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Abstract

My days in the plateau were sung by coal-black birds. There were other birds, of course – the Bassian Thrush; the Crimson Rosella; the Yellow-Breasted Robins out the back; the Eastern Spinebills in the grevilleas under my study window; the nesting pair of Bulbuls; the raucous Red Wattlebirds; the Satin Bowerbird and his squabbling elegant troupe; the sweet Golden Warbler; the Whipbirds, who whistle up the morning from wherever it's been; the Kookaburras, whose is the dawn and the dusk; the Currawongs, who sing their name and steal everyone else's; the migrating Cuckoos and Koels; the tiny Thornbills; the Gang-Gangs, scarlet headed, metal grey, with a voice like an iron gate opening in fog; the Sulphur-Crested Cockatoos, shockingly white, some kind of errant messengers of the fallen gods; the Sacred Kingfishers, itinerants, gods themselves; and in the valleys, the eagles.

Mark Tredinnick

DAYS IN THE PLATEAU

ALL OUR GRIEF¹

My days in the plateau were sung by coal-black birds.

There were other birds, of course — the Bassian Thrush; the Crimson Rosella; the Yellow-Breasted Robins out the back; the Eastern Spinebills in the grevilleas under my study window; the nesting pair of Bulbuls; the raucous Red Wattlebirds; the Satin Bowerbird and his squabbling elegant troupe; the sweet Golden Warbler; the Whipbirds, who whistle up the morning from wherever it's been; the Kookaburras, whose is the dawn and the dusk; the Currawongs, who sing their name and steal everyone else's; the migrating Cuckoos and Koels; the tiny Thornbills; the Gang-Gangs, scarlet headed, metal grey, with a voice like an iron gate opening in fog; the Sulphur-Crested Cockatoos, shockingly white, some kind of errant messengers of the fallen gods; the Sacred Kingfishers, itinerants, gods themselves; and in the valleys, the eagles.

But my days in the plateau were strung on the plainsong of black cockatoos. Particularly the days of that last Christmas.

December in the plateau is the season the black-cockatoos fledge their young. In the days before Christmas, a pair that has nested by our bungalow at the edge of the scarp for as long as I have lived here, and probably much longer, feeds its young one on the cones of the black pines. The three of them strew the ground and batter the Jeep with ransacked seedcases, which drop to the ground and lie like exploded grenades.

These birds by my house are the yellowtails, *Calyptorhynchus funereus*. They're named for their plumage and their song; mourning is their habit. Their cry is an unearthly, world-weary keening. 'Whyla' is what it sounds like, and that was what the Gundungurra called them, for that is how the birds named themselves. 'They sing all our grief,' Judith Wright wrote once. But that is just a projection. What they're doing these days of Christmas is weaning their child; they're teaching her to fly.

With a tired kind of grace, with the slow and languid beating of their wings that is also their habit, this couple leads its young one from treetop to treetop — from silvertop ash to pine to peppermint gum to pine — as though they were decking the boughs and ringing the house with song. It's not a happy song — more a wail than a wassail. It's an incantation, a spell, a sad kind of carol.

A week after Christmas there is only one cry in the trees about the house. The parents have abandoned their child to the plateau, and flown wherever it is that they go — down into the valleys or the city parks along the coast. They'll be back;

but she doesn't know that. For now she's lost. Soon enough the place will find her. She doesn't sound like she knows how lucky she is.

WHY I CAME AND WHEN

I came to the plateau in the winter of ninety-eight. A place a thousand metres in the air and a hundred ks west of the city. Not far west, but far enough. A world of sandstone and eucalypt and unregenerate weather, a place just fallen from the sky. The pitch of the night and the closeness of the stars within it and the sky asleep in the valleys at dawn: I came for that, and I came for the faces of the vermilion stone that no one would ever own, and I stayed because there was real estate here, nonetheless, in all this inalienable wilderness, that even I could afford.

I came to leave the city behind, a place that never wanted as much of me as I had wanted of it; I came to live with a woman I loved in a landscape that never ended, and I thought I'd like to be here yet if it did.

The house we found in May and moved into in August was a plain timber cottage, caught somewhere between Federation and California Bungalow, and it stood on the south side of Katoomba, and since 1911, when the allotment was cut from woodland near the cliff's edge, it had sat without pretension through all the years in all the wind above the valley of the Kedumba. A stand of trees, peppermints and silvertop ash, geebung and banksias, kept the house from the valley and the valley from the house, but most days I took the path through those assembled and restless trees to the edge of the scarp and looked down to where the plateau had once been and where now only the valley remained.

To live in the plateau is not to live high, but deep; it is to cleave to a landscape most of which is gone and most of which is space and most of which is down below you. To live in the plateau is to live inside something, not upon it. Katoomba sits on a narrow ridge, and canyons gape all about. They surround you; they are where your eye wanders and your mind falls. The valleys are the larger part of what the plateau is, and they are what it will all one day become.

ANTIPODES

The sky had fallen — pieces of it. It was early morning, and down below the escarpment, cloud sat like snowdrift, and it had the valley covered.

On cold clear nights like the one that had just ended, the valley surrenders its warmth fast, and the air inside the valley cools more rapidly than the air above it, and it finds itself stuck. Moisture — the perspiration of the soil, the transpiration of grasses, the breathing of the streams — saturates the cold incarcerated air and gives it form and turns it white. And so in the morning, the valley has pulled down the sky and trapped it and transfigured it as cloud.

And as I looked down to where the Kedumba should have been, five white cockatoos flew up out of the cloud and perched in the crown of a eucalypt on the scarp. The birds stayed uncommonly silent; cloud insists on silence. They sat above the cloud, three hundred metres below me, and they waited for the sky to

work out which way was up. The world was upside down, and I was at the top of it.

But it wasn't the sky that had fallen; it was the valley trying to leave. And the sky was having none of it. High above me, a sheet of altocumulus flowed in from the south. It too would pass, and the day would slowly warm, and I would go back inside to work, and by midday the night prayers of the Kedumba would have dissolved the sky's resistance; they would have been accepted and forgotten. The valley would be the valley again, and the air would all be blue from top to bottom.

THINKING LIKE THE SKY

I'm taking the Prince Henry track, later that same day, thinking about the sky, and here's what I'm thinking. You cannot stand on sky, but you can be in it as you can be in water or in sleep. Not like the birds, of course, who own it in song and flight. And I envy them — these three black cockatoos, for instance, rowing heavily through the late blue air below me; these two white cockatoos dropping in the dusk faster than light down the face of the escarpment, spinning like twin gyres — I envy them their poise through three dimensions, their acquaintance with the amplitude of things, their perspective. But this will do, this walking with only one's head in the clouds.

Sky is the mind of the country, its abstract thought, its awareness of itself. Weather passes across it like bright ideas and sour moods and memories. The sky is how the land dreams — and where. It's an ecstatic kind of ground.

Sky is ideal; land is actual. Sky is infinite and quick; land is finite and slow. I'm looking out now over the Kedumba Valley and feeling the sky's impetuous geomorphology roll and unroll. I'd need a satellite map to *see* it; but it's out there happening all the same; it is, in fact, a whole lot realler than it looks. Ridges are rising and travelling north and eroding again all in an afternoon's orogeny. Troughs deepen and dissipate — look. Plates collide and pull apart; basins fill and empty. And there's not an idea it rehearses up there in its swirling pressure cells and down here now in the valley, over and again, that is not taking place, or has not already, or won't sometime, among these rocks I stand on.

One is always, as I am here, subject to the sky's eternal and cyclical reinvention of itself. Wind and cloud, specifically, are the children of what passes for love between land and sky up *here*; between the ideal and the actual, *here*. Between mind and body. Now, and again now. Up here, I live inside the weather. But there's more to it than weather; I live inside a state of being, a particular quality of awareness, a personality, ignited by the place where the infinite meets the finite, *here*. I walk along this animate ridge, inside the plateau's sensibility, shifting with it, unmaking my mind and making it up again in a characteristic pattern not unlike the plateau's.

Sky goes fast; land goes slow. But nothing is really standing still. Even a plateau runs like a river. Changes like a mind.

KARMA

One winter's night I drove back from three days in the Kanimbla, and the sky was low, and the road was lost in it. I rounded the bend on Kurrawan, taking it easy because it's hard to see when the sky is turbid and you're driving at the bottom of it, and my lights picked out a shape on the tarmac. A shape that said *lump of wood*. I pulled alongside it. Thinking cat or possum. But it was frogmouth, playing chicken.

I wound my window down, and she turned her amber eyes upon me without moving her head. She'd heard the car and seen the lights, and made of herself a broken branch. This is how frogmouths disappear. They raise their beak and petrify.

'I'd move, if I were you,' I said.

And she did. Without a sound, the branch took flight. I lost her in a moment.

Three hours later, after getting in and making dinner and sharing it with the kids, I went outside near midnight to haul the rubbish up to the street. The sky was still the sea, and the night was still the bottom of it, and at the top of the drive I looked up and saw through the mist something roosting on my mailbox. Broken branch with yellow eyes. It stopped me dead. It was the bird, returned. She'd found me. I stepped closer; she stayed where she was, and she stayed calm. She sat and looked at me. And I've got to tell you it felt like thanks she'd come to observe; it felt like a blessing she'd come to bestow. If there are angels, she was one, and I knew it was I who'd been saved.

DROUGHT SONG

My last summer was as dry as any the plateau could remember. It followed a nearly waterless winter and a season of fire before that. Had there been water to spare the trees would have wept. But the groundwater was running low where only the tall trees could find it, and the sky was giving nothing away. All the storms were dry storms, loud and purple with cloud, rich with electricity but good for nothing more than, say, a hundred plump drops. Now and then some virga teased the canopy and withdrew and kept her virtue intact. Some of the trees didn't make it through.

It's troubling to see trees die like this — trees, those shepherds of fire, those talented survivors of weather. It's as though we know who'll be next. The younger eucalypts and casuarinas, the small heath trees and banksias — thin plants holding rocky ground and those planted in the cuttings along the highway — browned, gave up their ghosts and stood on in death. But the bigger trees managed. They mourned. They shed leaves and stopped growing awhile, holding everything within them. And then, instead of tears, they wept flowers, more colorful, more abundant, more scented with honey, than usual — flowers to make fruit to set seed to make new saplings in time, to keep the forest going once the rains came. Which they must.

All through late September, through October and November, small fires rehearsed through the dry sclerophyll forests. A large fire got going at Mount Hay in October and filled the blue-eyed sky for two weeks with that sweet hell burning eucalypts raise. There were blazes at Yengo in the Hunter, west at Lithgow, south on the Shoalhaven, east at Llandano on the Cumberland Plain. Smokes rose everywhere. You got used to that smell in the air, especially in the dusk. The trees gave it off without waiting for the fire. As though they knew what was coming and grew tired of waiting.

It is the night of the twenty-fifth of November, a night like any other but warmer. It's still twenty-five degrees at seven o'clock when I walk out in twilight along the cliff path and find the lyrebirds. I pass under the first without seeing her. But I sense something looking at me from the limb that flies out over the path; I look up and see the bird, and then I hear her partner high up in the eucalypts beside the track. The first bird sits me out a while then joins the other in the big trees at the edge of the cliff.

For ten minutes I squat and watch the birds trapeze, all ungainly, from limb to white limb of two tall oreades, which lean into the evening, there, above the valley. They stay silent, grey ground birds unsteady in the tall timber, looking upon the valley and turning their small faces to catch the loud passage of sulphur-crested cockatoos in their sudden white plunge to blue gums on the valley's floor. Then I walk to the next lookout on its promontory and turn and lean on the rail and look back until I find the birds again in the canopy.

The voice of a young man comes along the trail from the south, and down the stairs, and then comes a man, its owner, and a woman. We greet each other. I show them the birds in the last light.

'They mimic other sounds don't they?' the young man asks.

'Yep,' I reply. 'All sorts of other birds. Chainsaws, mobile phones, the works. They even do themselves sometimes.'

We talk about music-making for a bit. They're music students from the Conservatorium in Sydney, up here for a couple of days' break after exams.

'What do you play?' I ask.

'This,' says the boy, touching his throat. 'I'm studying opera.'

'Piano,' says the girl.

So there we were, just north of Echo Point, Mount Solitary sinking into night: a young man learning to sing, but singing nothing, and a pianist, accompanying him without playing a note, and these lyrebirds, made of song but just now miming only the dusk's brown silence, and I and the darkening valley and the dry warm night and the dry cruel ground and these weeping trees, and no water falling but these cockatoos falling like mad stars into the valley, the banksias failing, the cicadas nearly done for the day and for the season, the moon not yet up, the sun gone down and this sustained chord of remembered light and suppressed heat. Which swelled and imperceptibly faded. And not a single note of explanation

played in all this plain and unsung music, which we were this night. Nor any rain.

In the night the wind got up. The sound of fire in rehearsal.

THE SACRED

It's taken — what — six years? The plateau's blue has taken flight and come to pray by my house.

This afternoon I saw a pair of sacred kingfishers on the power-lines near the head of my street, above the ruined swamp by the edge of the cliff. The birds perched still as idols upon the wire, caught in the divine dichotomy, alert and yet at ease, poised within the afternoon but galvanised by the prey upon which they were intent. I drove beneath them and broke their current of attention. They flew for the cover of the timber in the high school, and the blue of their flight was the colour of the fire that passes, sometimes, through the mind, the current that leaps from synapse to synapse in the brain: it had the snap of revelation. The trajectory of prayer. The tincture of divinity. But it was nothing uncommon I saw — just the blue of the wing of a kingfisher's flight. Kingfishers are blue the world over; and the sacred kingfisher's a common enough bird up here. You'd expect one around a swamp, no matter how long gone, this time of year.

It's as common — this small god in its blue King-Gees, in its cyan raiment — as the small sacraments of which real life is made; it's as common as the intervals that run between all the lives, the atoms and particles, the forms, the intervals, the fragments of time, that compose a place like this. And never stop.

But this sacred blue bird's a migrant — like me, though more reliable. She travels. But a place like this is where she comes to nest and breed and leave again, to give herself back to her wider world.

An hour later, I left the house to run some things to town. I didn't see the birds this time. I wasn't looking; I drove too fast. I was going slower coming home, half my mind intent upon what I would read tonight at the festival, the other half alert for the sacred on the corner of Kurrawan and Bourne. And there it was upon the wires. The birds had returned, and they stayed this time. My car and I had become already part, an unremarkable instance, of the ecology of their afternoon, of the mind of the place in which they searched for a fresh idea for dinner.

I'm not going to tell you this was an epiphany — this seeing them and then seeing them again this close to my home after all these years of never seeing them here at all. But I thought I should mention it, this being a short sacred geography, a brief natural history of home. The birds should be in it — being sacred; this being their geography. They should be in it, no matter how late they've left their run. No matter how close I may be to the end of mine. They felt like some kind of an answer to some kind of a prayer. Not necessarily mine.

I'm going to steal a word for this sacred moment.² This was geophany. This was the flash of the very soul of the place. A wink from the eye of its god — a nesting pair, to be precise.

HOME IS A VERB

Leaving, the plateau told me, is part of what belonging, and for that matter becoming, entails. Passing away is what the plateau does. That is its calling. Non-attachment is what this place practises and what it quietly preaches. Eternal impermanence.

The plateau is a verb, and I am, too. For a while there I thought we were the same one. And perhaps for a while we were.

Home, too, is a verb — a word that dwells infinitely between those who say it often enough together. Home is the sayer and the said and above all it is the saying. Home is the conversation we make with what, and whom, we say we love; and what it's about is who we are and always were. Home is a word — sometimes it is a whole sentence — for the ecology of belonging, and it includes deposition and erosion, the wet and the dry and the cold and the wind; it includes the making and the unmaking, the coming and the going, and it isn't always happy. Sometimes it rains, and sometimes it burns, and sometimes it falls and you fall with it. But home runs deep, and it runs hard, and sometimes it runs dry, and once it starts, it never seems to end. Home happens in fire and falling water, in snow and flood, and in the shimmer on eucalypt leaves; it happens in west wind and cold night and embers in a hearth; it happens in massed stars — heaven shattered — in winter dark sky; it happens in erosion and drought; it happens in the cry of black cockatoo returning and in the cry of a new child waking; it happens in staying and in leaving for good.

For seven years, home happened to me in the Blue Plateau, and although I thought I'd left, home doesn't seem to want to stop.

THE PAST

When the men had been and gone, when they had emptied the house of the boxes we had emptied the house into, we stood in the front room, which had long ago been a veranda where the plateau came inside and sat, and it was as though everything we had lived here, dreamed and made, broken and mended, everything the place had made of us, was yet to be.

NOTES

- ¹ 'All our grief' first appeared in a different form as part of an essay 'Days of Christmas', winner of the Wildcare Nature Writing Prize, published in *Best Australian Essays 2005*.
- ² From Tim Robinson, who coined it in his essay 'Listening to the Landscape,' *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara*, Lilliput, Dublin, 1996, p. 164, for 'a showing forth of the Earth'.