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In the Air: whipbird/human/koel

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Abstract

At a time when climate panic obscures clear thought, 100 Atmospheres is an invitation to think differently. Through speculative, poetic, and provocative texts, thirteen writers and artists have come together to reflect on human relationships with other species and the planet. The process of creating 100 Atmospheres was shared, with works (written, photographic and drawn) created individually and collectively. To think differently, we need to practice differently. The book contains thirteen chapters threaded amidst one hundred co-authored micro-essays. "In the Air" asks questions about our encounters with bird life, and how reconsidering our relationships with birds might also allow us to live with the planet differently.

Keywords

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In the air: whipbird/human/koel

Joshua Lobb

DO you remember that day, years and years ago, catching the train to the mountains? A hazy morning, mist in the valleys. Do you remember the songs of the forest and the silences between us?

Do you remember last night? Or, to be blunt about it, too early this morning? Do you remember what caused me to rumple my body into you, to roll back, to grunt and then to flick the covers away?

It happens every year. The start of summer: an air-ripping cry in the night.

You must have heard it too.

At the cliff tops we were accosted by the grind and hiss of buses and the shouting of school kids. The children slapdashed around us, sucking in the chilled air, puffing out plumes of white. They proclaimed – to us, to the buses, to no one in particular – that there was nothing to see. They were right. The mist had settled in and there was an empty space where the Three Sisters should be. A pip-squeaking ten year-old coo-eed into the void. There was no echo.

We weren't there for the view, you said. You knew the way. You led me past the ruckus and found the track to the stairs into the valley. Well, ladders, really: metal frames bolted into the sandstone. You slivered past crumbling rock and disappeared. The icy-sharp railing blanched my palm. I didn't

look down. I breathed in the shrill air and followed. The cliff was smeared with moss, sharp horizontal lines. Ashy sediments marking the millennia. I could hear your boots tinkling against the metal rungs. I breathed in the invisible valley.

Halfway down the cliff – a stratum of silence. Above, the hackling tourists and growling buses. And below –

You were waiting for me in a sandstone alcove. You told me to listen.

I listened.

You can't have slept through it. At the end of the street, no, three houses down, no, in the tree outside our bedroom window. A discordant plea. Two notes, one sliding into the other: a long rounded tone followed by a sudden higher plosive. Rising in inflection like a question, or a passive-aggressive demand. A pause. The grey air is silent. A chance, I hope, to ruffle back under the covers and into cloudy sleep. I sigh into you. Your body huffs and settles, lost in your own dreamscape. We share a few breaths. Then the call gashes the air again. The second plea at a slightly higher pitch, not-quite desperate, but definitely plaintive, woefully hopeful. Release and whiplash stop. Then silence. A third, up another tone in pitch and intensity. The lash at the end coming quicker, more severe, more expectant. I try to snuggle under your warmth, and a puff of objection escapes from your lips. I'm too half-asleep to apologise, too muzzy to recognise your body as anything other than a warm soundproofing shield. I'm trying not to listen for the next lacerating whoop.

I listened.

We were in another world. Or other worlds, really. Our feet had slopped onto the muddy track at the bottom of the ladders, but we weren't at the floor of the valley yet. The path precipiced downward and we followed.

Every layer provided new songs.

I didn't know the names of the songs we heard, nor the names of the birds who sang them. It wasn't like I hadn't heard birds singing before, or even these particular songs. I could have bluffed my way through finches, parrots, cockatoos. I could have made a stab at something and called it sparrow or galah or lapwing. I could have scratched out some easy verbs to manage them in my mind: chirp or warble, screech or whistle. On the misty path at the bottom of the ladder, these were inadequate, thin wisps of breath.

You told me to listen, and I was trying to listen.

Release and stop. Silence. Release and ripping stop. I groan into the stuffy mattress. My feet get snarled in the blankets. The whooping churls the darkness, irks the air. I kick out. You grumble a few disconnected, disconnected words. When you twist your torso away from me, you drag the blankets with you. My humming body is floating, anticipatorily, in the stillness of the air, in the gaps between the whoops. These rectangles of silence are irregular, unpredictable. The room expands with expectation.

Many of the calls were barely audible, like a party at the end of the street, or a television left on in the other room. My unformed mind clutched at inadequate analogies. One call sounded like the release of a half-filled balloon, the spittley plastic ends flapping together as it razes around the room. One trebled like a baby giggling; another, a polite cough – short, tentative, as if seeking permission to join in the fun. Another was a melodious metal detector: slow metronomic beeps and then, as it neared its target, increasing in tempo and delight. It was impossible to get the descriptions right. One was R2D2; another was Monkey from the TV show, whistling for his cloud. Another, an off-kilter Mr Whippy van: half a phrase of “Für Elise” and then a sudden dissonant clang.

I couldn't have told you where the sounds were coming from. I couldn't tell if they were clasping the spindly branches above or huddled in the undergrowth or hidden in the petrified grottoes. There was an occasional fluttering of leaves. High above us, a flash of yellow among the grey.

The path sidestepped an ancient tree. The bark felt like fur. I smoothed its hide as I passed.

We moved silently through the quivering conversations.

We listened.

The next whoop is the shrillest of them all. I think, for a moment, that the glass the bedroom window has shattered. Point blank. It breaks the room. But the shards bring revelation. I feel like I've been anointed by an archangel, like a shaft of truth has

pierced my soul. Or maybe it's more biological, like a migraine that was gripping my cheekbones has suddenly detached itself and curled away. The darkness in the room is dazzling. Everything feels jagged and clear.

I know what I need to do.

My body is less eager to follow my new calling. As I stumble out of bed, my knee nicks the corner of the bedside table. You might be muttering something to me now, telling me to get a grip, but I'm on a mission. I blunder out of the room, bumping into the door-frame. I'm clumsily insistent, evangelical, monomaniacal. I fumble through the darkness towards the hallway cupboard. I bang about for the broom and drag it, scrapingly, down the corridor. The screen door yelps as I shove myself outside. I totter over the tiles of the porch. The broom clatters.

The nasty noise is unperturbed. The whoop is a provocation.

I peer into the arms of the tree. A cavernous blackness stares back. I grip the splintery handle and smash the broom into the trunk. My arms tighten as the cut the air. I hack the trunk again, and again, and then again.

The new melody was beautiful. A constellation of calls. A chorus of wind chimes, almost too perfect to be natural. Like sonar. Like white coral tinkling underwater. Two tones – though sometimes it felt like three. The higher note held longer. The lower tone used as a springboard. Sometimes insistent, sometimes ethereal. Sometimes two notes came together, clashing, like children landing

simultaneously on a trampoline. Sometimes three high notes were held in succession. Sometimes a long gap of silence. Then the paired notes would tinkle again.

And, then –

The broom wheezes through the darkness. The fractured bark muffles the air, like dust.

And then the other call. Or calls, you might have said. Harmonious with the quiet chiming rhythms, working as a counterpoint. A slow softness at first, like a lyrical cicada: increasing intensity, until unwavering and clear. It felt mobile, like it came from nowhere and everywhere, a siren whirring down a city street. It thrummed through our bodies. Then, Doppler-like, the sound changed: a sudden lash, then silence. We waited. A palpable silence. A minute, two minutes later, the siren bent the air from another angle; another slap as the sound cracked off.

We sat on the dewy rocks. The fuzzy moss tousled the hair on my fingers.

This is what I wanted you to hear, you said. Or you might have said. I can't remember.

I huff, exhausted, against the chiselled bark.

In the deepest part of the forest – the hairpin in the track before it led us back up the cliff – there was a clearing. Mottled picnic tables, remnants of a gazebo from another era. We moved, stealthily, not wanting to interrupt the stillness. There were signs planted at the edges of the space, noting its historical significance or other points of interest. I didn't

want words, so I slinked past. But you stopped, tracing the letters with your fingers. Although there was little light down there, the scratchy metal glinted. Then, a whiff of wind created a break in the canopy. A laserbeam of sunshine illuminated the rectangle. The silver spaces around the letters hummed.

The sign declared:

This is Leura Forest. In the bush you may hear the call of the golden whistler, the yellow robin. You might even hear the cockatoos soaring above the valley. In the valley, you'll hear the bell bird and the whipbird.

The whipbird call is a combination of male and female birds. The male calls first and the female with amazing timing answers the male. This is called an 'antiphonal response'. See if you can hear both sides of the conversation.

We didn't say any more about it. We weaved through valley, listening to the call and response.

The space around the tree feels vacant. The night air feels solid. But it still isn't silent. The whoop returns. More tentative, maybe, but unrelenting, inevitable. I listen. I'm too tired to do anything else but listen. The sequence has looped back to the start: the quiet, slower, dissonant plea. This time, though, now that I'm really listening, it feels listless. Its insistence is provisional. Morose. A pathetic cry. The whoop modulates. Less perfunctory, maybe, but still melancholy.

I scrape my fingers over the whittled bark, though my dusty hair. The whoop moves up another notch: barefaced, acute, ingenuous.

A shadow forms on the front porch. A body approaches. I feel your warm fingers on my shoulder, the sweaty small of my back. You're whispering to me. Ineptly, I clutch at your dressing gown, gasping out sobs in the night. The air calms around us. You're breathing in and out. I follow your lead.

The whoop starts up again, a wobbly croak in the grey morning light.

Do you remember the journey home? Outside the train, the daylight dimming; inside, the fluoro lights flickering on. Under the quiet light, you let my knee move towards yours. You turned your head and looked at me.

Do you remember the koel last night? Crying into the void, waiting for a response.