp 1-2, 7-8, 24-26, 27-29, 44-49). At one point he even excuses a neighbour's shooting of a currawong for swooping down on a backyard bird aviary (1987, pp 28-29). He picks wildflowers and brings home native plants from the neighbouring National Park (1987, pp 130-134); he even returns home with Aboriginal artefacts, such as a grinding stone (1987, p 96). At

one point he tells a story of walking with his friend and fellow poet, David Campbell, who:

Was writing a series of haiku poems about the Aboriginal carvings we had seen. He was in state of creative excitement, arriving each day with three or four new poems in his pocket. He thought I might object to his trespassing in my 'territory'; but not so. Anyhow, if anyone owned those carvings as a poetic territory, it was [the also non-Aboriginal writer] Nancy Keesing'. (1987, p 19)

From a twenty-first century point of view, the values in this text are astounding. Stewart is a colonial writer and this also shapes the way he anthropomorphises nature. Stewart observes animal behaviour, but instead of looking to science for clues on how to interpret it, he writes such judgements as:

The lorikeets, I note with approval, never do their works onto the bird tray but shoot cleanly over the edge... Nature thinks of everything. (1987, p 21)

A beastly little black beetle is attacking the pink hibiscus. Aphids are swarming on one of its buds, and a lovely frail pink flower, ragged where it has been eaten, had four little snails under a nearby leaf, waiting to finish it off. (1987, p 22)

The mad black ants are swarming again, rushing up and down the short blade of an immature iris leaf. I think they must be demented with love. (1987, p 26)

A currawong is dive-bombing the Indian mynas on the lawn, I think with no kindly intentions. I saw one once most mercilessly hunting... it had battered the myna to the ground. (1987, pp 28-29)

Our wonderful cats remind me of a family of outcasts... nobody else loved them, so they loved each other... there was a wild loveable streak in them, and sometimes they would absent themselves from the kitchen for two or three days at a time, and go hunting rabbits and bandicoots. (1987, p 44)

This approach to the natural world prioritises the human interest, and the place of their pets, at the expense of all else. Human convenience is seen as paramount. It is not 'place or nature literate' (Snyder 1995, p 171) and accords no human accountability to the natural world. (It does not even distinguish between the place in the eco-system of feral pests like rabbits and endangered native animals such as bandicoots.) It does not offer

insight into the way the natural world works and by prioritising the human interest, contributes to the destructive state of mind that excuses, and allows, environmental decline. In many of his poems, Stewart expresses an enthusiastic sense of wonder towards the natural world, praising it for its colour and creativity. The poem 'Firetail Finches' (1992, p 150) is a wonderful example and begins:

Such flashing joy of flower and feather  
Over rock and wild creek-water,  
Such ragged scrub and such confusion  
Of perching green and flying crimson

The values of the colonial writer are also, unfortunately, too often present. So in 'Ants' (1992, pp 208-209), Stewart has a young vandal dig-up an ant colony. The 'angry' ants then ask:

Who lifted that stone off our nest?  
The city is all laid bare.  
Fierce light leaps in like a beast,  
All run, some here, some there.

Oh who could have lifted stone?  
What monstrous jaw, what shoulder,  
To tug until stone quite gone,  
To heave the world's great boulder?

The rhymes and rhythm are a little too mechanical, and the humour lacking in wit. The tone in the voice of the talking ants is more that of the children's animal fable. Stewart concludes his poem by giving voice to the human vandal whose behaviour is apparently based on the 'noble' desire of wanting to bring a grander vision of life to the ant colony:

Well then it's time for shifting,  
Come soldier, come worker, come nurse;  
But pardon, my brothers, for lifting  
The lid of your universe.

In 'Speaking Of Wombats' (1992, pp 229-230) Stewart describes the wombats as:

For there was this creature  
Shambling and hairy  
Lit by the moon  
Like some wild furry fairy

A wombat dressed as a fairy is as an image that fails to work. The story that science tells of the natural history, the evolution, of the wombat is far richer and suggestive of wonder, a real magic. Stewart is not alone, however, in his approach. Roland Robinson is a contemporary of Stewart's. Stewart sees wombats as 'fairies' and Robinson follows in

this vein when he describes casuarinas as a feminine ‘spirit of the land’. In ‘Casuarina’ (Elliott (ed.) 1979, pp 127-128) Robinson writes:

The last, the long haired casuarina  
stands upon the hillside where,  
against the turquoise night of those first  
yellow stars, she shakes her hair.

In describing the removal of Aboriginal people from their country, Robinson glosses over a history of massacres, and the idea of removal being ‘forced’, and writes:

She [the casuarina] shakes her hair out in her singing  
of cliffs and caves and waterfalls,  
and tribes who left the lichened sandstone  
carved in gods and animals.

Poetry needs to avoid the ‘trap of anthropomorphism’ and its reinforcement of the values of colonialism. These values diminish the relationship between poetry and ecology and produce an anthropocentric art. This contributes to the destructive patterns of thought that prioritise the human value over all else, to great environmental cost. To paraphrase John Cameron, we need nature poetry that attends to the detail in place; that *informs* the reader about the animal and plant species and their surprising interrelationships; that *provokes* the reader to question how the human and non-human world can possibly cohabit; and that *inspires* the reader to pay closer attention to their own place in the world (Cameron 2004, p 35). To achieve these goals, and to be postcolonial, poetry can reject the ‘trap of anthropomorphism’. It should take the time to attend to the detail. This means not only observing the natural world closely, it also means paying attention to the science and history. Without this, close observations have no context and richness of understanding. Our approach to place requires recognition, and knowledge, that our experience is concerned with the intimate relationship between the human and non-human, between the social and the ecological (Griffiths 1996, p 277). One way of achieving this is by acknowledging that close observation, and study, is helpful before writing.

This is the goal I set for myself in all my writing. My poem sequence, ‘colonial heads’, is a good example of how I approach this challenge. Each poem in the sequence takes as its subject a native tree species that has a particularly important function in the economies of Aboriginal and colonial non-Aboriginal sense of place. Each poem in the sequence takes on the voice of a ‘colonial head’ expressing the values of racism and environmental destruction so characteristic of a colonial ethical orientation. By juxtaposing the expression of these colonial values with a very contemporary approach to line division and punctuation, I show how these values of colonialism have continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the poems suggest an individual voice rather than a piece of nineteenth century versification. So the poem ‘black boy’ begins:

faithless  
like everything else  
useless  
like a botanical decoration

the battle was to find any native  
resource to make all this  
empty space worth while

Black Boy is the derogatory colonial name commonly given to the plant species, *Xanthorrhoea australis* or Grass Tree. So much of my poetry is about the names we assign to things, our labels for place, and how much this reveals about our values. The determination to survey, name and map is one of the first concerns of a colonising power as it seeks to gain possession of land. I have written of this in 'Palimpsest' concerning Captain James Cook's voyage of 'discovery' of the east coast of Australia in 1770. As Cook sailed along the east coast he made maps, naming distinctive coastal mountains, bays and inlets that could be later used to aid navigation. The continued use of such place names today is an example of how knowledge of Aboriginal prior occupation is erased to make room for the colonising story. So my poem, 'Palimpsest', reads:

Scraped again  
and again  
down  
through accumulated  
sandstone years,  
the Budawang Range  
is a complex  
of pricked and folded gullies  
embellished with monoliths;  
once bora grounds  
- illuminated tors -  
their eminence now fractured  
and made to bear transported gatherings:  
Sturgiss, Nibelung, Donjon;  
whilst the Budawang's signature,  
Dithol – *woman's breast* –  
was coyly named Pigeon House  
from the Endeavour's helm –  
a clear sailing,  
white washed over  
and over –  
palimpsest.

This gaining control over the naming of place is important in the process of legitimising the act of colonisation: it is about power. Joseph Banks was the gentleman-scientist on board the Endeavour with Cook. The very significant and popular Aboriginal singer-song

writer, Archie Roach, has described this process of colonialism and the colonising exercise of power started by Cook and Banks in his song 'Native Born' (1990):

So bow your head old Eucalypt and Wattle tree  
Australia's bush is losing its identity  
While the cities and the parks that they have planned  
Look out of place because the spirit's in the land  
Look out of place because the spirit's in the land

Do you remember Joseph Banks  
Who stood upon this sacred earth  
And what he felt inside when he looked around and saw  
The land to whom we give our thanks  
Our mother land who's given birth  
To trees and plants and animals he'd never seen before?

So bow your head old Eucalypt and Wattle tree  
Australia's bush is losing its identity  
While the cities and the parks that they have planned  
Look out of place because the spirit's in the land

But no one knows or no one hears  
The way we used to sing and dance  
And how the Gum Tree stood and stretched  
To greet the golden morn  
And mother land still sheds her tears  
For lives that never stood a chance  
And Albert Namitjira cried as we all cry  
The Native Born  
We cry the Native Born

The cost of this colonising exercise of power is very great for Indigenous peoples: dispossession in only the beginning. Archie Roach reminds us that the loss of culture and identity and the 'tears / for lives that never stood a chance' are the price as well.

For my poetry of dwelling, that attempts to explore how I experience and remember place, it is necessary to highlight not only the intimate relationship between the human and non-human, between the social and the ecological (Griffiths 1996, p 277), but also between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. My poetry of place acknowledges the fact of prior Aboriginal ownership of country – that Aboriginal people are the Original Custodians; it does this for example in the way that it approaches place names. This is one part of a postcolonial project.

### *My nature poetry of image: the sixth day*

A sense of place – which I sometimes define as the niche a plant or animal has evolved to occupy – informed by the critiques of environmentalism and postcolonialism; these are the key concepts in my poems of praise and dwelling. My nature poetry of image has a slightly different focus. The poems in this category must still relate to my larger project and commitment to the values of environmentalism and postcolonialism, but they do so in a way that brings to the fore the question of what distinguishes a nature poem from an environmental poem.

My poetry of praise celebrates nature and natural places as ‘cultural landscapes’ (Griffiths 1996, p 277). The subject of these poems is nature. The subject of my poetry of dwelling is the relationships between the human and non-human world, prioritising the critical stances of environmentalism and postcolonialism. It is easy to see how the poems in these categories might approach nature and place in a way that recognises that our experience is concerned with the intimate relationship between the human and non-human, between the social and the ecological (Griffiths 1996, p 277). It is easy to see how my poems of praise and dwelling might want to ‘inform’, ‘provoke’ and ‘inspire’ (Cameron 2004, p 35). What about the poetry of image? The poems in this category have the human world and human nature as their subject. They use imagery from the natural world to explore their subjects but it is not so obvious how they might present the non-human world as more than just a framing device; how they might stress that the human interest is not the only legitimate interest; and how they might show human accountability to the non-human world (Buell 1995, pp 7-8). As we have seen in the introduction to my thesis, these are the areas of definition that the American academic and ecocritic, Lawrence Buell, develops to distinguish between the nature poem and the environmental poem or eco-poem. It is now time to consider these issues in regard to my nature poetry of image.

While my poems of image are nature poems, it is fair to point out that many of them do not constitute the environmental text as defined by Buell (1995, pp 7-8). Nature features prominently in poems of mine such as ‘Bridal Falls’ and ‘Raising the Colours’, but the approach is not explicitly that of the committed environmentalist and ecocritic. In ‘Bridal Falls’ I pay attention to detail: to species names and to the observation of animal behaviour, such as the reproduction of Torres Strait Pigeons, Coastal Taipans and Spur-winged Plovers. I do not anthropomorphise nature or adopt the values of colonialism in the way that I present the non-human world. There is not recognition, however, that the sugar plantation referred to is the result of rainforest clearance. This glosses over the non-human interests in the poem and fails to take account of the need for human accountability to the environment. The poem comes close to presenting the natural world as merely a framing device for its exploration of a declining human relationship. I hope its attention to detail informs the reader and begins to accord the non-human world respect and to suggest some sense of the environment as a process – but Buell would not see this as enough.

The work of Buell is a significant contribution to ecocriticism and defines aptly the nature poetry of dwelling, and much of the nature poetry of praise. It provides the would-be nature writer with a strong theoretical framework in which to position their work. But we must not forget purpose when judging the merits of creative writing. As I have shown in section two of my thesis, the nature poetry of image is a very rich and diverse group. Imagery from the natural world has been used to explore many aspects of human nature and this poetry is a very valuable category within the area of nature poetry.

In my own nature poetry of image, I trust that my approach to the non-human world is governed by these principles:

- My writing must be ‘nature and place literate - to know who’s who and what’s what in the ecosystem’ (Snyder 1995, p 171).
- It must not anthropomorphise the non-human world, or be informed by the values of colonialism in any other way.
- It must accord respect and admiration to the non-human world and, at least, imply allegiance and accountability.

Poems of mine; such as ‘Bridal Falls’ and ‘Waiting’, that explore human relationships and the politics involved in parenting; and ‘Raising the Colours’, that has Indigenous education in Far North Queensland as its subject; satisfy these guidelines. They are not environmental texts, but nor are they exploitative or careless in the way that they treat the non-human world. Some of my nature poems of image, however, certainly fulfil Buell’s criteria for the environmental text. Poems such as ‘The Outdoor Educator’ and ‘Learning on the Line’ deal with my work as an outdoor educator and expedition leader. My work in these fields, in the way that I develop my experiential learning programs, is explicitly informed by the values of postcolonialism and environmentalism; this has equally informed the poems that I have written about this that are also, in part, a response to Peter Kirkpatrick’s poem ‘Bucolic Plague or This Eco-Lodge My Prison’.

The Sydney poet and academic, Peter Kirkpatrick, concludes his prize-winning poem – written for a bushwalking friend – ‘Bucolic Plague or This Eco-Lodge My Prison’ (2006, pp 59-63), with the lines:

Let’s share this shrewd ironic feller [a white cockatoo], Paul,  
and ditch epiphanies (like love affairs,  
they’re better left unplanned). Bugger bushwalking.  
Who treads the least treads lightest on the earth.  
I say, go take a leaf from trees themselves:  
lie still, and let the landscape come to you.

This witty poem of one hundred and fifty-four lines, written in blank verse, is very memorable. It mixes startling imagery and puns, a conversational style and humour with serious reflections on language and how we make meaning. As a keen bushwalker, and leader of bushwalking expeditions, I had to take up the challenge and respond to Kirkpatrick’s good-humoured provocative text. Kirkpatrick writes:

The fact is that I find such forest rambles  
boring as wombat shit: just a difficult  
and dull inspection of brigades of trees  
each in camouflage fatigues - except  
really you're mostly staring at the ground,  
planning every footfall, on the look-out for snakes.  
The pointlessness is worst...

My poem, 'Learning on the Line', is roughly the same length as Kirkpatrick's. My unrhymed free-verse lines suggest a rhythm that echoes the footfalls of the hiker as I relate my experiences of leading a group of students for a two-week expedition through the Greater Blue Mountains National Park. The poem is a celebration of place informed by the critiques of environmentalism and postcolonialism. The poem is also a reflection on the purpose and value of Outdoor Education and hiking: the learning outcomes, the challenge-by-choice and adventure. My poem concludes:

Our final campsite: tonight  
the kids string their bivvies together  
and celebrate tall stories: a thunder-and-blood  
Black Panther and Cannibal Kev, the near misses,  
their rolls and rolls of strapping tape. They prepare  
each other meals, a billy of tea  
and amidst rounds of song forecast  
the luxury of their next fast-food, nights off the ground.  
At the fire each evening  
we've climbed our mountains and bounced  
back, reorientating our senses  
and values. With anyone, the trick is reaching  
summits, the challenge descending  
home with so much more than just a dream of takeaways,  
a craving for beds.

The pun in the poem's title and the synecdoche in the final lines that presents the 'dream of takeaways, / a craving for beds' as a figure of speech by which the whole of domestic comfort is referred to in this one part, echoes Kirkpatrick's mix of the serious and the humorous. My poem is intended as a response and tribute to Kirkpatrick's remarkable poem. Kirkpatrick is a Sydney poet who writes wonderfully of the urban experience and, as such, his poetry raises a significant question for me.

Commenting on the importance of this urban poetry, the Melbourne poet Peter Bakowski, in interview with Brad Evans in *Five Bells*, the journal of the Poets Union in Australia, makes the following observation:

In Australia there's still this thing where we feel that a poem  
has to refer to nature or the Australian landscape and an extreme

example of this is bush poetry. In reality Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world and the bulk of us live in a big noisy city with traffic. If you look at a lot of our poetry magazines they don't reflect the urban modern life enough. I prefer to see more poems about traffic jams and cafes than poems about billabongs or sunsets. (1997, pp 4-7)

Kevin Brophy, another Melbourne poet, would agree with Bakowski. Brophy has written that 'bush, pastoral or nature poetics want to preserve with the medieval conviction that we learn deep truths by turning from humankind, from the mess of a contemporary urban world, and going back to a more redemptive order in nature' (2003, p 42). Both Bakowski and Brophy have written wonderful urban poetry. They have also both written nature poetry. Brophy has written nature poetry of praise in 'Three Summer Haiku' (1997, p 21) and 'Blue-Tongue' (1997, p 37) and nature poetry of image in 'Walking towards sunset' (2002, p 50), 'After rain' (2007, p 70), 'Central Australia' (2007, pp 74-75), 'Tulips' (2007, pp 78-79) and 'Jamieson hills' (2007, pp 16-17). Bakowski has written nature poetry of praise in 'Bee' (1995, p 19) and 'Snail' (1995, p 19). But of course these poems are only a fraction of Brophy and Bakowski's poetic output which is usually focussed on the experience of living in urban situations. The challenge of these two poets to explain why I read and write nature poetry is an important one.

I am a nature poet but I can also see sense in Bakowski and Brophy's arguments. Contemporary poetry should also reflect our urban reality. It certainly should not deliberately turn from the 'mess of a contemporary urban reality' (Brophy 2003, p 42). As I have defined it, the 'nature' in nature poetry does not refer to a notion of 'utter wilderness', a place where humans are literally *personae non gratis* (Casey 1993, p 231). The nature that I write about is that highly contested place where notions of culture and the non-human world intersect: a cultural landscape. Nature is encountered in urban, suburban, rural and wilderness – or National Park – contexts. In writing about the natural world, I do not turn away from contemporary human experience. I highlight the critique of postcolonialism and the need to reconnect ourselves with our natural environment, to readdress the destructive habits of thought that contribute to the environmental crisis we find ourselves in. My poetry is not a denial of the human world and culture. It is an engagement with some of the more significant issues that make up the 'mess' of contemporary reality. This is the nature poetry that I write and, as I have shown in section two of my thesis, that I am attracted to as a reader. Nature poetry praises the world that we inhabit; it critiques our record of dwelling in it, from both a postcolonial and environmental perspective; it locates in nature the imagery needed to explore human nature. Nature poetry can encourage a sensitivity to the subtleties of dwelling in place, where ever that may be; a living that is appreciative of its surrounds; an outlook that accords respect and care.

## ***Section Five: Conclusion***

Australian poetry reminds us that we cannot encounter the natural world except by cultural means. As the Australian academic Tom Griffiths writes, this idea of the natural world as a 'cultural landscape acknowledges that an area is often the product of an intense interaction between nature and various phases of human habitation, and that natural places are not, as some ecological viewpoints suggest, destined to exist as climax communities or systems untouched by human hands' (Griffiths 1996, p 277). This approach to the natural world has many implications for the way we seek to manage places like national parks. It reminds us that these environments require recognition that our experience is concerned with the intimate relationship between the human and the non-human, between the social and the ecological (Griffiths 1996, p 277). It also reminds us that nature is an expression of our political, literary and scientific understanding and that we experience it not merely to sensitively rhapsodize, to write with literary effect, but to see with a scientific eye. The presence of science can be subtly located in the poem's imagery, giving an initial observation of the natural world a richer context and understanding. This is illustrated in a series of haiku-like poems taken from my sequence called 'Pressure Points':

*Cicadas*

fed on air  
to a high pressure fanfare  
a splitting rave

*Mozzies*

zipping up storm fronts  
as Zeroes sloughing hailstones  
warm blooded targeting

*Snakes*

sequined suntraps  
summer-clutched to breed  
a spurring urgency

*Fire Control*

summer offerings of sclerophyll  
fuel this currawong nest  
cuckoo timed

*Barometric Readings*

lapis lazuli rolled  
glassy picnic days, a high  
subsiding pressure

In these poems I am not only celebrating a moment in nature, an observation of some wild creatures as though they are a welcome distraction in an otherwise busy urban life. I am engaging with some of the realities of an Australian summer: the role of noise in cicada reproduction, the arrival of storms and mosquitoes on dusk, the life cycle of cold-blooded reptiles and insects and the ever present danger of bush fire, so often made more severe by our poor bush-care and hazard-reduction programs. Linking all these insights together is an idea gleaned from science about the place of summer pressure. This might be the pressure to breed, to manage hazard, or the summer atmospheric norm of high pressure systems resulting in Australia's south-east coast south-easterly winds, hot dry days and the occasional relief of early evening storms. So much of our experience of summer is concerned with our responses to the extremes of weather and to the juxtaposition in the life cycles of the animals and plants with which we share this world. An engagement with such shared experience provides a rich context for a poetry of place; a poetry that engages with the natural world as a 'cultural landscape'.

In Australian poetry three purposes emerge for writing about the natural world: there is poetry of praise, poetry of dwelling and poetry of imagery. The nature poetry of praise has nature as its subject. Here the natural world is often seen as the embodiment of the Romantic's Nature, the conservationist's Wilderness, or the scientist's Natural History. Here is a small poem of praise I call 'Sclerophyll Canopy':

sinewy edge-faced scanty  
foliage knotted in all its evergreen  
hallelujah

Poems that seek to praise, like 'Sclerophyll Canopy', can be divided into three main categories. There is the hymn of praise to a particular bush, rural or suburban place. There is praise of a specific animal or plant, usually of some commonly encountered bird or insect. And there is the expression of wonder, of praise for nature's capacity for regeneration, particularly in the face of drought and bushfire. In the Australian nature poetry of praise there are really significant voices like Robert Adamson, Judith Beveridge, RF Brissenden, David Campbell, Bruce Dawe, Sarah Day, Diane Fahey, Robert Gray, William Hart-Smith, Bronwyn Lea, Kate Llewellyn, Les Murray, Jan Owen, John Shaw Neilson, Peter Skrzynecki and Judith Wright. The effect of many of these poems of praise is well described by the Australian novelist and poet James Bradley in his review of Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986). In his review, Bradley writes:

Lopez's account of the Arctic is anchored in his observations of its terrain, its light and the animals that inhabit it. Yet, it is observation

rendered so as to make each moment transcend its detail... By attending to detail, by learning to see things as they are, we learn to dissolve ourselves into landscapes, to become inhabitants of a shared world... one to which we owe a silent respect, and an allegiance. (Bradley 2001, p. 28)

These insights into what makes this type of place-based nature writing of praise so consequential have some very interesting parallels as we look at the Australian nature poetry of dwelling and image as well.

The nature poetry of dwelling has the relationship between nature and humanity as its subject, here the natural world is written of in terms of the pastoral, anti-pastoral and environmental text. These poems often reject the idea of human dominion over nature and seek to replace the term 'dominion' with 'dwelling'. The word dominion suggests power, control and exploitation, whereas dwelling, especially with its pedigree back to Henry David Thoreau, encapsulates a greater environmental awareness and sensitivity. This is what I have in mind when I write in 'Habitation':

Remaindered to the rocky, steeper edges  
of farms, rainforests are a strangler fig's  
host, slipping through our fingers,

even as you trudge waist-deep through barbed  
cycads and vine thickets, past giant stinging trees  
and Moreton Bay figs with lianas wreathing canopies,  
like carpet pythons, festooning the way.

A green catbird forages ahead, yowling  
from a tangle of vines. It's mating  
season and the males are grandstanding  
across the rainforest airwaves.

He breaks in on a stand of ironwood and turpentine  
and all that ancient furrowed towering worship  
of the sun is crowned with epiphytic orchids, mosses and ferns.  
This site of upswept fallen paradise is also abundant,

if like a cancer, with mistletoe, packed  
with sugars, carbs and nesting sites leached  
from their hosts' sap – a commonwealth,  
a commonwealth disturbed.

Much of the poetry of dwelling, such as my own, is written within a postcolonial and ecocritical context; it is place-based and informed by science. 'Habitation' sees in the abundance of mistletoe, a native aerial parasite, an indication of landscape health. This is because mistletoe, in balance, provides nesting sites and encourages tree hollow

formation; it also grows nutritious fruit and leaves all year round. When abundant, however, mistletoe indicates an absence in an ecosystem of native consumers such as sugar gliders, possums and butterfly larvae. When over-abundant, because it is a parasite, mistletoe contributes to dieback in tree hosts and to the degradation of ecosystems. My poem locates its imagery in ecological science.

There are many significant Australian poets who have contributed to a postcolonial poetry of dwelling (often with an ecocritical inflection): Laurie Duggan, Lionel Fogarty, John Kinsella, John Manifold, David Martin, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Geoff Page, Samuel Wagan Watson and Judith Wright. Poets like Caroline Caddy and Philip Hodgins have explored the anti-pastoral – or georgic – while John Bennett, Louise Crisp, Coral Hull and Mark O'Connor have contributed to the promotion in Australia of an ecopoetics. In my own poetry of dwelling it is of crucial importance that ecocriticism and ecopoetics be aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture and viewpoints. For ecocriticism to be a vital presence, it must be attuned to the contexts of the colonial and postcolonial. As Judith Wright has written in 'At Cooloolah' (1994, pp 140-141):

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's twilight  
has fished there longer than our centuries.  
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,  
and he will wear their colour till he dies,

But I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.  
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,  
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,  
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah  
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,  
for earth is spirit: the invader's feet will tangle  
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

Like in the study of 'place', postcolonialism is a vital perspective that ecocriticism must engage with as it develops its critique. As Wright highlights, if ecocriticism fails to do this, it is just another discourse 'come of a conquering people'. As we have seen, the Australian multi-disciplinary academic, George Seddon would agree with Wright on this point. He has described the type of place-based literature that I am attracted to as a 'literature of intimacy with places, with country' (1998, pp 105-109). He has argued that 'being Australian in the sense of belonging to the land has always depended on an acquired skill. It is neither a right nor a given; it has always had to be learnt, once handed down by the tribal elders to the young, and then earned by them' (2005, p 240). Seddon rightly prioritises the understanding of Indigenous Australians in this process, but highlights the importance to all of acknowledging the 'delicacy and beauty of the natural environment' if they are to feel 'at home' and embedded in this place (2005, p xv). It is this embeddedness that I continue to explore in my own writing and reading, especially in poetry of dwelling.

The nature poetry of image has humanity as its subject. This poetry uses imagery from the non-human world, not to explore nature or our relationship with nature but to focus on the human concern, on human nature: sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth, domestic life and relationships, immigration and bigotry, warfare and cruelty, religious belief, memory and creativity, terminal illness, death and bereavement. Thus in 'Bridal Falls' I write of a long-term marriage that was perhaps once loving and enriching (resulting in the shared raising of children) but has become inharmonious and lacking in a common vision. I describe this difficult relationship within the setting of a beautiful tropical environment:

To Walsh's Pyramid, that mountain-mound of Djarruga,  
the scrub hen, we returned each year. The source  
of Bridal Falls. Torres Strait pigeons courting,  
deep *ooms* haunting the air.

We talked through the Wet seasons thinking it  
meant something; the tropical heat sticking  
to our bodies making clothes difficult,  
the UV extreme. Life in this glaring glasshouse

grew as though on steroids; a stifling  
virility before decay. I had an affair  
with work, grew barbs, pretended. You bitterly  
waited: what *should* we have said?

Fruit bats flew screaming, crash-landing  
the canopy, disturbing neighbouring bats into noisy fights.  
One day two great coastal taipans blocked  
our path, they were mating, coiling and uncoiling

in a ritualised wrestling by necessity brief.  
We were on the edge of a sugar plantation  
and whatever we feared rose up into the plovers'  
plaintive cries. Sometimes aggression when nesting

reminds us of what we share. Fruit bat lovers,  
enveloped in wings – hanging –  
we're a hair's breadth from contentment, a field of sugar  
in exuberant, humid and suffocating air.

Within Australian poetry, the nature poetry of image is a particularly diverse and rich group. Many poets have located, in the natural world, the imagery they need to explore the human concern. Poets such as Robert Adamson, Susan Afterman, Judith Beveridge, Brook Emery, John Graham, Gwen Harwood, Dorothy Hewett, Andrew Lansdown, Peter Minter, Vera Newsom, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Grace Perry, Marcella Polain, Jennifer

Rankin, Dipti Saravanamuttu, Andrew Taylor, Judith Wright and Warrick Wynne have written of sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, domesticity and romantic relationships. Manfred Jurgensen, Jean Kent, Kate Llewellyn, Miriam Lo, Nan McDonald, Kevin Murray and Fay Zwicky have written of old age and the joy of grandchildren while Katherine Gallagher, Philip Hodgins, Susan Kruss, Miriel Lenore, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Ron Pretty and Robyn Rowland have responded to terminal illness, death and bereavement. John Millett and Jan Owen have written poetry of the Second World War while Jennifer Compton, John Foulcher, Carolyn Gerrish, Jamie Grant, Dorothy Hewett, Anthony Lawrence, Geoff Page, Andrew Sant and Kerry Scuffins have explored the bush as a site of nightmare, accidental death and murder. Finally, Peter Kirkpatrick and John Watson have used imagery from the natural world to explore the nature of language and the value of nature poetry.

My reading of the Australian nature poetry of praise, dwelling and image highlights the challenge to continue this love affair with the natural world informed by the contexts of the postcolonial and environmental crises. One way of doing this is to embrace science. As the American ecocritic and poet Gary Snyder reminds us: 'nature poetics must not fear science...it must go beyond nature literacy into such emergent new territories as landscape ecology and conservation biology' (1995, p 172). This also allows the poet to avoid the trap of anthropomorphism, that system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms by seeing in the non-human world: a void, a blank – a type of *terra nullius* – on which it can project its own values and aspirations; an act of colonisation. I describe the weaknesses of this approach to writing nature poetry in chapter four of my thesis where I discuss some of the poetry of Douglas Stewart and Roland Robinson.

The technique of anthropomorphism prioritises the human interest at the expense of all else. Human convenience is seen as paramount. It is not, in the words of Gary Snyder, 'place or nature literate' (1995, p 171) and accords no human accountability to the natural world. Poetry needs to avoid the 'trap of anthropomorphism' and its reinforcement of the values of colonialism. These values diminish the relationship between poetry and ecology and produce an anthropocentric art. This contributes to the destructive patterns of thought that prioritise the human value over all else, to great environmental cost. To paraphrase the Australian academic John Cameron we need nature poetry that attends to the detail in place; that *informs* the reader about the animal and plant species and their surprising interrelationships; that *provokes* the reader to question how the human and non-human world can possibly cohabit; and that *inspires* the reader to pay closer attention to their own place in the world (Cameron 2004, p 35). To achieve these goals, and to be postcolonial, poetry can reject the 'trap of anthropomorphism'. It should take the time to attend to the detail. This means not only observing the natural world closely, it also means paying attention to the science and history, both human and natural. Without this, close observations have no context and richness of understanding. Our approach to place requires recognition, and knowledge, that our experience is concerned with the intimate relationship between the human and non-human, between the social and the ecological (Griffiths 1996, p 277). One way of

achieving this is by acknowledging that close observation and study is helpful before writing.

This connection between science and nature poetry is very important. In acknowledging this, nature poetry becomes so much more than just a response to nature. It becomes a dialogue between poet, nature and the evolving ideas of such sciences as ecology and natural history. As the British academic, Greg Garrard argues, ‘ecocriticism must promote the poetics of *responsibility* that takes ecological science as its guide’ (2004, p 71).

This is a goal – I hope I set myself – in my poetry. Another poem of mine that seeks to accord such care and respect in the way that it approaches the natural world is ‘Common Wombat’. It is more than ‘poetry of small observation’ (Wallace-Crabbe 1974, p 132) and is informed by science about the priority of smell and sound over sight in the way that this animal navigates the world. It highlights the consequences of adopting a nocturnal life, with days spent in a burrow, on the evolution of the wombat, resulting in it being extremely efficient in the way that it retains water but unable to use such mechanisms as panting or sweating to lower its body temperature. The poem is also aware of the role played by olfactory signalling in reproduction and in marking territory through scatting. ‘Common Wombat’ describes a bushwalker near the end of the day, hiking along a ridgeline and looking for a place to camp, as they become aware of the scats and traces of this remarkable animal (an animal that is not very ‘common’ after all). Part of my poem reads as follows:

But, of course, here  
were the signature scats,  
the burrows, all those hallmarks  
of a living whose presence  
is now a dry stone wall ruins.  
And where I sweated  
on finding water holes  
before dark, weighed down  
with my pack,  
my direction measured  
by compass and map,  
these animals remained  
cloistered and solitary, earthed  
just beneath my feet.  
They shunned our sun,  
shunned the vision  
we saw as so far sighted.  
They never perspired  
never panted  
but waited for evening’s cool  
relief and security;  
a vista of scent

for their open-air habits.

The poem does not anthropomorphise the ‘muddle-headed wombat’ but rather seeks to be ‘nature and place literate’ (Snyder 1995, p 171), celebrating this animal as one superbly adapted to its surrounds. This poem is not only a response to nature; it is an attempt to enter into a dialogue between nature, poetry and science. By being aware of what scientists understand about the natural history – the evolution – of this animal, the initial observation of the natural world is greatly enriched; the poem’s imagery is located in zoology.

‘Gilly-wattler’ is another of my poems that illustrates this approach to the natural world. This is a small poem that engages with the place - or evolutionary niche – of the Red Wattlebird. This bird is one of Australia's largest honeyeaters and is crucial in the process of pollinating flowering plants. It has, however, a harsh 'throat-clearing' call and is often also called a 'Barking Bird' or 'Gilly-wattler'. In Australian poetry it is often written of in a way that highlights only this hacking voice. Andrew Lansdown, for instance, in 'Choka' writes:

A wattlebird in  
a white gum clucks twice. So ugly!  
It has nothing  
going for it, that bird. Shape  
and stance and sound, all  
match. Watch. There it goes again.  
Bracing on the branch  
it throws its head back, beak a-  
gape, and gags on its own song. (1993, p 20)

It seems very limiting to reduce this remarkable animal to the noise that it makes, especially given its significant role in the pollination of plants. To write that this bird ‘has nothing / going for it’ is an astounding way for a contemporary person to respond to a native animal living in its environment. Ecological science tells such a rich story of the interconnections and processes between animals and plants existing in an ecosystem; such insights can only enrich the way that we respond to the behaviour of the animals that we encounter. My poem is a small imagist piece with modest ambitions but it is an attempt to honour, subtly, a wonderful native bird and what ecological science understands about it. My poem, ‘Gilly-wattler’, reads:

from throats  
clearing  
rasps  
and clefts of syrup  
easing  
impregnation  
drawing  
dusted gold

coloured  
with tongues and combs of honey

Poetry can be more than an uninformed response to nature. It can become a dialogue, even if subtle, between poet, nature and the evolving ideas of science.

There are the nature poetries of praise, dwelling and image. Each of these types of nature poetry have a different purpose in writing about the natural world as it is encountered in the suburbs and cities, in the rural areas and in the National Parks and State Reserves. The nature poetries of praise, dwelling and image all remind the reader that to engage with the incredibly rich natural and human history that has shaped the Australian continent for so long, we are best served to approach the natural world as a 'cultural landscape', highlighting that all places are an intense interaction between the biophysical environment and various phases of human habitation. A major strategy of this type of writing, especially the nature poetry of dwelling, is to be place-based and informed by the ethical orientation of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. This poetry can also see in the natural world powerful imagery for the exploration of many human concerns. This literature informs, provokes and inspires the reader to think about nature and the presence of humans within it. It does this by challenging the reader to consider the social justice and ecological implications of their lives and to connect with their environment by feeling wonder, respect and care. It is with this type of nature poetry that I am concerned, both critically and creatively.

*Gathering Points: AUSTRALIAN POETRY: A Natural Selection* is a useful title for my project as it brings together all the elements that make up my work and reflects the idea that notions of place, whether they be geographical or the niche that an organism has evolved to fill, are not static but are constantly being challenged, altered and constructed through physical movement, such as migration and invasion; through intellectual debate and re-examination; through archaeological and scientific research which bring new insights and knowledge; and through personal engagement and reflection. Not only are our notions of place transported, they reflect and give meaning to us socially and culturally. In a sense, we gather around our constructed place. It is our campfire, our hearth, our identity.

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