

Shoulder to the Wind

A lyrical evocation of the Bogong High Plains

NOELENE J KELLY

Dip. Teach. Prim, Christ College
B. Theol, Melbourne College of Divinity
MA (Communication), Victoria University

School of Communication and the Arts
Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development
Victoria University

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Abstract

This thesis comes in two parts.¹

In the first instance it is a journey into the space and light, the wetlands and the wildflowers, the rocks and creatures and winds of the high plateau region of Australia's south-east corner. Within this elongated spine of high country rise the Bogong High Plains, a series of peaks and sub-alpine grasslands bordered by forests of snow gum and alpine ash. These High Plains are the subject of this thesis.

What you will find here is creative in form. It is composed of a series of personal and place-based essays in the nature writing tradition. While these lyrical essays arise from my own extensive engagement with the High Plains, they attempt an ecological perspective; they endeavour to write the High Plains over time and from multiple viewpoints, including those of Aboriginal custodians and geological scientists, cattlemen and ecologists, as well as my own phenomenal experience. Mostly, they are a response—protective, celebratory, artful, tinctured at times with grief and loss and, perhaps more frequently, with amazement—to a rare and increasingly threatened place.

These creative essays are accompanied by an exegetical reflection that contextualises the creative work and examines a range of issues and discourses which either arose from or impinged upon the work as it took shape. These include a number of concerns that may best be framed as questions. Can a text ever be said to 'represent' the Earth? How does a place-based work bring into view the global context within which all places are now situated? In what ways does nature writing and ecocritical theory support and advance a re-positioning of the human—and a re-positioning of the literature human beings may produce—in relation to the natural world? And how may

¹ This includes a creative component of approximately 57,000 words and an exegetical component of approximately 37,000 words.

such concerns best be engaged with in the Australian context, by a non-indigenous writer, on a continent in which Aboriginal peoples retain custodial and sacramental relationships with these sacred geographies?

Beneath these questions, motivating and animating both components of the thesis, lies another, perhaps more fundamental, concern. In these increasingly perilous ecological times, how might a writer best serve the Earth and that larger order of things on which all species depend, from which all things emerge, and in which all things participate? These nature essays, this exegetical reflection, partial and provisional as they may be, embody my response.

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

I, Noelene J Kelly, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Shoulder to the Wind: a lyrical evocation of the Bogong High Plains* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date

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My ultimate debt of course is to Bogong High Plains, that high, beautiful, fragile place. May I listen always for its winds.

Publications

I extend my thanks to the editors who made helpful suggestions and accepted for publication the following versions of work developed in this thesis:

1. Kelly, NJ 2012, ‘Eyes of the Future’, *EarthSong: Ecology, Spirituality and Education* (forthcoming, autumn edition).
2. Kelly, NJ 2011/2012, ‘Singing up the Silences: Disruption and Invocation in Australian Nature Writing’, *AJE: Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, vol. 1, pp.18-26.
3. Kelly, NJ 2010, ‘Still Country: Continuity and Change in a Warming World’, *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, no.7, pp. 33-38.

Other Publications

1. Kelly, NJ 2011, ‘Fisherman’, *EarthSong: Ecology, Spirituality and Education*, vol. 2, no. 2. spring, pp. 10-1.
2. Kelly, NJ 2010, ‘Xerophilia: Ecocritical Exploration in Southwestern Literature; Review Article’, *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, no.7, pp. 120-121..
3. Kelly, NJ 1995, *Circles of Blessing: Stories of Lyndale/Kilmair*, Spectrum, Melbourne.

For

Tina

Marjie

Hannah

and for

the children

who live in the waters, soils

and skies of the Bogong High Plains

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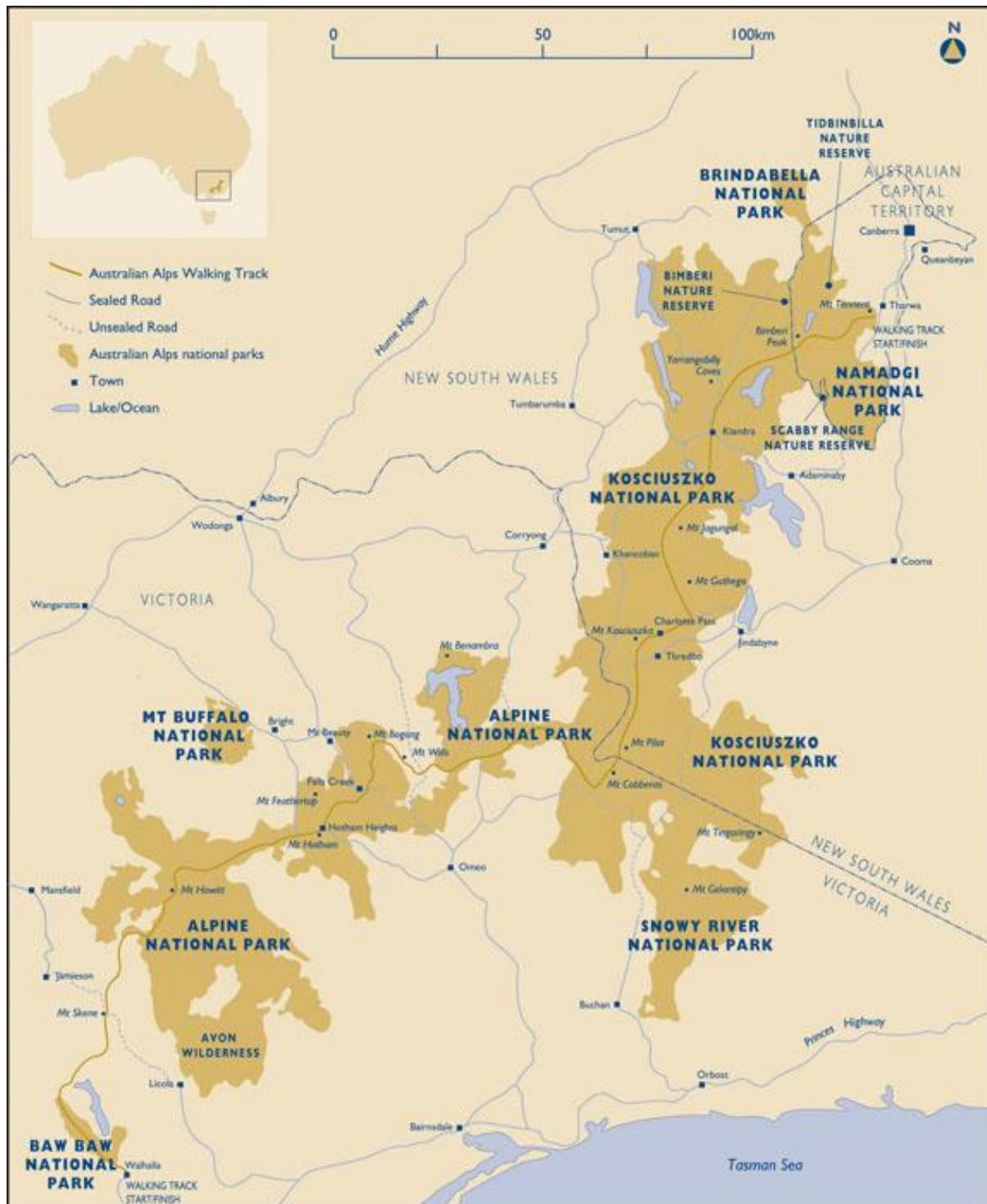
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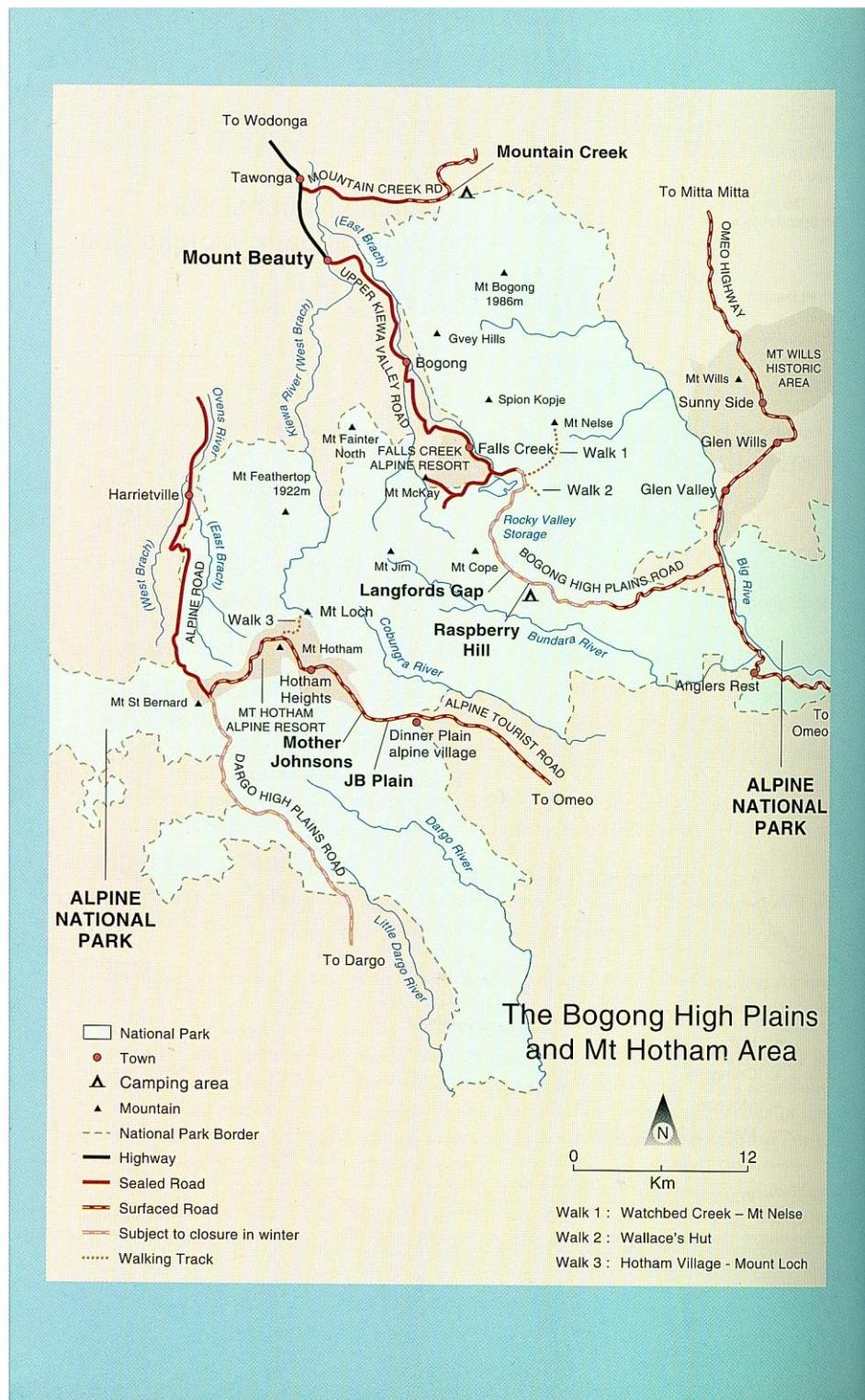
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Lyric Essays

Australian Alps National Parks

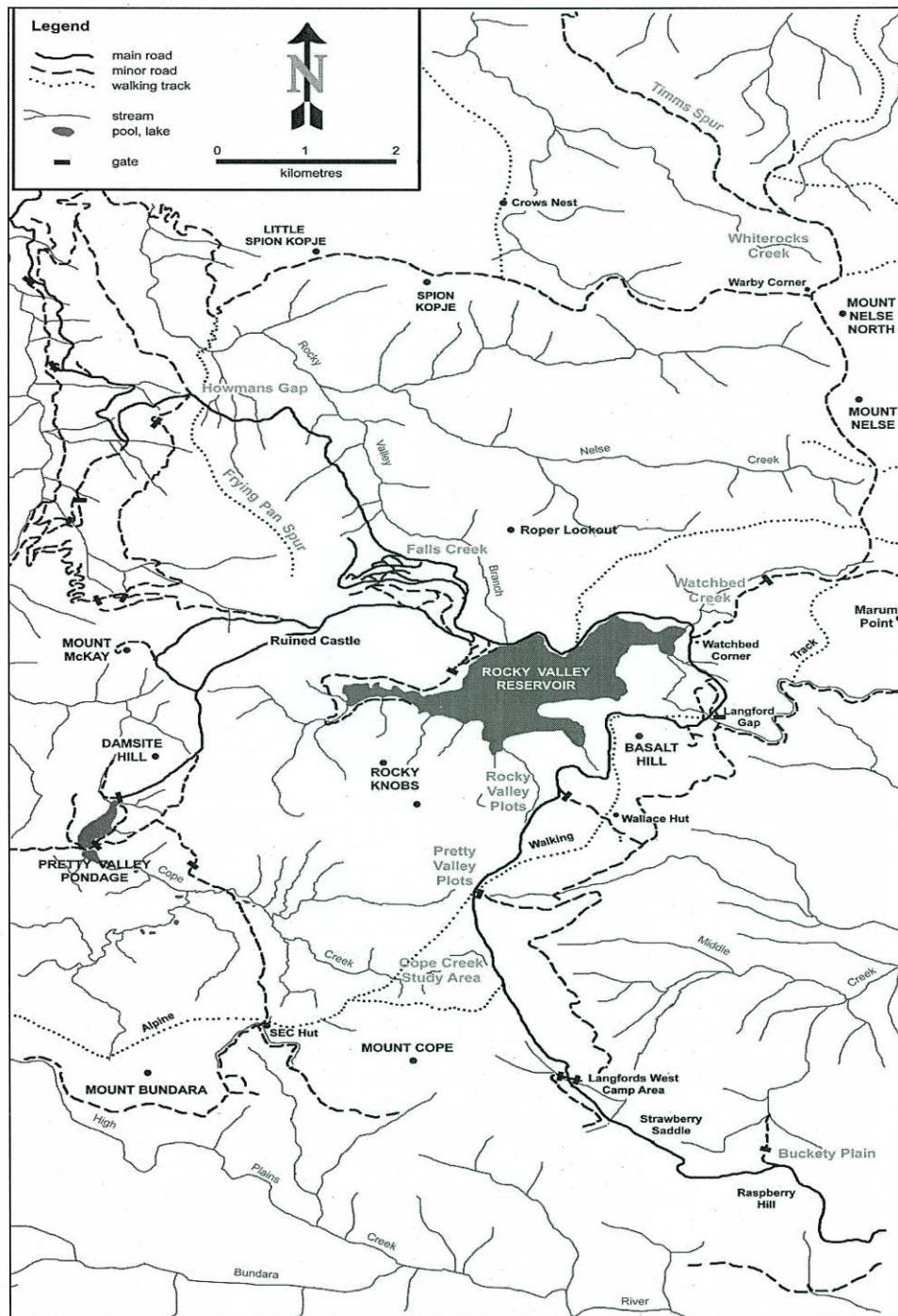


Map of the Bogong High Plains and Mt Hotham Area²



² Slattery, D 1998, *Australian Alps: Kosciuszko, Alpine and Namadgi National Parks*, National Parks Field Guides, UNSW Press, Sydney.

Map of the Bogong High Plains around Rocky Valley Reservoir³



³ The Centre for Applied Alpine Ecology 2008, *The Alpine Ecology Course: Course Notes*, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

1.

Shoulder to the Wind

An Introduction

Let me begin with a description.

Beside my bed in my inner city home is an antique cupboard. In its drawers are faded sarongs from Bali, hand woven shirts from Oaxaca and San Cristobel, well worn jumpers from Carlton. On top of the cupboard, among bottles of perfume and bits of jewellery, is a photograph, dog-eared and dusty from too many years without a frame. In the photograph a spider's web is suspended between two branches. Each silk of the web is weighted by a line of water droplets. It's clear the rains have been.

The tree hosting these threads of watery pearls is an aged snow gum. Its multiple trunks rise in clusters from submerged lignotubers. The trunk in the foreground is calcified, its bark brittle and beginning to lift from the wood. Tufts of moss are sprouting in the spaces. Sometime soon, with heat or with the weight of snow, this branch will crack and fall. The trunk behind is a muscular limb, thick yet supple, its skin renewing itself in strips of olive, grey and cream.

The clouds pressing into and frosting the background of the photo are the remnants of a storm that washed us out of our tent during the night. They will slowly gather and build into great towers of moisture that rumble and darken through the day. Within twenty-four hours the deluge they release will drive us off this plateau to the valley below. But for now, in the photo at least, the plateau is calm. The rain has stopped and the clouds, still heavy and with no wind to carry them, seep into spaces among the trees.

The shrouded plateau captured here with the silken web in its fingers is the Bogong High Plains, rare elevated country in this most horizontal of lands. If you had joined us here on this dull January day when the photograph was taken and walked with us—my partner and I—across the plateau, you would have moved through a mosaic of heath beds and grasses that give way to woven carpets of wildflowers growing beneath the stunted gums. You would have breathed air that was newly minted and run your hand along the satin slick of peat beds as they hold and caress the waters of the snow melt. You would have heard the songs of birds that lift and fall like the land itself. A gush of wind may have hurried you to the edge of a snow plain where blue-helmeted wrens flit and bounce and where the quality of light paints everything in crystal definition. You may have lifted your eyes and looked out then, on the blue haze that hangs on distant spurs and ridges. If you had stayed until evening, trails of perfume would have meandered in on the breeze and later, under a dazzling moon, you and all the snow gums would have cast night shadows across the land.

Risky business

There are risks in laying out like this the beauties of a place, particularly a place that is preserved and protected for its ecological significance and its rarity and yes, its natural beauty. Exposing the High Plains to greater damage is the main thing. Loving places to death is a growing phenomenon in the West. Until relatively recently—until British colonisation, that is—the only human touch the Plains had known was occasional, seasonal, and about as light as you could imagine. But things have changed in the last century and a half, and they are set to change even more. We need to be mindful of what our words can do, what behaviours they may inadvertently encourage.

Another risk lies in presenting a place as one huge landscaped garden, an undamaged idyll, a bolt of passive high altitude parkland. The fact is the Bogong High Plains is often a difficult place to be. There are remote enclaves up there, country that is hard to read, that is powerful and unforgiving. Weather can be extreme and unpredictable. People lose their lives there, and creatures do too, only more so. Things happen there, processes are underway there, that push all manner of life to the brink of dissolution.

The why question

So, the inevitable question is why. Why do I go and why do I write? Easy and complicated. Why do any of us, particularly city dwellers such as me, feel the need to quit the noise and rush and nodal crush of humanity for a while and head to the hills? Some would suggest it's the pastoral impulse at work, an elitist option of retreat and refreshment. Maybe, but there's more to it than that. It's not that the natural world is absent from the city. The weather comes and goes here too. Things grow and die and recycle back in some other form. Beauty is to be found here, and grandeur. And tawdriness and trash of course. But cities are powerful drawcards, and for reasons other than—or at least in addition to—mere pragmatism or ambition.

So why do we go to places where the human footprint is lighter, less emphatic, where the biological coherence is more intact? For the same reason Pat goes out into her veggie patch on a wet day at the end of winter. To play in the mud. Other things too, but that essentially. To remember. To reconnect we say, even though we rarely articulate how this works, or what this means or what it is we are reconnecting with. Something about releasing our bodies back into some larger order. Not that they've ever left it, but you know what I mean. The viscera of it all. We sigh as we lean back against a rock and feel its residual heat warming our spine. We sigh as we lie on the snow grass, wriggling between the tussocks until we are held snug by those great hairy hands. We hear the voice of the wind in all its different timbres moving unencumbered over the Plains. The way it plays percussion on our eardrums, and plays some larger tunes with the trees. We lie under a crow black sky washed in the centre by the Milky Way and imagine we are falling into all that stardust. And we really fall, backwards and spreadeagled, into the fluff and powder of new snow. Our bodies yield. Earth yields. We breathe in birdsong and breathe out anxious coo-ees when we have wandered off the beaten track and fear we have lost our way. Danger dances around the edge of all this. Obliteration is always a possibility. So is transformation. Both are inevitable, ultimately. Littoral places remind us of this, sharpen our awareness of this. Remind us of the way our lives play out, are held within, the deeper patterns and powers and rhythms of the world.

So then, to the matter of writing. I write as a response to this place, to its fluency and its vulnerability, its power and its slow story of change. I write as a way of seeing more truly what I see when I am there, of fathoming some of the depths of the place, of noticing how life arranges itself there. I write as an act of love and of witness. But words in these days of ecological imperilment must do more than that. The High Plains and the patterns of life that are distinctive there are, like many other places, running down and running out. Time is short. Words now must hold the weight of grief. And they must do the work of shaking us into wakefulness, of holding us to account, of announcing, of enunciating over and over, our implication in the community of life. These essays, these stories and reflections rise from, are meant as a contribution to, the ferment and effect of such things—of wakefulness and accountability and kinship—in whatever considerations we may make about how we should live in these uncertain times, and of the lives we choose to fashion in and with this land.

But before we go on, another description, an extended introduction if you like, to the High Plains, to this place towards which all the words that follow will endeavour to direct our gaze. And not only, or even mostly, our gaze, but that will do for a start.

The rising of the Plains

The Bogong High Plains are the largest continuous stretch of sub-alpine planar surfaces in Victoria. Look at a map of Australia. Find the most southerly tip on the eastern side of the continent, a promontory that juts into Bass Strait as it squeezes between the mainland and the island state of Tasmania. From that promontory, head due north and there, near the border of New South Wales, you will find the Victorian highlands. Mount Bogong is its highest peak and just to the south the High Plains roll like a high green sea.

The Plains lie at an altitude of over seventeen hundred metres. In the daytime you feel that you are high up, walking in open country, closer to the sun. At night the stars fall towards you like a glowing river. On summer evenings when the sun burns low on the

lip of Mount Hotham and the world is conjured for a time in rust and gold, you may glimpse Bogong moths, summer food of the Minjabuta and the Jaithmathang, coming in on the wind. You may remember then that this high place, these rocks and secret aestivation sites, hold the memory of other lives, of other times and weathers. Those First Peoples, like much of this landscape, are scattered now, carried by tides of loss and change to lower, more difficult ground.

The main section of the Bogong plateau stretches in a north-south direction and is defined on three sides by deep river valleys. A narrower plain with more modulated edges pushes further north before dropping to a valley at the base of Mount Bogong itself. A number of outliers or fingers of plain extend as flattened or rounded ridge crests to the west, although these are also separated from the main plateau by a steep valley. From the plateau rise a number of peaks or elevated residuals of more resistant rock that hold to the planar surfaces like crouching dogs. These are the remnants of much taller mountains that have been left to keep watch as the softer surfaces around them have been sanded off. From the top of these peaks you can see how the original plateau has been dissected by fault lines and by rejuvenated rivers, how the original valleys of the plateau have been smoothed and leveled.

On a clear day you can see north to Kosciuszko, the highest point in this continental ridge of peaks and plains, and south to where the high country gives way to the coastal plain. To the west the granite shoulder of Mount Buffalo suggests the outlying chain of highlands and volcanic outcrops that continue their westward trend before culminating in the lovely range known as Gariwerd.

The Bogong High Plains are situated within the Alpine National Park, the Victorian section of a preservation area that extends across 25,000 square kilometres of elevated country, from outside Canberra in the north to Gippsland in the south. Incorporated within this networked chain of national parks are all the highest peaks and plateau country in Australia—a fraction as it turns out, less than one per cent—of the continental landmass.¹ Within the Victorian section of this high country reserve a

substantial area has been excised for commercial and recreational activities. The subalpine ski village at the northwestern edge of the High Plains expands in visitor capacity and sophistication each year, while snowmaking machinery enacts the deceit of consistent snow in a warming climate. The Rocky Valley dam just east of the village impounds a number of creeks and rivers whose waters are fed into the dam via a network of aqueducts incised into the Plains. Beneath Mount MacKay and along the east branch of the Kiewa River a series of power stations utilize the dam's water for power generation. A recently-sealed road cuts across the plateau and through the main section of the national park like a jagged scar. For over one hundred and fifty years cattle have been fattened on the Plains in spring and summer. They have gone now, those cattle, but the land retains their memory in dried out bogs, in ruptured soils and slowly healing herb fields.

The colours of the Plains are muted and moist, well-washed and well-worn. Watercolour soft. And the texture is like that too. The Plains are smooth to the eye, rolling in all directions in soft undulations, as if the breeze has got beneath the green fabric of the land and lifted it into rounded ridges and swales. Where the cold air and the frosts collect, the snow grasses predominate, thick hummocks that hold together the loamy soil and collect pearl-drops of dew on their blue-green wires. On the warmer parts of the slopes, and often where the land has been disturbed, the heaths grow, creating a brindled pattern of deep greens that contrast with the lighter green of the grasses.

In spring and summer, particularly in areas less impacted by cattle grazing, successive waves of wildflowering sweep across the Plains. This dramatic show begins when the snow pack loosens and spring sunlight leaks through. A delicate marigold responds to that first flush of light, flowering in pale pinks and creams beneath the thinning snow. Later, when the heaths break out in waves of colour, or when the alpine daisies bloom, the Plains are radiant, as if dusted in bright chalk. Many of the heaths are fragrant when in flower—some spiced with dusty cinnamon, others with musk or sweet mint.

Walking by a heathbed at midday can be a heady experience when the heat of the sun is

coaxing the perfume from the flowers and the flowers are proving irresistible to the legions of winged creatures who are busy feeding and mating while the weather holds.

The trees congregate in the warmer and more protected areas of the Plains. All eucalypts, their delicate hands of foliage move and shimmer in the wind like schools of whitebait. But few trees have it easy up here. Their bodies grow twisted and arthritic as they strain to anchor themselves in the fragile soils and protect themselves from the fierce winds. In autumn and early winter they shed their bark in leathery straps of red, orange and brown. From seed pods at the base of their leaves pop creamy balls of blossom that feed the lipstick blur of summer rosellas. On the edge of the High Plains, in the highest reaches of the alpine valleys, regimental stands of alpine ash begin their march down the slopes. The great fires of 2003 decimated the old trees, and their stags, devoid of limbs and canopy, stand upright like vast graveyards of weathered bones. Further down the slopes the live ones mingle with box gums, with candlebarks and stringybarks and peppermints.

Only rarely do large native animals like kangaroos venture onto the Plains, and then only in the forested areas. I have only seen them once or twice in summer, small packs thumping through forest litter or standing to attention in their grey coats among the snow gums. Wombats make their home here in summer, and occasionally overwinter here too, although it is the smaller mammals such as antechinus and the endangered pygmy possums who make year-round use of rock screes and the subnivean space beneath winter snows.

From any vantage point the sky up here fills more than half your vision, and watching what fills the sky becomes instinctive. Across this blue expanse drift flotillas of weightless, ever-changing clouds that twist into silver-edged contusions, or sail like a white armada for the coast. In the middle of the day when the sky is clear all the spurs and ridges fanning out from the Plains are painted in deep blues and indigos as if the sky has fallen and darkened the land with its ink.

Fragments

So, a description—or two. Fragments. I could go on, but you get the idea. There will be more of it—description I mean—in the pages ahead. A necessary, unavoidable tool if you are to know anything—if I am to convey anything—of this place through my words. But not the only tool one hopes, and perhaps not the most crucial or effective or relevant. Bits and pieces are what you'll find here. Pieces of writing that are not all of a piece. Pieces that fall open in their own idiosyncratic ways, like the rocks you sometimes find on the High Plains—rocks that have been loosened from some higher ground and smashed in a valley, their conglomerate, disparate innards lying there for all to see. Impressions, reflections, opinions and sometimes arguments are what you'll find here. Stories and strands of memoir and whole sections that unfold more like natural history writing than narrative. Pieces that unfold in peripatetic, patchwork ways, much like the land itself. Essays that forego the plain patterning of sequence or chronology and follow the deeper rhythms of season or theme or topographical characteristic.

The writing of place comes in many forms—forms that may in this instance reflect the many-sided aspects of the place itself. What's being hoped for here is not a lapse into lyrical and lovely language. Or not only that. Words as a form of response to this particular place is more like it. Words, as I mentioned earlier, as a way of speaking, of giving expression to how this place has appeared to me—how I have experienced it—over time. Powerful, benign, full of motion, poised, vulnerable, austere, sensuous, unpredictable, composed, playful, partial. Always partial, forever unfinished. Like words, only more so.

Places, Barry Lopez reminds us, are so complex, so dense with their own ways and systems and purposes that we should think of them as ‘other civilizations’.² We will only ever know some of the parts, and then only fleetingly. Our approach to places then, should be laced with caution and curiosity, with as much restraint as respect. We should step out of our boots sometimes, and consider the possibility of sacred ground.

But back to the fragments.

Coming and going

My relationship with the Bogong High Plains is intermittent, at least in a physical sense. I come and I go. I walk and I camp. I'm a temporary dweller, almost always under canvas. I guess for the purpose of this writing, of these essays and stories, I might have relocated for a year or two, tried for seasonal jobs at the ski village of Falls Creek, done the Thoreauvian thing. I admit I did think about it. But it seemed too false and contrived, too premeditated. The fact is I move between the city and the bush. This is how whatever relationship I have with the Plains works. And to be honest, I think the Plains like it that way. There are times, I've come to be convinced, when the High Plains are about their own business, when forces moving there are beyond human ken, when what is required is acquiescence and humility and a fast exit to lower ground. And more critically, the ecologies of the high country break apart with too much human dwelling. Even Aboriginal presence was intermittent. The First Peoples came and went with the seasons.

So, even though my relationship with the Plains has a long history—my coming and going has been going on for almost half my lifetime—my physical presence there has always been fragmentary. So too are these pieces of writing. Each emerged from a particular journey or experience there, in a particular year in a particular season, although the seasons, as we now know, are becoming less like what we have known in the past. You will find stories here about certain people, about wind and fire and cattlemen, about what the old, old oceans brought in and what the rivers and the wind are taking out, about the First Peoples and the second and what has become of this high place in the wake of both. What connects these stories is the place itself, and my presence, however partial and fleeting, within it.

And so, a final quiet word before we begin.

Shoulder to the wind

The High Plains ‘speak’ in many voices, not all of them decipherable to the human heart and mind. But if you were around them long enough, you might learn something about endurance, about the slow art of waiting, about staying put when everything around is blowing to hell. They do a reasonable line in surrender too, in processes of change and decomposition, but that’s over the long haul, part of the larger essay of transformation. Day to day they are a study in stability, of holding their own counsel as weathers sweep in, as seasons and lightning strikes and cloudstacks come and go, marking and mottling the surface of the Plains before dropping, tired and fractious to the coast.

And then there are the winds. The winds are always poking and prying. They are restless here. They come mostly from the west, pushing and tumbling and jagging across the peaks and open plains. They swirl and double back and sweep in in full frontal assaults. If you’re on the Plains it is good to think about your body then, and your safety. It is good to think about grounding, about anchoring yourself and holding firm. You tend to try lots of postures when you’re out on the Plains in such winds. You bend and drop low and shelter your eyes from all the grit that’s flying. You cover up and batten down. Of course retreat is often the answer, but when retreat is not possible, it’s good to look at the land, at the Plains themselves, how they have positioned themselves to take best advantage of their long conversation with the wind. It’s wise to align yourself with their bulk and curve, with the way they lean and cover and resist. It’s good to narrow yourself, to turn side on, your legs in a wide-ish stance, your thigh muscles flexed. It’s good to notice how the head of a rocky prominence tucks into the body of the plain, and how the plain itself seems to lean forward into space, how the gushing air streams around it as it holds its ground, as it rises, becalmed and solid, with its shoulder to the wind.

2.

Geomorphology

The Earth remakes itself, it fractures, heals and renews itself in processes that can be read everywhere around us. But mostly we don't see them. The course of human life is short, I suppose, and these processes are often gradual, infinitesimal, and anyway, our senses are too filled with other entrancements to notice the long and the short of the making of the world. The scientists, our priests of human reason, bring us news of it, but we have let slip our votive practices, foregone our cultic rituals that remind us that we move within an arc of stupendous creativity and power—power that from time to time, ‘brushes [us] with its clean wing’³.

Mostly, as I say, such power moves slowly, at least to the human eye, like the slow drift of continents on the Earth’s surface, like the work of wind and water on a raised plateau, like the weathering of skin or the wearing down of a human heart. But sometimes things happen quickly. One continental plate is subducted under another, an island shoots thirty metres in a split second and the resulting tsunami takes three hundred thousand lives. A lightning strike cracks through bone dry ground and ignites a conflagration that takes out a million hectares of country. A healthy body begins to dwindle inexplicably and suddenly illness and loss fill our days. We remind ourselves that such events are not malicious or personal, not biblical or apocalyptic, although at times the scale of the tragedy would have us believe it so. It is simply how it goes when the Earth is at work, when the Earth is deep in the act of dissolution and generation, forging the preconditions for life.

The time for wind

It is a week after the spring equinox and on the High Plains the wind is swooping up from the western shoulder of the plateau and pouring over the ancient surfaces. It is the time for wind up here, when the wild breath of the continent moves across the western

plains and comes up hard against the Great Divide. Today it has caused the closure of the ski lifts in Falls Creek. For skiers the season has been a poor one, uncertain snow and now these winds from the interior. But it has been a much poorer season for the rivers and bogs, and for the creatures and plants that will rely on their waters in the high, dry months to come.

Pat and I button down our japarras and step out onto the plains. The sky is clear and blue, a crystal chamber through which the wind booms and echoes. The long gust of it is mighty in our ears. We bend into it, pushing with our chests against its weight. The heath fields in the distance rock and move like stranded bodies of water. At their edges snow gums—elegant survivors—unloose their tresses and trail them in the roar.

Around us the snow grasses, flattened and leached of green, are emerging from thin winter snows. Pat waits on high ground as I pick my way between the hummocks and ease down to a wetland that lies in a frost hollow off to the side of the track. The bog, also chlorophyll starved, but needing warmth more than light in these chilly days of spring, has emerged with mosses and swamp heaths in thermal shades of purple and brown. Midst the tangle of colours, it's clear that rope rush is gaining ground here, a sure sign that the bog is drying out. Further along, a pool is raucous with the mating songs of frogs. In a month or two these ephemeral pools will fall silent and harden, licked dry by the winds and baked to shallow pans by the sun. If the soil is disturbed, cracked by feral hoof or human footfall, any sudden gust will send the precious particles skyward.

On a ridge the wind pummels us, dips icy fingers beneath our clothing, nudges us off balance. Fallen leaves dance by us in weird gyrations. Broken insect husks tumble about our boots. Grit salts our eyes. Rocks under our feet give way, loosened by snow melt. Blind rivulets feel their way to lower ground. The wind and the water, with persistence as old as the continent itself, are carrying away a mountain. This is how it goes up here on this high plateau. The way it has gone for the last fifty million years. It is the bass note, the imperceptible rhythm that hums at the heart of life.

Skin and bone

Tina is sitting in a wheelchair in the kitchen as I walk in. The morning is humid and she has pushed the sleeves of her pink cotton housecoat up to her shoulders so that her arms are bare. I bend to kiss her, working to keep my eyes on her face and my expression constant. But her arms have become angular, skeletal, jointed rods barely covered with skin. I see how her breasts have retreated too. Her chest is corrugated, pale as the wave ridged sand. We drink tea. John makes it for us and we talk of the trees we can see through the window – the neighbour's fig, a large gum and a palm from two doors down.

I wash her hair. It has become a ritual between us. I wheel her over to the sink, cover her shoulders with towels, and work jugs of tepid water and farty squirts of shampoo into her hair. The effort to stand and bend exhausts her. I wonder how long this can continue. I unwrap her wet hair, her long hair, and it falls like dark silk down her back. Slowly I begin to comb out the knots, holding each handful strongly so that my tugs do not pull on her scalp. When all the strands are calm and smooth I plug in the hair dryer and set it on low.

She speaks about the bed sore on her bottom, how uncomfortable it is, and how smelly. I can smell it as I stand her behind her with the warm air and her dark hair moving through my fingers, but I don't say this. There is a touch of animal about it, something of decay. She falls quiet. The room settles, just the whir of the hairdryer. John is in the lounge room checking emails. When I move to the side to blow dry her fringe her face is in profile. Her eyes are closed, resting back their sockets. She calls to John, wants him near her, and I wonder if she is in pain. He sits on a kitchen chair with his sleepy eyes, a complicated smile playing on his lips. Tina talks of a black and white print hanging on their bedroom wall. She gets John to show it to me. It's of a naked woman washing her hair in a pool.

The song of this place

High on the Heathy Spur track we stop to notice the taller peaks around us—Mount Nelse, Mount McKay, the Fainters, and the blue tip of Feathertop, the only classically cone-shaped mountain in the range. To call them ‘peaks’, though, is a bit misleading. Really, they are weathered domes of more resistant rock—some basalt, some granite, some high-grade metamorphics—sleeping quietly on the raised bed of the plateau. On a clear day you can see across to Kosciuszko, the highest point of this weathered spine that curves along the continent’s eastern seaboard

The sanding back of these high peaks and plains, their gradual dissolution, their remaking and uplift and ongoing weathering is the song of this place, it is the story it sings in its composed gestures, in its subtle couture, in the rhythms of the creatures who endure here.

I look at my shoes. They are damp and stained with soil. I, too, am carrying away a mountain. We find a spot that is sheltered by some large boulders and stop for a drink and some fruit. Pat picks up a stick that is bleached to silver, and flicks some loamy soil from her boots.

The kiss

The hospital room in Cabrini smells faintly of faeces when I enter. Tina is hooked to an intravenous drip and is lying back resting. Each movement is difficult. We talk quietly. ‘John was worried’, she tells me. ‘He thought I had cancer’. ‘Did you think so?’ I ask. ‘No’, she says. She is calm as she says this, convinced and convincing. I have come to respect her intuitive feel for things, but as she struggles forward to kiss me goodbye, her face moves into the natural light of the window. Her smooth olive skin is tinged with yellow.

Earth Dreaming

By the time you are high enough on the track to catch a glimpse of the Dederangs lumbering on the horizon through the gap of the Kiewa Valley, you could almost

believe that these high ranges and plateaux form the coastal cliffs of some ancient sea. You could almost believe that the prevailing westerlies have pushed sands from the continental basins uphill for eons and left them here to compact and weather. But, really, the sea hasn't been here for a good one hundred million years, and wind and rain have flat-lined this place a number of times over, not built it up.⁴

Half a billion years ago this strip of the eastern seaboard was part of ancient Gondwana. Greenstones—Cambrian calling cards and the oldest rocks in the Alps—tell us that lava has been extruded under water here. Sand and silt, kilometers thick, were laid down here, marine sediments were deposited, underwater volcanoes erupted and the whole area was compressed, transformed under heat and pressure and raised through a series of crustal faulting and folding. The sea retreated but wind and water took on the work of dissolving the massive ranges that formed here in the Silurian and Devonian periods.

Then for three hundred million years, all was quiet along this eastern fracture. This high country was again worn down to a level plain where it waited, dreaming perhaps, for some earthly music to sing it up to the sky.

But it's hard to know all this, hard to hold the story, as we stand here in the wind, with clouds galloping in from the west, turning the peaks from violet to grey and back again.

Speaking the words

When the phone rings I am lying on the couch with my legs heavy across Pat's lap. I grab the remote and flick the volume on the television down when I realise it is John. 'Not good news', he says. His voice is breathy, shaken. 'I spoke with the surgeon today. It's in her pancreas. Some chemo may slow it down, but her system is so weak already'. These words give context, provide a continuum, within which the bouts of listlessness and weight loss make sense. There is a great quiet between us, of shock, of sorrow. Two months ago Tina turned fifty.

Reading the land

Geologists and geomorphologists read terrain, they search with their hands and their eyes and their instruments, for fragments of story. They walk into valleys and examine fault blocks and they fall, with the kestrels and with the dying song of the ravens, into history, into the past, into the hidden narrative of the land. They move down through bands of millennia, through ruched layers of rock and sediment, scouring seams of suggestion. They gather evidence, they glean and sift for meaning, they reconstruct in present time the movements of the past. From here they make prognoses about how the future may go here, what forces may rent or placate this place, what pressures may be brewing. A bit like physicians. A bit like surgeons.

The fluency of waves

The 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi says this:

*Late, by myself, in the boat of myself,
no light and no land anywhere,
cloudcover thick. I try to stay
just above the surface,
yet I'm already under
and living with the ocean.*

It's there in the book we have bought and wrapped for Tina's birthday—the birthday she is celebrating in Richmond with another baby boomer who has also hit the half century. We spy John first in the moist press of the crowd, who points us in Tina's direction. She hugs each of us warmly and struggles to make herself heard over the band. Her cheeks are flushed, as pink as I've ever seen them.

Pat and I get drinks from the bar and watch for a while as the night loosens and people make space on the carpet to dance. Tina is up near the band, her eyes mostly closed, her body slow and deep in the music. It is how I often think of her, moving with the fluency of long waves. I have written this on her card, or something like it.

Some time during the evening I say to John that Tina has lost weight. I don't remember this, but he does. He tells me later that these words were the first to call up his own fears.

What the birds see

Out in the Pacific a fracture is opening. We wouldn't know it if we were standing on this track eighty million years ago, would likely miss the clues that the Mesozoic plain under our feet is about to be lifted skywards. But the ancestral sea birds would see it, see the rupture happening east and west of Gondwana, see India rifting with speed towards its destiny in the cathedrals of the Himalayas, see the New Zealand subcontinent prepare to leave home, to put a whole sea, the Tasman, between it and its Gondwanan family. Those birds might look down at the magma welling into the fissure below them—at the rift that is pushing New Zealand and a chain of other islands further east, igniting a season of volcanism that remains active to this day—and consider the avian diaspora their line is about to foster.⁵

If they flew high enough they would notice that on the Australian side of the rift a tired and broken plain is being raised and tilted to become the eastern highlands. They would see the slow stages of this uplift; great blocks groaning upwards progressively, the backs of giant whales rising from their slumber. They would see the course of the rivers change, the genius of the headwaters fingering the creases of the newly raised rocks for their lines of weakness, and forging stream patterns that are long and straight. They would see the Kiewa River, the Cobungra, Big River and the Ovens, sliding off the plateau to the north and to the south, slicing valleys through the ranges and leaving behind these high, undulating plains, these islands in the sky.

The birds would see it, but it's odds on we'd be peeling an orange, or watching the flies make a run for the juice on the snow grass, and miss the whole show. Or maybe not. The call of a crow is falling on us just now, falling out of the troubled air, falling like some old voice onto this high shore.

What the week will bring

The nurse at the desk of the Palliative Care Unit asks an orderly to show me the way to Tina's room. He is young and busy. He moves quickly to the door of number eight and announces my arrival with a sharp pull of the privacy curtain. The boldness of the manoeuvre startles all of us. Tina's blue eyes are saucers swimming with fright in her hollow face. John has risen to reassure her and is fixing the oxygen tube that has slipped from her nose. I quickly move to the other side of the bed and take her hand. I'm not sure she knows immediately who I am. I speak my name; tell her that I'll stay here quietly with John while she sleeps. I sit by the window, by John who is watching his wife with a look beyond tenderness.

I glance at Tina when I can. It is hard, just now, to look at her. She sleeps with her eyes open. She has energy for only the most vital functions. The skin on her cheeks and around her jaw has retracted, her gums and teeth protrude. Her skin is translucent, like soft wax. Her black hair though, lies like a shining bolt on the pillow.

Later, I walk with John to the beer garden of the nearest pub. I order something cold to counter the oppressive heat. John wants alcohol. For the first time we talk about Tina's funeral. 'Bells and smells', John says. 'Tina would definitely want a ritual to nourish the senses'. Incense we think, to honour the woman we have known in this now broken body, and rose petals to make a path of beauty for her passing. I ask John what he thinks this week will bring. His eyes are clear and steady as he says: 'I think it will bring death'.

The high shore

When the call comes two days later, the air is still thick with heat.

John is sitting forward, holding Tina's hand. I place some flowers on her bed and rest my palm gently on her wasted shoulder. Her face, at last, is peaceful. I sit near John and take his other hand in my own. We speak a few words in low voices. The silence floods us, bears us somehow, on its rich tide.

The nurses bring us cups of tea. John's mobile flashes constantly. He takes only the most important calls and then stands and opens wide the curtains. Amber light washes the wall behind Tina's bed.

We settle back in our chairs. We keep watch here, in the gathering darkness, on the high shore of this soft crevasse.

Visitation

From the Eagle chairlift the snow-covered plains are dazzling, almost blinding. A late winter dump has smoothed and polished their bald tops and sent long drifts into the valleys where they fall in soft marsupial folds. Another season has come and almost gone. Below my airborne feet school children in goggles and helmets buzz around the slopes and intermittently descend, coursing in long wavy lines down the smooth white pelt of the mountain. Overhead the viridian sky suggests warmth, but the air bites hard at exposed bits of flesh.

About the time I leap awkwardly from the chair-lift and slide onto the ski fields John is gathering his car keys and closing the front door to begin his working day. He steps into the crisp air and turns his eyes skyward, glad that on this day—Tina's fifty-first birthday—spring warmth seems likely on the far side of morning.

The key slides easily in the worn lock of Tina's old Volkswagen. Just as he is about to open the driver's door John notices a tiny feather, no bigger than a thumb nail, floating towards him on an imperceptible zephyr of air. It flutters for a moment near his forehead, drifts downward, and comes to rest on the silver door handle, just near his knuckles. He is transfixed for a moment, stilled by the delicacy of this visitation. He eases the feather carefully onto the tip of his finger. Its colours shimmer against his skin. When he describes the feather to me later—white at the base, deepening to the most brilliant flash of orange—it sounds for all the world like the breast feather of a

flame robin. Flocks of them helicopter around the snow gums in summer, having begun their migration to the high country in early spring.

3.

Maisie Fawcett

I'd been walking the Bogong High Plains for ten years or more before I heard of *Maisie Fawcett's Plots*. A ranger from Parks Victoria mentioned them one time when I stopped in at the Mount Beauty Office. 'A long term study' he had said, 'to gauge the impact of cattle on the high country'. I had, as it turned out, walked and driven by the plots many times. The oldest of them, an exclusion zone fenced with wire, is on a rise opposite the track to Wallace's Hut, one of the most visited spots on the High Plains. The original fence posts, round as tree trunks and green with moss, are clearly visible from the road. The other plot is on a slope on the edge of Pretty Valley. I had always assumed the fences had something to do with cattle, with keeping them safe or keeping something safe from them. I had no idea those exclusion plots constitute one of the most enduring ecological studies in the country.

* * *

The sky is a thick brush stroke of blue as I head up to the High Plains one morning in early summer. As the sun clears the bald peak of Bogong it stretches long tongues of warmth into the valleys. Birdsong swings out from the valley walls, looping and tumbling somewhere above my head. In high gullies pale fronds are waving from the gorgon heads of tree ferns and gang gang cockatoos screech beneath the canopy of alpine ash. A year or so has passed since my conversation with the ranger—enough time to read up on the plots and to understand something of the significance of the woman who created them.

On the seat beside me is an aerial photo of the mossbed in the Rocky Valley enclosure. It was taken more than fifty years after Maisie had her nine hectares on the edge of the

valley fenced. Deep mounds of *Sphagnum* moss fill the whole central section of the photo, joining to create a vast continuous garden. The creek that originally ran through the centre of the enclosure has vanished, absorbed by the mosses and diverted by the great tangle of swamp heaths and rushes that texture and pattern the moss. Pools of water, like saucers of cold black tea, are held in slight depressions among the moss and around their edges bundles of sedge emerge in thin green points. My purpose on this bell clear morning is to find this moss bed, to walk the protected land in which it is enclosed, even though I expect it to be much changed as a result of the fires that swept across it a few years ago. In some half-formed way I hope to find traces of Maisie and her work preserved there, still lively there, though her body is buried these twenty years or so in some other place.

As the tarmac ends and I move onto the gravel road just beyond Falls Creek Village a great swathe of gold rises on my right. I stop the car and look. On the high side of the road great bands of *Bossiaea foliosa* are in flower. The thin, needle like fingers of this heath are a dusty green, but just now, in early summer, each frond is heavy with the orange-gold flowers of the shaggy pea. These bands of green and gold, interspersed here and there by the red dangling spiders of the royal grevillea, accompany me along the road to the dam wall. As I push across the plateau towards Wallace's Hut, it seems that the whole of the Plains have been painted out in bright colour. Great banks of creamy *Orites* tumble down the slopes with the lower growing purple pea of the *Hovea* and the lemon star flowers of *Kunzea* heath splashed about its feet. Flesh clumps of *Olearia* daisies are startling in their whiteness and the golden heads of buttercups are dotted through the darker, moister areas. When I finally park the car, swing my pack onto my back and step out towards the enclosure, I step into a wave of spice and sweet mint and the soft humming of insects.

Beyond a creek that is flowing fast through an entrenched and eroded channel the enclosure fence becomes visible. Near its weathered posts long courses of barbed wire coil on the ground, long since oxidised. More recent steel posts have been sunk along the outer perimeter and flexible wire snakes along the ground. The wires are down, I

calculate, either to protect them from winter snow drifts, or because the cattle they were designed to exclude from this plot have finally been removed from the whole of the High Plains. A few steps forward and I notice a peg hammered into the ground topped with a numbered metal plate—a recent transect point I guess, for determining the floristic composition of the enclosure. I get to some high ground that affords a more sweeping view of the enclosure. Stony outcrops hold to elevated areas. Groups of snow gums and larger heaths—*Phebalium*, alpine mint bush, *Orites*—cluster nearby. These give way to smaller heaths, to alpine grevillea and *Hovea*, some *Olearia* and *Kunzea*, and many healthy clusters of silver snow daisies. Beyond these lower-growing heaths and herbs, the ground slopes steadily towards the dam and is slightly gullied towards the centre. From my vantage point the moss bed is fully visible, as wide and thick and tangled as in the photo. The pooled water, dark and mirror-like in the photo, is as clear and still as plate glass. But there are signs of disturbance here too. All across the wetland the bleached bones of heaths lie scattered and desiccating, merging on the outer perimeter of the enclosure with the limbs of dead snow gums. They are the only indication, at least to my naïve eye, of the fires that passed through here in 2003, burning this plot for the first time in fifty years. My mind goes back to that summer, and to its aftermath, to the first trip Pat and I made back to the Plains after it was all over. How the sight of the burnt out forests snatched the words from our open mouths, how the blackened heathbeds and the strange silence of the place reduced us to tears. How many hearts and lives, human and otherwise, were broken that summer, and not only on the Plains.

* * *

I leave my high vantage point to examine the moss bed more closely. Thick, sodden chunks of yellow *Sphagnum* lie at the base of the tangled heaths and sedges, almost hidden except where they ring the pools of water. Almost all the water that falls on the High Plains or that rises from natural springs, passes through wetlands such as this. In these low lying depressions water that is released as snow melt or that falls in mad

summer storms is held up, soothed into gentler, quieter patterns of movement, refrained from dashing off the plateau and flooding the valleys below. And as it pools and meanders, the highly absorptive plants that grow here, and their underlying dead remains, the peat that acts as a huge sponge, quietly filter the water to high levels of purity. All of this occurs, at least in healthy wetlands, with almost no disturbance of the soils—a factor which is critical in the avoidance of erosion.

I notice some wet soil that is exposed, its protective heaths obviously lost in the fire, and pinch some of the peat together, expecting the water to cloud immediately and loose silt to come away in my hand. The soil holds together though. No silt is released and the water passing through remains clear and untroubled. Below my bended knee the peat feels spongy to a great depth, its springiness and lack of compaction indicative of its massive water-holding capacity. Nearby some candle heath and rushes are sprouting from a mound of sphagnum and I comb my fingers carefully through the sharp greenery to the moss below. Its fronds are thin and long, delicate and water-logged. Of all the wetland species sphagnum moss has a particular genius for water retention. Its cells are so fine and so closely aligned that a capillary film of water passes constantly over and between them. Water ascends through the mound via lateral shoots that act as wicks, absorbing water vertically from the lower, more saturated part of the plant. The elongated leaves of sphagnum expand exponentially, enabling the sphagnum to hold enormous amounts of water—up to twenty-four times its own weight—as Maisie discovered in some of her first investigations into the workings of the High Plains.⁶

In the stages of its own life cycle sphagnum also conjures new directions for passing water. This moss works the contours of the wetland through its ‘hummock-hollow’ progression, building to large, fleshy mounds which gradually hollow out and fill with water, becoming effective holding pools in which carex and other sedges form.

Because of this level of water retention, both in the sphagnum and in the anaerobic peat below, wetlands are not easily burnt. When they do ignite, however, they can smoulder

for long periods. A fire of some intensity—at least hot enough to burn patches of the heaths and moss down to ground level—has obviously passed through here. Judging by the remaining elasticity of the peat, though, and the resilience of the sphagnum, little sub-surface damage appears to have taken place. As I turn to move up through the enclosure I muse about Maisie’s reaction to what I am seeing, this mature wetland in the throes of a coherent, graceful recovery from one of its most salient threats.

Beyond the wetland the land rises to a run of snow grass. Some tussocks are still recovering from the winter snows while others have sent up fresh green blades from their crowns. But the grasses have been more obviously affected by the fire. Many of the *Poas* are reduced in size; some have managed only minimal new growth, while others have clearly died from the fires. Everywhere though, heaths and smaller forbs are beginning to colonise the burnt gaps between the tussocks. Blue mats of silver snow daisies still hold to the less affected areas, while the fleshy leaves and stems of the billy buttons and native dandelions and alpine star bushes are beginning to swell in anticipation of summer flowering. Small native violets and the delicate prostrate white star flowers of the mud pratia have already covered most of the burnt areas between the tussocks.

* * *

Past the enclosure the land rises sharply and then flattens to a gentle saddle beneath Rocky Nobs. Pale granite tors are clustered here and there and dead snow gums keep watch on higher ground. A wetland runs along the base of the saddle and appears to have escaped fire damage. I explore here, marvelling at the serpentine channel the wetland has carved, but noticing how defined the path of the water is. Some moss holds to the edges of the water channel, but forms into clumps only intermittently. Water is moving quickly here, for all its sinuous, shapely form, its lively progression retarding the development of the mosses that would hold and slow its movement. The snow grass tussocks are quite extensive, but there are no mats of alpine daisies between

them, no billy buttons or eyebrights or native dandelions that are present in the enclosure. I come across some cow pats still solid where they dropped, even though a number of years have passed since the cattle that grazed here were finally removed. Wind and water have scoured the area around each cake of dung, leaving depressions in the soil that are prone to frost heave and further erosion. Herbaceous species such as *Ewartia* and the common sheep sorrel are just beginning to afford some covering.

* * *

Science is really about imagination. My niece's husband tells me this as we stand at the kitchen bench looking out through the large windows into the backyard. We have glasses of red wine in our hands. It is Easter Sunday and the family has gathered at our place. Outside the autumn light clings to everything like butterscotch. Mark is a research scientist. He studies cancer cells. He explains to me the molecular structure of chillies. He describes how the elegant, fluent twist of molecules in some of the hottest chillies in the world has led to a breakthrough in the treatment of cancer. Scientists don't make or create or discover anything he says; they just find ways to notice what is already there. The deepest scientific act is intuitive; an act of the imagination.

I remember this conversation as I survey the degraded grassland and wetland around me. It was just such an act of imagination that led Maisie to her most significant insight into the workings of the High Plains.

When Maisie first came to this place in 1944 she was a young woman in her twenties with an outstanding academic record behind her. During the previous three years she had been working as a field officer for the Soil Conservation Board, having been seconded from Melbourne University's School of Botany to conduct investigations into the causes of erosion in the Hume catchment around Omeo. When she was asked to extend her research to the Bogong High Plains she was told by her cattlemen friends in

Omeo that the Plains were in fairly good shape. They and their ancestors had been taking cattle up to the High Plains for summer grazing for more than a century. Maisie's sense though, based on a brief and foggy trip to the Plains the previous autumn, was that erosion was a serious problem there: 'cattle pads scour out, sheep and cattle yards wash away, and tons of soil shift off burnt areas', she reflected.⁷

Maisie's early assessment of the High Plains confirmed her sense that it was 'a very sick catchment'.⁸ All the vegetative communities were eroding, with the rarest and most fragile communities undergoing severe and accelerating decomposition. Snow patches, the treeless tops of the highest peaks, and the steep snow gum wooded slopes that had been heavily grazed and then burnt in the 1939 fires, were the hardest hit. In these areas sheet erosion was so advanced that rill formation was common. Gullying was also occurring on badly eroded snow patches and on the many moss beds that had been heavily trampled. The remaining moss beds were struggling. Maisie had heard from one of the government surveyors that as late as 1925 it was impossible to ride a horse through the wetlands, so extensive were they and so saturated with water-logged peat and banks of moss. By the mid-1940s however, they had severely contracted, the precious water-holding peat was beginning to dry and to wash or blow away. In addition, very little growth of *Sphagnum* was occurring in any of these degraded wetlands, and eroded material and silt carried by the streams entering the moss beds were killing many of the wetland plants.⁹

Maisie's first response was to restrict stock in these most vulnerable areas and protect the ground cover of the Plains. These two recommendations were included in a report given to government by a party of Soil Conservation Board representatives of which Maisie was part. As a result, sheep were banned completely from the High Plains, cattle numbers were restricted and controls were placed on the arrival and departure dates of stock on the Plains each season. Maisie was convinced, however, that the only way to protect and sustain the high country was to understand how the life systems there worked. To this end she set up a series of experiments designed to gather hard evidence so that all future decisions in relation to the Plains could rest on a footing of

substantial science. So began an investigation that continues to this day and which forms ‘one of the foundations of Australian ecology’.¹⁰

Maisie was scornful of ‘ex-cathedra’ statements and grand assumptions, even from the cattlemen she admired, that could not be supported with hard evidence. To gather that evidence she established a number of fenced enclosures on the High Plains to exclude cattle—the Rocky Valley plot through which I had just walked, and another smaller enclosure a mile or so away in Pretty Valley. Parallel grazed areas were pegged out near these enclosures and used as control plots. She then applied the Levy point system—a method of measuring the floristic composition of the plots—that she had developed in her earlier assessment of the Hume catchment around Omeo. This system was time-consuming and labour intensive. It involved lowering a steel frame supporting ten needle-like points into the ground at regular intervals throughout the whole of the pegged plot. Every plant touched or pierced by a needle was recorded. In this way botanical changes in the enclosure could be quantitatively measured against the grazed plot nearby.

To assist Maisie in this painstaking work, Professor John Turner, the head of the School of Botany at Melbourne University who had recommended Maisie for the Omeo position and who had provided vital logistical support to her research, arranged for volunteers from the Botany School to join her each summer on the High Plains to help with the analysis of the plots. So began what was to become something of a tradition for members of the Botany School and connected students and lecturers. A dozen or more of them would pile into the Rover Scout Hut on the eastern edge of the Plains each summer and spend long days out in the field with Maisie recording changes in the composition of the plots. At night, they would pour over plant specimens taken from the field, searching field guides and manuals for identifying clues and lamenting the gaps in knowledge of Australian flora. These ‘High Plains Hounds’ as they named themselves, shared in the tedium of the work, but also found time to explore the alps and to understand first hand the alpine and sub-alpine ecologies. They also found time for much hilarity and communal fun after each day’s work was done. As these

excursions became an annual event the composition of the group broadened to include not only Botany students and lecturers, but others with expertise in zoology, agriculture and soils. The renowned botanical artist Margaret Stones spent a couple of summers on the High Plains, as did members of the Soil Conservation Board and Jim Willis from Melbourne's National Herbarium.¹¹ What could have been a solitary and painstaking research for one scientist became a collective and communal endeavour that advanced both knowledge and experience of the High Plains, and a collaborative approach to research. It must be said, however, that it was Maisie who directed traffic on the plots and it was Maisie, occasionally accompanied by John Turner, who addressed field days at the Rocky Valley plots, who conducted inspections of the enclosures, who consistently discussed her work with cattlemen, with State Electricity Commission engineers who were surveying and later co-ordinating the development of the Kiewa hydro-electric scheme on the High Plains, and with members of the Soil Conservation Board and its advisory committee. And it was Maisie who consistently won the respect of cattlemen, of SCB members and others by speaking not only from her love for the high country, but from the clear, uncluttered evidence that the land itself was revealing.

* * *

Maisie had two 'hunches', two intuitive insights that, if shown to be true, would radically shift accepted understanding of how the ecology of the High Plains worked. One involved the dominance of heathy shrubs in areas that had been disturbed, especially by grazing or by fire. She wondered whether, if left undisturbed for long enough, the shrubs would die off and be replaced by snow grasses. Grasses are much better protectors of thin mountain soils, she observed, and are far less flammable than heaths. The cattlemen were mildly amused and not a little sceptical of her hypothesis, arguing that 'the country is alright until it is burnt—once burnt it must be kept burnt'.¹² They became good naturedly mocking yet also a little alarmed when the Rocky Valley enclosure went over almost completely to shrubs in the first few years after being fenced. Maisie held her ground though, convinced that with patience the longevity of the life cycles on the Plains would reveal themselves and vindicate her position. More

than twenty years later when Maisie returned to the High Plains to re-examine the plots and to collect data for an advisory board that was inquiring into the establishment of a national park, she wrote to her friend Lilian Bennett:

You would scarcely recognise the plots. The moss bed has healed over and all the plots with the exception of the outside *Carex* have gone over to shrubs. This has agitated the cattlemen (and others) but my predictions about the shrub's future have now been shown to be correct. Many of them are dead and the others are dying. They are being replaced by grass and herbs. I am delighted.¹³

There is a rhythm, a movement to the way the ecological systems of the High Plains unfold. Heaths, herbs and grasslands ebb and flow, interweave and intergrade, send out quick-growing arms into broken or troubled ground, then drop back so that slower, more ponderous roots and rhizomes can quietly knit things back together. Bare earth is vulnerable. Up here what is uncovered gets carried away, lost to the wind and water. It's impossible to know what first turned Maisie's eye, which plant community gave her the nod about how things would progress. What she guessed though, and what she later proved, was that heaths will rush to colonise bare ground. They will grow strong there, and often large, but their days are numbered, their florescence limited. Eventually, their aging tops will begin to subside and open out, more light will reach the ground beneath them, and into that space will come, not new heaths, but small tussocks of snow grass, held and protected by the shrubbery that surrounds them. Eventually, as the heaths senesce the whole area will be returned to snow grass plain. As this occurs a profusion of herbs, of wildflowers, will spring up in-between the snow grass tussocks, multiplying and diversifying until the whole area is a tangle of colour and complexity. The rhythmic pattern of this succession, at least as it currently unfolds, is forty to fifty years.

* * *

Beyond the rise on the other side of the wetland the second of Maisie's exclusion plots comes into view. This Pretty Valley plot was sectioned off in 1947 to gauge the impact of cattle on the most extensive of the High Plains' plant communities, the *Poa* tussock grasslands. These grasslands were highly valued by cattlemen, providing summer pasture for their stock and allowing their own home pastures to be rested for almost six months of the year. They had been in such a degraded state for so long, however, that their reduced capacity had become somewhat normalised in the minds of the cattlemen, attributed to deficiencies in the soil or the severity of the climate.¹⁴

What became evident within the enclosure, however, was that while regeneration of some ecosystems on the Plains was slow and elongated following the removal of cattle, other biotic systems recovered much more quickly. After a mere three years, a striking transformation occurred within the Pretty Valley plot. Bare and eroding spaces between tussocks were quickly colonised by wild flowers and herbs. The snow daisy became particularly vigorous, along with the yellow bouncing heads of billy buttons and the succulent leaves of the native dandelion and *Asterolasia*, the alpine star bush. Increased vegetative cover was accompanied by vigorous flowering and seeding and an increase in soil humus and nutrition.¹⁵ By 1958 when Maisie and John Turner produced two joint papers on the Pretty Valley plots, herbs and wildflowers constituted 73% of the cover in the ungrazed plot compared with 42% in the grazed plot, a figure unchanged from 1947. What was especially significant however, was the efficiency of the groundcover provided by herbs in the ungrazed plot. Outside the enclosure where herbs were consistently grazed, the amount of bare ground not only persisted but was slowly increasing. Some areas were so badly damaged that the only plants that could colonise them were shrubs which were not only less efficient in terms of soil stability and moisture retention, but also a greater fire hazard. The unambiguous recommendation that Maisie and Turner made was that grazing on the tussock grasslands of the High Plains 'be prohibited'.¹⁶

* * *

Cattle are selective grazers. Alpine celery is a particular favourite. I notice a small plant just to my right as I head towards the Pretty Valley plot. It has taken hold on some bare ground between the grass tussocks where the fires have burnt through to the bare soil. I bend down to it, careful as I run the tip of a finger across the serrated, fern-like leaves. From its centre a number of fleshy stalks have pushed up, each topped with a flower that looks for all the world like a small head of cauliflower. One could easily imagine slicing them up and tossing them into a juicy stir fry. I can see why they were a bovine delicacy. As I rise to go I notice another celery plant just a metre or so away, and then another two beyond that. In the space of a few minutes I count eleven plants in an area about the size of my lounge room. During all the years I've been walking the Plains, I have seen these plants only rarely. They were more common over near Mt Hotham where cattle were removed in the 1950s, partially because of Maisie's research findings, but were constantly eaten out on the Plains. Now that the cattle have been gone for only a few years, they are back, building their wreath-like formations and flowering madly.

It's difficult to find any alpine celery bushes within the enclosure as I approach it, so luxuriant is the growth within it. I lean against one of the posts and drink in the riot of colour in front of me. *Poa* tussocks sit shoulder to shoulder with the silver-blue sweep of snow daisy rosettes. White daisy heads bend and shiver in the breeze, billy buttons spray dabs of yellow throughout the plot, mauve Bogong daisies and yellow buttercups emerge here and there, plump star bushes and alpine grevillea cluster in the higher corner of the enclosure. Outside the plot, just a metre or two away, a few daisy bushes are sprouting, but a run of heaths—grevilleas, mint bushes and *Kunzeas* have crowded into the previously grazed areas. On the bare ground between the shrubs and the grass tussocks small herbs are just beginning to take hold. From the edge of the plot, looking over towards Pretty Valley, you can begin to imagine, with the cattle now gone, how this valley would have originally appeared to the Dhudhuroa and the Jaithmathang, and to those first cattlemen who named the valley for the way it first appeared to them.

* * *

In 1949 when Maisie was recalled to Melbourne University to lecture in plant taxonomy and ecology in the School of Botany she was reluctant to leave the country she had come to love. She remained deeply connected to the High Plains though, taking her students back to the Omeo district and to the High Plains for highly successful excursions, and completing work on what was affectionately called ‘The Monster’, a botanical key to the genera of Victorian plants. It was the absence of this kind of botanical reference that had so frustrated Maisie during her time on the High Plains. It was published in August 1949 and became a touchstone work for generations of scholars in the Botany department. Importantly, Maisie’s work on the enclosures continued, even after her marriage to Denis Carr in 1955 and her appointment to research positions in Belfast and later Canberra. Members of the Botany School continued their annual pilgrimage to the High Plains, surveying of the enclosures and recording the incremental changes in plant composition.

In 1959 in collaboration with John Turner Maisie published two seminal papers on the grassland communities of the Bogong High Plains, synthesising more than a decade’s worth of detailed data. Other papers covered the role of shrubs on the Plains, the physiography of the Victoria’s northeast region, the European discovery of the Bogong High Plains and the nitrogen fixation of alpine plants and soils. A wealth of work that has grounded in solid data subsequent waves of scientific investigation into Victoria’s alpine region.

In the 1970s Maisie was asked to re-examine her exclusion plots on the High Plains. The government was deliberating the establishment of a national park incorporating the High Plains, and the data Maisie provided was influential in establishing both the need for a wide protected area and the greater stability and florescence such protection might afford. What she found did not please some of the stakeholders. She wrote:

The results show that ‘ineffective cover’ (10% in 1966) on the grazed plot has risen to 34%. On the equivalent fenced plot it has not changed in the same

period (less than 1%). I was not allowed to say that it is clear that the cattle must go. But I had to set out what I thought would happen (a) if grazing continues and (b) if it is prohibited.¹⁷

In the end, a compromise was negotiated between environmentalists, cattlemen, skiers, foresters, and other stakeholders. A national park would be instituted but cattle would remain.

* * *

The High Plains enclosures and the intensive and collaborative investigations that Maisie Fawcett conducted there have produced invaluable information concerning high country ecology, but they have also spawned broader scientific investigations into the particularity of alpine and sub-alpine ecosystems.

Renowned alpine ecologist Alec Costin was initiated into field work through his participation in the High Plains excursions in the summer of 1947. In the 1950s Costin spent a number of years working for Victoria's Soil Conservation Authority and documenting evidence of soil erosion right across Victoria's high country. His extensive report in 1957 revealed the seriousness of the degeneration of plant cover throughout all of Victoria's catchments. As Maisie's investigations had revealed more than a decade before, the major cause of this was cattle grazing. Moss beds were particularly prone to damage as cattle entered them for water and to graze the favoured sedges and *Carex* that grow there. Costin found that in wetlands on the more isolated mountains such as Bogong, Hotham, Feathertop and Loch, the deterioration was so advanced that they were virtually 'dry mountains'.¹⁸ As a result of his report cattle grazing was further reduced across the high country and the runs on the highest and most degraded mountains withdrawn.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a new generation of scientists continued and extended Maisie's research on the High Plains. In 1980 botanist Dick Williams re-examined

Maisie's two enclosures as part of his doctoral studies. In collaboration with David Ashton he published his findings, confirming the process of shrub senescence that Maisie had first documented and showing how, in the absence of cattle, wild flowering and soil stability are greatly enhanced. Rather than addressing concerns about widespread erosion however, as Maisie had done, Williams' investigation contributed to the broader debate that was then current regarding nature conservation and land use in Victoria's alps. Such information was critical to discussions in the mid-1980s regarding the consolidation of a number of disparate alpine national parks—including those that Maisie advocated for in the 1970s—into a greater Alpine National Park that straddled the Victorian and New South Wales border.¹⁹

After Maisie's death in 1988 her husband Denis Carr offered alpine soil ecologist Warwick Papst all the data Maisie had accrued on the Rocky Valley and Pretty Valley plots, all the way back to 1945. Carr also funded a post-graduate scholarship that contributed to the ongoing monitoring of the enclosures. This led to renewed scientific activity on the High Plains, with the plots being surveyed in 1989 and again in 1994, and a major scientific paper being published in the *Journal of Australian Botany*.²⁰ Henrik Wahren of Monash University—the recipient of the scholarship and the author of this paper along with Papst and Williams—surveyed data spanning 49 years, making the investigations that Maisie initiated one of the world's longest-running ecological experiments.

In 2003 after fire swept up out of the valleys and engulfed more than eighty per cent of the High Plains, another intensive study was conducted across the High Plains and other sections of the Victorian high country. This study conducted by Dick Williams incorporated the Rocky Valley and Pretty Valley enclosures, but also extended to every type of alpine biotic system. Results confirmed the erosive effects of cattle on the High Plains, especially in the wake of a major disturbance such as fire, and refuted any notion that cattle reduce or retard fire in the alpine context. These findings were crucial in the Victorian Labor Government's 2005 decision to finally suspend all cattle grazing in the national park.²¹

* * *

I look up from my musings on the Pretty Valley plot to a sun that is well into its western descent and is laying light the colour of burnished copper across the Plains. From the top of the saddle I look east, in the direction of the old Rover Scout Hut where Maisie and her Botany School companions spent so many summers on the Plains. The hut is hidden from here, but I picture it frozen on the high edge of the valley where it drops down into Middle Creek and sheets away towards Shannonvale. That ordinary hut which became a holding house in a sense, of such significant scientific endeavour. And it occurs to me that few people beyond those in scientific circles would know much of Maisie Fawcett and even less of the significance of her contribution to our understanding of this place. On a recent ramble of the High Plains with Dick Williams, a group of us stood on Mt Nelse, taking in the fine view. Dick pointed to a high ridge just north of Mt Nelse that has never been named. He proposed that Mt Maisie would be an appropriate moniker. And I think as I head down the far side of the saddle, that if there is any more naming to be done, any more labelling of the significant sites of this land with European imprints, then we could do a lot worse than naming a small section of this high country after one of its most committed and effective champions.

* * *

By the time I head back through the Rocky Valley enclosure on my way to the car the sun is just beginning to clip the nearby ridge. I notice then that I have company. Two people, a woman with a clipboard and a man wearing an iridescent work vest are crouching by the bog pools, obviously recording what they see. I decide not to disturb them, but wave from a distance. A group of yellow *Ranunculus* tug at my eye and I crouch too, for a closer look at this succulent that is opening its buttery leaves in this water-logged basin. This *granitica* version of alpine buttercup rises on a hooked stem that is covered with fine hairs. Flat, heavily dissected leaves rise from its base and its

golden flowers tremble slightly in the air. It looks delicate here, and vulnerable, its fine roots clinging precariously to ground that is as much water as it is soil. When I look up the darkening sky has made mirrors of the bog pools. Bits of blue have chipped and fallen in gradations down the slope. We kneel by them, three humans and this golden burst of buttercup, drinking for a moment, at these shining pools.

4.

Consummatum Est

There are many names by which the places of the Bogong High Plains are known.

Mount Cope

Howman's Gap

The Ruined Castle

Mount McKay

Fainter Falls

West Kiewa River

Spion Kopje

Holland's Knob

Mount Nelse

The Fainters (north and south)

Basalt Hill

Hooker Plateau

Kiewa Valley

Cope Creek

Mount Bogong

Raspberry Hill

Hell's Gate

Pretty Valley

The Niggerheads (now Mount Jaithmathang)

The Park

Lendenfeld Point

Mount Feathertop

East Kiewa River

Rockingstone Saddle
Paradise
Mount Loch
The Staircase
Mount Jim
Rocky Valley
Strawberry Saddle
Bucketey Plain
Middle Creek
Eskdale Spur
Rocky Knobs
Frying Pan Spur
Cobungra River
Falls Creek
Tawonga Huts
Langford's Gap
Marum's Point
The Lanes
Watchbed Creek
Basalt Temple

It is interesting what you see when you write the names of a place down; when you list them in random order. Terry Tempest Williams does it in her collection *Red* (2001). Truth be told, that is where I got the idea. In her essay ‘America’s Red Rock Desert’ Williams records the names of the natural features that are everywhere around her in her desert home. Her list runs to one hundred and seventy-five entries, progressing over seven pages—a gathering of the names of Utah’s red rock wilderness area. And the names, many of them, are lovely, or intriguing, or inimical. *Moon Eyed Horse Canyon; Mount Timpanogos; Mussentuchit Badlands; Labyrinth Canyon; Sewemup Mesa; Lampstand; Bullfrog Creek; Grand Gulch; Nipple Bench; The Cockscomb; Joshua Tree; Beaver Dam Wash; Fiddler Butte.*²² Williams believes in what a name

can do, and she believes in wilderness. The names invoke the places, and the list suggests an unpeopled vastness where humans ‘stand on its edge, looking in’.²³ And it is the wilderness, and the spare, red places within it, that Williams’ hopes will ring inside her reader’s heads and remind them that they ‘belong to a much larger community than [they] know’.²⁴

But I am not so sure about William’s idea of wilderness, or about the power of a name. It’s not that I doubt her conviction or her dedication to the protection of the slickrock desert she calls home. Nor do I doubt her affinity with the Native American peoples for whom the south-west deserts constitute sacred homelands, or with the mysterious Anasazi who, in an earlier age, also claimed the region as their own. It’s just that the word ‘wilderness’ has a different timbre in this land. As vast as the Australian continent is, and as sparsely peopled—particularly its arid interior—a dense filigree of relationships is embedded in the Earth here. Songlines and Dreaming tracks, sacred sites and sanctuaries, network across the land. There is no empty ground. There is no vantage point from which one may ‘look in’ at country that is devoid of custodial relationships of care. Unless, of course, you happened to be an explorer or an early settler. Unless you happened to assume naming rights to a land you were encountering for the first time. So the names by which many of Australian places are now known conjure questions and ambivalences. They are often laden with meanings and associations that have more to do with early British settlers than they do with Australia’s unique ecologies or its Aboriginal custodians. That was part of what I was doing when I took Williams’ lead and listed, one after the other, the names by which the Bogong High Plains are currently known. I was looking to see the sorts of associations those names carry.

For names can be rich and complex. They can also be thin and arbitrary. They can be used to subordinate and lay claim and they can be used more modestly, recognising that a place, like a person, will always be more than its name suggests. Names can be contingent and multiple, suggestive of the many aspects of a place, of its dynamism and creativity, its moving, shape-shifting ways. And names can be so stiff with utility that

they close down a place's potential. Williams, I think, wants us to believe that names announce the deeper narrative of the land, that they pull us into intimacy and help us see the story of the land as our story too. She is suggesting that when we know something by its name—some place or some person—we are much less likely to harm it, or offend it, or be careless with its use. Perhaps she is right, but in colonised countries like Australia and North America the naming of places—at least the naming done by settlers—rarely emerges from such intimacy and is never simple.

* * *

When cattlemen Jim Brown and Jack Wells first rode up onto the High Plains in the early 1850s they did that most Adamic of things—they named what they saw. As they cleared the tree line and cantered across the undulating plains they scattered about them names for all the physical features they observed, doling them out like handfuls of chaff scattered from their saddle bags, expecting, one imagines, those names to stick, to take root. *Rocky Valley* for the shallow basin peppered with granite boulders where the Kiewa River rises. *Pretty Valley* for the great sweep of blue-green snow grass dusted with colourful wildflowers. *Mount Jim* for one peak near the head of this valley. *Mount Jack* for the peak at the other. *Rocky Knobs* for two high outcrops that sit between the two valleys. *Feathertop* for the way the wind 'feathers' the snow off one of the highest peaks.

That the region and the natural features within it might already have names, might already be encircled by systems of meaning and significance, seems not to have occurred to them, or if it did, it seems to have been of little consequence. Brown and Wells would almost certainly have been aware of the seasonal presence of Aboriginal communities on the High Plains, and on the plains and peaks around what is now known as Mount Hotham. As early as 1824 explorers such as William Hovell made note of the movement of substantial numbers of Aborigines into the high country over the summer months. Tribal groups such as the Dhudhuroa, the Jaithmathang, the

Minjambuta, the Taugurang, the Gunai/Kurnai, the Brabiralung and the Monero-Ngarigo journeyed there from their traditional lands in and around the valleys and coastal plains to take advantage of the yearly influx of bogong moths that flew in great numbers to their aestivation sites in the mountains each summer. The yearly feasting on the plump moths was also a time for cultural celebrations, for catching up with friends, or with family members who had ‘married’ into other tribes, for settling disputes and forging alliances. These gatherings also had their practical purposes. Systems of exchange took place along the length of the Great Dividing Range.²⁵

The tracks kept open by Aboriginal groups for their annual migration were in many instances the same pathways explorers, cattlemen and cattle duffers later used when exploiting high altitude pastures and in finding trade and travel routes through the alps. It was perhaps along some of these tracks that George Gray was led in 1851 to the high pastures on the Cobungra by an Aboriginal guide known only as Larnie.²⁶ It was from Cobungra that Brown and Wells made their incursion onto the High Plains, seeking a shorter route to the cattle markets at Beechworth. As to how that high place might have originally been named, neither man it seems, thought to ask.

These are just some of the strange anomalies in naming places and features in a landscape, particularly when those doing the naming are colonists—newcomers who tend to read the land according to templates from ‘home’. Terry Tempest Williams’ suggestion that names are powerful, that they pull us into identification and intimacy with a place, is an important one, but it remains partial, one wash of colour within a kaleidoscope of complexity. There is a gully for example, on the High Plains, on the lee side of Mount Jim, where the land has been eaten away by thin streams of run-off. A cluster of snow gums grows in this protected cavity. Chunky blocks of basalt have broken off the parapets at the top of Mount Jim and have found their way here. They tumble amongst the roots and grasses. In this quiet, protected place, great circular lichens grow on the flat faces of these rocks. On first glance it appears as if some lone hand has spent a lifetime perfecting these intricately patterned pale green discs and reproducing them on every upturned surface. The effect is arresting. Pat and I refer to

this gully now as the ‘Place of Painted Lichen’ and we move about the blocks and among the trees as one would move within a gallery or within a ceremonial space.

Such names are important in personalising places, in establishing private significances and meanings in the land. They create connections, as Williams reminds us; they help us identify with a place; they make us care more. But such attempts have their limitations, too.

Australian philosopher Val Plumwood talks about ‘deep naming’²⁷ where names are connected with the story of a peoples’ interaction with the land over time, often over long eons. Aboriginal naming practices function in this way. Aboriginal place names embody clusters of associations. They hold ecological and historical knowledge. They give clues to a place’s origin in sacred mythology. They hold personal and tribal significances. They are born of a deep and loving acquaintance between a place and its people.

* * *

Mount Bogong; The Bogong High Plains; The Bogong moth; Bogong Village; Bogong Creek; The Bogong Range. ‘Bogong’ is one of the few Aboriginal names for specific presences in the Victorian alpine region that has remained in common usage.

‘Mountain’ or ‘peak’ is what it is said to mean, although it is often translated as ‘Big Fella’ in direct reference to Mount Bogong. This may well be a bastardisation of the word’s original meaning—a makeshift version snatched from Aboriginal conversations by early explorers or pastoralists—or the version Aboriginal communities were prepared to let those colonists know. ‘Kiewa’ is another Aboriginal word that has come down to us, its meaning—‘sweet or cold water’—indicative of the purity of rainwater and snow melt that was once siphoned through a mosaic of moss beds and wetlands before falling from the plateau as the Kiewa River. Few other original names remain.

Who knows if either of these names—Bogong or Kiewa—was known to Victoria’s first and longest-serving State Botanist when he made his officially sanctioned journeys into the Australian Alps in the mid-1850s, just a few years after Brown and Wells’ first explored the High Plains. What we do know is that following his third journey into the high country in 1854, Ferdinand von Mueller wrote to Lieutenant Governor Charles Hotham requesting naming rights to some of the highest peaks. ‘I solicit His Excellency’s permission’, wrote Mueller, ‘to name the grandest of both [peaks] Mount Hotham, and the second in height Mount La Trobe,—as I trust to be entitled to the great honor of being the first man who ever reached these commanding summits of the Australian highland.’²⁸

Mueller’s disappointment was bitter when his compass bearings and his meticulous recording of the physiography of the region could not be reconciled with later surveys. As it was subsequently discovered, Mueller’s compass readings had been subject to magnetic interference from the basalt capping of Mt Loch. Mueller had, as Linden Gillbank remarks, ‘[written] himself into Victoria’s alpine history on the wrong peaks’.²⁹ Still, what is interesting in Mueller’s letter to Governor Hotham, is his unqualified assumption that he is the first man to reach the summit of these peaks—peaks which were later identified as Mt Feathertop and Mt Loch. Although explorers such as Hovell commented that everywhere they went in the high country they found evidence of Aboriginal presence in the form of campfires and stone scatters and middens of bone and charcoal, Mueller was able to sustain the fiction that he was the first man to walk those high places.³⁰

I don’t mean to disparage Mueller. He ranged widely throughout the Alps, covering many thousands of miles on horseback and contributing enormously to both the geological and botanical understanding of the alpine region. If others had travelled with half his fascination and enthusiasm for Australian places and their unique flora and fauna, and with something of his willingness to learn and to love this land for what it was rather than for what opportunities it could provide, the colonial impact on Australian ecologies may have been much less malign. But Mueller was also a man of

his times. While he was certainly fascinated with Australian ecologies and responded to them with great care and regard, the culture from which he came enunciated sharp divisions between the human and the natural world, and sought to bring all that was ‘wild’—plants, animals, Indigenous peoples—under the ‘civilising’ control of western cultural systems.³¹ Naming was, in many instances, the first step in this process.

It seems that in the mind of Mueller, and of Brown and Wells before him, Aboriginal presence in the alpine regions did not equate to Aboriginal property rights. Occupation did not mean ownership. What could be at work here? What kind of thinking could account for this? How is it that explorers and colonists could acknowledge Aboriginal presence and prior occupation of a region, and yet both name and claim for themselves, and/or for the ‘Crown’, whole stretches of land, whole ecosystems, that were clearly the homelands of Indigenous peoples?

Part of the answer might lie in the influential ideas of Enlightenment philosopher John Locke who held that ‘wilderness’ is transformed into property, into a commodity that can be owned and traded, through a particular expenditure of human labour.³²

Chopping, clearing, ploughing, establishing gardens and cattle runs; this was the work of ownership, of laying claim, of bringing the land under human control. Responding to country by performing the sacred ceremonies; attending to the needs of country by enhancing a rich blend of species or safeguarding sanctuaries; communicating with and being guided by the ancestral spirits that reside in country; these Indigenous ways of relating to the land were, it seems, fully unreadable to European eyes.

But there is something else at work in Mueller’s request for naming rights. The clue is in the language that has come down to us. Jay Arthur is a lexical cartographer. She maps language. She shows how language acts as a lens through which attitudes to land are illuminated. In her essay ‘Natural Beauty, Man-Made’,³³ Arthur traces a particular lexicon in colonial Australia. She shows how, in commonly used words and phrases, the Australian landscape is represented as lacking self-knowledge, its potential unrecognised and unfulfilled. Awareness, the capacity to complete the promise held

within the land is the gift of the coloniser who is ‘written in’ to the land before the occupation. The land awaits his action, stands ready to receive him. In this sense, the colonist is not really invading the country, but rather, bringing the place to completion. With the advent of his own arrival the colonist announces, in a phrase heavy with biblical resonances but tragically devoid of biblical self-giving, a new, imperial version of *Consummatum est—It is Finished*.

The act of naming, then, is the initial means by which the newcomer writes himself into the land, writes his own meanings onto the ‘blank slate’ the country has become. In the light of this it is reasonable to expect that for Mueller and for Brown and Wells and for many explorers and colonists before and after them, the land, while occupied and defended by Indigenous communities, was nevertheless waiting for the particular vision and meaning that only the coloniser could bring.

* * *

This is a long way from the intimacy that Terry Tempest Williams suggests is possible in the bestowal and speaking of a name. A long way from a system of naming that recognises spiritual meaning in the land. And it’s a long way from how we understand human naming, how the depths of a person will always slip the nets of any name we choose. One wonders then, how we now escape the legacy of all those dead men, those colonial dignitaries, whose names continue to toll across the Australian landscape. One wonders whether, in these late days, Australians together—Aboriginal and settler-descendent—might find a path towards one another by looking again at how our land is named. One wonders about the possibility of listening carefully, to one another and to the land, of opening ourselves to those deeper stories and to the names that may rise from this rare, powerful, companionable place.

* * *

You can sit on the lichen spattered rocks at the summit of Mount Cope and listen for the land's deep names. The wind comes in hard in this high place and the snow gums hunker down, send their twisted limbs along the welcoming rock face. The great plumes of rock that have hardened here cantilever down the mountain, the spaces between them long exposed by the soft brush of time. It is here you might imagine that the old ones came, their saucered depressions still there in the small caverns and hollows away from the wind. You might, you think, catch the echo of their voices rising from those dark places where they scrape moths from the crevices and roast them on their fire-warmed rocks. On a rising whisper you might catch the cadence of how this place was known, by what word it was named—but only if they wanted you to know. But those names, if not the descendants of those peoples, are lost to us now, the Dreamings long retreated into the land, the totemic ancestors mostly fallen silent under a weight of foreign tongues. Cope, Nelse, McKay, Hotham, Fainter, Loch, Jim, Marum, Eskdale, Holland, Langford, Howman—these are what we are left with, the faint and feral wake of another kind of passing.

* * *

5.

Storm

Some things, they say, you should never do alone. Swim. Sail. Snow ski. Climb mountains. Scuba dive. Outdoor stuff mainly, although drinking alone is one indoor activity that seems freighted with particular anxiety. There are many others, especially if the lone actor is inexperienced, or ill-equipped, or happens to be a woman. In settler Australia two of the strongest taboos converge around travelling alone in the outback and walking alone in the bush. Fear of what may happen to you if you become lost out there is lodged deep in our psyches. Horror stories abound. The spectre of the lost child runs thick through early colonial art and literature. It reappears at regular intervals in the contemporary context; in literature, in film, in art, in court cases, in the press. There are many reasons for this. Atavistic fear is one of them—attributing malevolent intent to a landscape that was seen by our forebears as irregular, vast and deeply unfamiliar. Another is the weight of evidence. People do get lost. People die—often by accident or misjudgement. Sometimes by misadventure. Wandering off the beaten track is not to be taken lightly. The positive side of this dark undercurrent is that here in Australia, country still rules, at least to a considerable degree, and even in our major cities. The internal powers of the continent, its weathers, its dryness, its cycles of fire and flood, its winds that scour the desert basins and conjure with their breath a blood red sky—those powers show their hand decisively and often. We may think for a time, that urban magic, that all our misguided and rapacious efforts at control, has inured us, issued us with a ‘get out of jail free’ card. But we never think this for long, and rarely for more than a generation. The continent is big, its powers immense, its beauty delicate and terrible.

Such thoughts are dusting the edges of my mind as I step from the road and head eastward following the snow poles that mark the route across this high plateau.

Behind me on the seat of the car and in clear view I have left a note giving details of my walking intentions, and I have left the same details on the answering machine of a bushwalking friend back in Melbourne. I settle the pack on my back and head towards Pretty Valley, a wide expanse of sub-alpine tundra stretched between higher peaks within a thin seam of mountains in south-eastern Australia. The air through which I move is textured and sluggish, meandering lazily across the plain. Moisture, I think. The air is heavy with it and as I look up I see that a veil of gauze has fallen across the gin clear sky of morning. Who knows what the mountains are brewing behind it? It is a sky, like many up here in late summer, to keep an eye on, to check in with, to regard with some deference.

Not much is moving in the valley ahead, at least to the casual eye. Some currawongs hiding in distant trees mutter a few fluted notes of song. A kestrel is perched on a snow pole ten yards ahead. Another is out hunting, hovering above some rocks that are rising from the plain like a cluster of grey fins. Suddenly there is a flash of coppery wings and the kestrel dives vertically, insanely, and comes to rest on a rock, something alive and squirming in its beak. A pipit, tiny brown thing, is motoring among the heath. Not much else, just me it seems, and on this slow morning I am heading in the general direction of Mount Jim, although I have no firm intention to reach it or to climb to its summit, such as it is. I'm more interested in exploring this valley, Pretty Valley, which is indeed pretty, but so wide and so shallow that it is, like most valleys up here, also a plain.

Beyond the poles and the kestrels the valley opens out into a wide expanse—a valley that is a plain that resembles a sea—the sage and deep green sea of the Bogong High Plains. Round the edges of this mottled vastness great silent ships have pulled in to dock. Mount Cope is just over there to my left. From its craggy prow you can see the eastern escarpment fall away to lowlands that run, dry and balding, to the coast. Ahead on the choppy horizon swims Mount Hotham, and way over behind my right shoulder flies the great sail of Bogong. Mount Jim lies out of sight on the other side of a distant swell.

The track drops incrementally to a basin where the chiaroscuro of the taller heaths converges in the deep green swathes of the bogs. This is artificially disturbed land, land that has been grazed by annual waves of cattle, land that has been surveyed and sliced in to aqueducts and segmented by an access road that services the hydro-electric scheme in the next valley. But it could have been worse. A dam would have been worse. A dam as big as the one planned for this valley would have been worse. A power station and a pumping station and massive turbines would have been worse. And it was worse for another valley, for the flooded Rocky Valley which lies just beyond the ridge, and much worse for the La Trobe Valley, a valley as beautiful as this one and richer in coal than this is in water.

I stop awhile at Cope Creek, a twisting line of water that runs along the floor of the valley and feeds a low network of wetlands before emptying into the aqueduct that carries it to the small diversion dam built at the head of the valley near Mount McKay. A few spongy handfuls of sphagnum moss cling brightly to the bank but mostly the channel is covered with the rush *Empodisma*, its fronds green and dark and strong as rope. Here and there some candle heath has taken hold, its leaves spiky as pineapple skin, its creamy ‘candles’ dried and papery in these last weeks of summer. Most of the snow daisies have finished their flowering, their silver leaves forming a dense mat either side of the rush. The water in the creek moves at a steady pace, tripping over a granite bed and widening here and there into pools the colour of strong black tea. As I step to the opposite bank and move along the track I notice a hot pink spray of trigger plants while some billy buttons nod their golden crowns among the hairy clumps of *Poa* grasses.

The track rises from the creek, loops around the lower undulations of Mount Cope, and ambles towards the aqueduct. As it cuts the lip of the rise the red roof of Cope Saddle Hut comes into view. A dark window peers out from its pale weatherboards. Last time my partner Pat and I were here we went in and checked its log book, read the messages left by other walkers, by those who have had reason to make good use of its shelter.

But today, I notice what I have never noticed before. Anyone sitting in that hut would remain unobserved because of the dark interior. From such a vantage point any movement on the plain would be magnified, any approach to the hut observed from a long way off. My imaginal sight flies forward, seeing what someone in that hut may see—a woman alone on an empty plain. This thought plumes and fattens in my mind. My movements become subtly self-conscious, imbued with a staged nonchalance, exaggeratedly casual. Every lift of the head, every visual sweep of the plain and pursing of the lips in perusal of the weather, every checking of the buttons on my cotton top and re-weighting of the pack on my back becomes a charade, performed against the hostility of the witness I imagine sitting silently in that hut. But then I catch myself, let out a little huff, reassured by the sound of my own voice on the air. I give a wobbly smile; turn over a few more rational thoughts. Surely anyone of malevolent intent would choose a spot with a bit more through traffic, a position where the pickings were better, not this lonely hut where no one may pass for days. A physical injury, turning a knee or an ankle while walking out here alone, is more likely to jeopardise my safety than some lurking sadist. And yet, as the track dips and comes into direct alignment with the window, I feel its intense watchfulness, the conduit it becomes for the eyes I imagine behind it. My head is down but my own eyes dart fitfully towards that window, scoping for any internal movement, but seeing only ragged cloud ends passing on the dark mirror of the glass.

I know that the logical thing to do is to cross the aqueduct and enter the hut, to push open the weathered door and let the air and light of the plain blow through—through the hut and through these dark imaginings in my mind. To see the grubby log book resting on the knocked-together table, to smell the stale ash in the wood stove, to see the cigarette butts squashed into the hearth and dead blowflies on their backs by the food bin. To sit on the bed frame and survey the long curve of the track I have just walked. But as I approach I lose my nerve. The door is shut tight and the air ahead of it feels heavy and portentous. It moves against my skin with the smoothness of a warm blade. To gain some time, to sequester my wayward courage, I swing the pack off my back and grab my bottle of water. I take a few gulps, straining between mouthfuls to

hear any movement from inside. The only sound that comes is the light gurgle of water being pushed along the aqueduct by gravity's steady arm. I hump my pack and turn, as if to make determinedly for the door. A few steps forward and my courage fails once more. I veer to the left and climb the track as it lifts onto a higher part of the plain. If anyone is in there and wishes me harm they will have to come after me, here in the open air. And besides, I reason, I can always do a quick reconnaissance of the hut on the return trip.

I am glad to be climbing, leaving the hut and my mad wonderings behind, and stepping further into a still morning as it warms and rolls along this valley. The dive-bombing kestrels reappear near some rocks just off the track. Their wings blur as they hang in the sky, waiting for any reptilian movement on the rocks or in the heath below. As I round a long curve my eye is drawn by an unfamiliar shape resting on the flat horizon ahead. I grab the binoculars, thinking that perhaps some kangaroos are feeding there, but knowing the shape and colour are all wrong for any native animal. The glasses show a large, mature stallion lazily picking over the snow grass, its black withers shining in the sun.

Soon, impressive piles of dung appear on the track, desiccating steamily and humming with flies. I move ahead cautiously, unsure about how feral horses react when startled or approached by humans. Stories of ferocious wild boars and wild dogs flick through my mind. I am just about to consider a change of course when the stallion lifts its head, turns, and joins a small pack of four other horses just over the rise. All are mares, judging by their size, and they are protecting a very young foal. We all watch one another, the horses with their huge, glassy eyes, me with my inferior little beads of sight. I test the ground with a few measured steps, staying near a snow pole which is the extent of my meagre protection out here. The horses back slightly, enough to allow safe movement along the track. They watch me for a good while though, their eyes unblinking and the foal positioned snugly among them.

By midday I have been walking for a few hours and am resting on a cluster of rocks just off a track blackened by fires less than a month ago. The sun is strong and warm; a couple of March flies are puncturing my bootlaces with their stingers and are giving off their high pitched screams. Snow pole 333 and the walk up to Mount Jim are still half an hour or so away but I've had enough rambling for the day. I take another drink and head back down the track on which I've come, moving slowly and cautiously past the brumbies. They are gathered very near to the track now and watch my passing with their great tombola eyes.

At one o'clock there is a rumble on the other side of Mount Cope, the low growl of a bass piano, the snarling discontent of shattered molecules of air on the other side of the range. I have been concentrating on the feral horses and not on the sky. The wind picks up, swinging around to the south-east, and pushing up an armada of grey battleships, their bulbous girth rimmed in silver by the retreating sun. I calculate whether I have enough time to stop for some lunch before making a hasty retreat for the road, or whether I should head immediately for the hut and sit out the storm where it's dry. I calculate wrongly and head up to some high ground where a cluster of old snow gums offer protection under their elongated arms. No sooner have I unwrapped my roll and flipped the lid of my water bottle than the first rattle of rain begins, large drops at first, and coming slowly, lugubriously, padding into the ground with the dull heaviness of copper coins, catching a few gum leaves with a percussive smack. One or two descend through the canopy and thud against my shoulders; another hits my thigh, spills and darkens to a circular stain. I pull my rain jacket from my pack and huddle beneath it like a crow, knowing I need a quick intake of carbs to fuel the long dash to the road. A few bites in and I glance behind me to see the black underbelly of the front advancing like a death ship. Suddenly there is cacophony all around as a great volley of water explodes in the valley, stinging every surface with the force of lead shot. A roar of wind comes barrelling over the shoulder of the plain, tearing at the snow gums behind me, biting off loose bark and spitting it back into the rising vortex. The gums react with a roar of their own, their great arms flailing blindly at the pummelling

muscle of wind, clusters of leaves darting in jagged patterns, like shoals of hysterical fish.

I stuff things quickly into my pack, zip my jacket to my chin, pull the hood low over my forehead and move out onto the track. The wind-driven rain is bearing into my right side, drumming with heavy fingers down my arm. Within the chamber of my oil skin the noise is deafening, battering my ear drum. My leg muscles burn as I push with speed into the wind, my feet stumbling here and there on the rough track. Overhead someone grabs a loose sheet of corrugated iron and belts it with a crowbar. The shattering boom wobbles in long waves on the wind. I look out from under the rim of my hood and see that a light show has kicked off in the next valley, pink and blue floodlights flashing on and off, and then a luminous scar twisting at stupendous speed into the plain. It looks to be still a mile or two away but I know that on every level this is a pedestrian guess born of hope more than good judgement. Ahead of me the red roofed hut sits smugly, ominously, not twenty feet away. I look again at its blind window and hesitate for the smallest moment, caught between fear of what human mischief might await me there—unfounded and irrational I know—and fear of the great wild forces out here sweeping across and lighting up and falling down on this place through which I am moving. I know it is crazy to be out here, moving alone on a volatile and unpredictably charged plain, my clothes soaked with water, the space between the clouds and the ground alive, surely, with distressed and dangerous electrons. But, and this is a goodly part of my consideration, I have known these summer storms to split the sky in the afternoon and settle into torrential rain bands that hammer the plains all night. Already the afternoon is darkening and the thought of being holed up in the hut for hours, perhaps having to make my way back to the car in heavy rain anyway, causes me to bypass the hut and cross the stone bridge over the aqueduct to the track on the other side. Best to get wet now, I figure, and get off the plateau as quickly as possible.

Almost immediately I begin to doubt my judgement. Beyond the aqueduct the track shifts direction and now the rain is coming at me head on. It drips off my hood, is

caught by the wind and pushed as spray into my eyes. It courses down my jacket and soaks my knees and runs down my ankles to my socks where it progresses via icy needles into my boots, spreading and warming to saturation point. Soon my feet feel as soft and squelchy as the mounds of moss that edge the bog pools in bright cheesy cushions.

The track rises and swerves almost at right angles before descending to Cope Creek and my eyes dart around searching for other living things that are higher than me out here. A bank of snow gums sits on a flank of Mount Cope but they are a fair distance from me. I might be small of stature but my human frame is still very much higher than the low heaths and snow grasses through which I am moving. I aim for the creek, calculating that I will be better positioned on the low ground there if the sky ignites.

My breathing is coming hard and fast, accelerated in equal parts by fear and exertion. I watch the sky, trying to read patterns and decipher the diction of the sound and light show above. White lights start flickering overhead and then a great silver nerve, stretched and angry, flashes above the ridge ahead of me. Five seconds later a mighty stock whip cracks and a thousand hooves thunder down the valley. I consider dropping to a crouch or prostrating myself—anything to blend in, to affect inconspicuousness as lightning begins its dance across this plain—but instead, moving on instinct more than good sense, I leave the track and scramble down the slope, the shortest route I figure, to lower ground. Another nerve, blue this time, is illuminated above, followed by another belt of the iron. At least now my head is lower than the track, but I sense that no struck pose, no quick positioning is likely to outwit a stray bolt of lightning that is on the hunt for a deathly dance partner. I keep my body low, bent almost double at the waist, thinking as I move that I'm doing my own dance out here, dancing on dumb luck and a prayer. And I curse too, curse inwardly at my own stupidity at being caught like this, at allowing myself to indulge in a dose of unfounded confidence in the inevitability of my own safety.

More explosions go off somewhere beyond the procession of black hulls above, the flashes broad and dazzling, great flares of white and blue, followed by the rumble of loose cannon balls on deck. I reach the creek and the nearby network of bogs and pause for a moment, looking up through the rain, through the great veil of falling water. Over Rocky Knobs another blue flash goes off and is followed by another a little further on, out over Buckety Plain. The northern edge of the front is on the move. I catch my breath, check the sky. The lights and detonations at the head of the front seem to be slipping over the edge of the plain, but who knows what could be coming up from behind, what sting this storm could still hold in its tail. My thighs are on fire, but my one aim now is to move in this lull, to get up the rise on the other side of the bog as quickly as possible and make it to the car. I start striding up the incline following the general direction of the snow poles which will take me to the road. I have my head down, putting one foot in front of the other, pushing into the wind and the water when suddenly, the rain stops. Stops instantly, like a curtain falling from a great height. The stillness, the silence that lands in its wake arrives almost as an assault. I stop, look out and around. I stand still, allowing my ears and body to adjust. I pull back the hood of my coat. I turn my face upwards. Not a sprinkle, not a drop is falling. Not from the sky or on the wind which also seems to be blowing itself out into the next valley. And then I hear the dripping, not from above but from below. All around things are quietly alive, seeping, running, coursing off every surface, including me. Water drips from the sodden heaths and the daisies, from a pile of nearby rocks, from the rim of my coat, from my sleeves, from the edge of my pants and the bottom of the pack on my back, from the bent spines of the grasses. Up there the clouds have lightened and are sailing towards Rocky Valley. A few warning lights are going off in that direction but it looks as though the storm is done with this valley for now.

By the time I reach the car a southerly air stream has pushed through behind the front and the temperature is dropping fast. I peel off my clothes and stand in their sodden mess, my fingers and toes red and raw, the rest of me white, still dripping and beginning to shiver. I squeeze excess water from my hair and towel down my body with a spare t-shirt that I grab from the back seat. I pull on dry track pants and top and

have trouble pushing wet and sockless feet into dry track shoes. The wind scrapes icy fingers through my hair as I dump the wet clothes in the boot and then dash to the driver's seat. With the heater on full I drive off the plateau to my camp far below, watching the back end of the storm blow itself out across the lower western plains.

Tonight I will ring my friend in Melbourne and say that I am back and I am safe. I will tell him of the hut and of the horses, and of the black mandalas where the fires have been. I will tell him of the kestrels and some of my mad wonderings. I will speak of ambling through the open belly of the Plains, of breathing air tinctured with the musk and mint of alpine heaths. I will tell him of my walking plans for tomorrow. On the storm, I will remain silent. When you're up there tomorrow, he will say, be careful. Call me as soon as you get back. Then he will pause; just long enough for me to catch his concern. And remember, he will say, as if the thought has just occurred to him, remember to look up occasionally.

6.

Rocks

You can see why geologists love rocks. They are so old and diverse, so present, so there. They are the product, the love child, of the two great forces of the planet, heat and gravity, the forces from which the whole world has been extruded, forces churning away under our feet and pressing into us through the gusting air. They hold the story of a place, of a whole place such as this, of the long eons of change, of what this place was before it was a plain, before it was a high plateau, before it formed the eastern side of a continent. They are the Earth about its ordinary business of disintegration and transformation. They are the Earth at work slowly—at least to the human eye.

The rocks strewn everywhere around the valley from which this track rises—the valley of the East Kiewa River which is flooded now to form the Rocky Valley Dam—are granitic rocks. At least, I think they are, but I couldn't be sure, being no geologist myself. They are pale, smooth-skinned. The larger tors gather in solid congregations that attract and protect communities of snow gums and larger heaths and a scattering of wildflowers in summer. But the whole downward slope of the plain as it heads towards the valley is strewn with smaller boulders. Perhaps they have been nudged progressively downwards by gravity, but it's possible that they have been unshrouded where they sit, their crowns, and shoulders progressively revealed. Denudation is the geological term for this process, and it's a good one. Their smooth sensuous forms have been slowly laid bare. They've been facing the wind a long time.

Elders

Some of the oldest rocks in the Victorian Alps, in the whole of Victoria in fact, are greenstones. From the Cambrian period, their age comes in at about five hundred million years when the Earth was engaged in some serious continent building along Australia's eastern margin. Greenstone is formed when lava is extruded under water.

As a stone it was highly prized by Wurundjeri tool makers; they made excellent axe heads from it and traded it far and wide. No greenstones have, to my knowledge, been found on the High Plains, but they have been found elsewhere in the high country.

My father found a greenstone once, years ago, not too far from here but on the other side of the range. He was fishing late one night in a river valley he loved. He had pulled his line in to rebait his hook and was kneeling on the stones on the riverbank, organising some fresh bait by torchlight. It's then that he spotted an unusual looking stone. He pocketed it and went on fishing. The next morning we clustered around him, the rest of my family and me, looking at the small chunk of rock in his hand. We'd often gone rock fossicking along the river bank near where we camped, in the hope of finding lovely coloured stones or stray bits of gold from some of the old mines that dotted the valley, but we'd never seen any rock like this. Dad licked his thumb and wetted the stone and it shone deep green. When he held it up to the light it was slightly translucent, like a densely compacted old Coke bottle. My father decided the stone would look even better if polished so he gave it to one of his fishing mates who had access to a sand blasting machine. We never saw the stone again. From time to time I think of it though, of its unusual beauty and the delicate way my father held it in the palm of his thick tradesman's hand.

Lithosol

The boulders that crowd this track and through which I am moving are much younger than greenstones but they have about them the composure and solidity of age; as if they have time beaten, as if—having survived the tumult of their young lives—they have slipped into a deep meditative state, a prolonged and studied patience. But collectively, they are sitting on a good metre or so of soil, a clue to the constant work of change that is going on here. A clue, perhaps, to the fate of a previous generation of rocks that has already dissolved here and to the kind of stresses and surrender this generation of survivors is quietly submitting itself to.

You don't have to look too closely to see that the rocks in this valley, for all their smooth and sensual form, are not all in one piece. There are rocks here that have snapped clean through, the two halves sitting each side of an inch of space, as if some diamond-tipped lathe has sliced through them in the night. Water has frozen within these rocks, at least at times, and it has thawed and re-frozen and the heating and the cooling have caused mechanical stresses and weakened the structure of the rock.

The outer edges of others look as if something has been dropped on them from a great height and taken off their corners. But this is really the action of wind and water, of frost and ice. Small piles of rubble collect at the base of these roughed-up rocks. This rubble eventually breaks down to become lithosol, 'rock soil', which is mostly sandy, having been formed from granite or from sedimentary rock. It is how this plateau builds its soils, I guess, how it seduces and tends the seeds of the tenacious, low-growing plants that survive here, the plants on which it relies to tie the whole place together.

And plants have a crucial role to play in all this. A large flat rock near my feet is covered almost completely by a single lichen that could be a delicately painted mandala, or the fine filament of a giant sea anemone, but which on this day, in this light, is more like a large circle of chantilly lace, its filigree edges dried and curled into dark ruffles. There must be some decent cracks in the rock to support a lichen as large as this, and the lichen is doing its unseen work here. Odds on the cracks in the rock hold a little rain and a little dust, and the acids this lichen is quietly secreting are mingling with these agents of change. The cracks will deepen, water will create small channels. A tiny fracture will arise in the crystalline structure of the rock. The fracture will fill with more water and dust and encourage deeper penetration of chemicals from the lichen, and grain by grain, the rock will turn to dust.

Vegetation such as this, such as lichens and mosses and ground-hugging, rock-hugging, low-growing heaths break down rock while at the same time protecting the forming soil from wind, rain and ice. Leaves and seeds from these plants return nutrients to the soil,

although fertility is not the soil's main game up here. Alpine soils, most commonly alpine humus loam, are finely textured and uniform in particle size. This allows a substantial amount of water, which is a natural part of the alpine climate, to be held between the particles and drained slowly into the valleys. This retention, this slow caressing and release of rain water and snow melt, *is* the soil's main game. It allows a constancy and regularity of water supply, even through long, dry spells, and prevents torrential flooding of surrounding lowlands during the spring thaw.

Pick up a handful of alpine soil. Roll it around in your fingers. Observe its friability, the way it collapses on your palm. Pick it over with the fingers of your other hand, isolate out the decaying bits of organic matter, the leaves and seed cases and the papery insect wings. See if you can find anything that moves, anything that might be making a meal of these things. It's likely you'll look hard for any evidence of this kind. It's too cold here for the organisms that ooze through your suburban soil in their thousands to survive. So the organic matter builds, and it gives the soil structure, and it helps retain water, and it makes peat, and it forms a vital part of the hydrology of a worryingly—at least from a human perspective—arid continent.

Soil mountains

So the Earth makes the rocks and the rocks make the soil and the plants hold it all together and the wind and water keep the whole show moving. And gravity does too. And all these factors working together is the reason why now, you and I are able to stand on any mountain or high plain on the continent and be standing for the most part in wildflowers or in snow grass or in woodland or heathbeds. It is the reason why any view you might gain from here, is a view out or down and only very rarely up.

Australia is remarkable because of the deep and well-structured soils that cover almost all of its high country, even most of its highest peaks. Unlike other continents where alpine peaks thrust skywards as sheer rock faces to be viewed from the valley below, mountains on this continent are generally of lower altitude and composed of rock surfaces that are flat or eroded into rounded residuals. It is this that gives Australian mountains, and the High Plains among them, their distinctive shape and character. And

beneath this distinctive character is a geological story that is complex, not fully resolved.

Standing on well-soiled alpine meadows, guessing at various rock types, observing the way soil falls and spreads in your hand, these are all clues to, fragments of, a much older and more enigmatic story that is bound into the rocks and the landforms of this high country. It is a narrative that is not easily read, not immediately apparent. And so I invite a geologist who has walked and worked in the High Plains for many years to tell me the story, to read the Braille of this country and transpose that knowledge to a language and a form that reveal the past lives of this place.

The geologist

Neville Rosengren comes to my house on an autumn afternoon when the sun is slanting gold across the inner suburbs. He comes in response to my hurried invitation—I am hoping this geologist who is also a teacher will translate for me some of the nuances of the scientific data and debate related to the High Plains. I am hoping, also, to tap some other areas of his rich store-house of academic knowledge. I notice that he has maps rolled under his arm, so the signs are good. He has come, he tells me, from field work in Westernport Bay and as I guide him through to the back room I sense about him the breath of the open spaces.

We talk, generally at first. We discover that we have at least one location in common, discounting the High Plains which, as I say, is the purpose of his visit. Years ago he and his family lived about a minute's walk from here. We sit at the table as wattle birds glide through the coloured light outside and we talk of here, of the soul of this inner city place, with its remnant Greek and Italian migrant families, of its quietness, broken only by the occasional tram shattering into the depot up the road, of its convenience to services and to universities, which is of some interest to each of us. He speaks of the sense of community he shared here, of being treated as family by his Greek neighbours whose overseas connections afforded him safe, though at times exhausting, passage as he travelled the Mediterranean. I tell him that the place is changing, that younger

professionals are moving in and renovating the cottages and the old family homes; that veggie patches are giving way to outside decking, that a new layer of life is being added to the old, that things are in motion here too.

The work of the day

Neville's geologist's eyes turn to me then and he asks for context, for a clue as to what words and concepts, what knowledge from his deeply hewn catalogue, he should call up. I speak then of these essays, these stories and bits of memoir that I am putting together on the High Plains. I speak of my desire to give witness through my words to this sub-alpine plateau. I write, I say, as a way of putting words at the service of the land, at the service of 'country', that rich Aboriginal term for the nexus between people, the land, and its in-dwelling presences. I do this writing mindfully, I say, knowing that the artificial alteration of the climate is signalling the rapid diminution of the alpine communities, that the high country as we know it is being carried off by warmer winds and by ground temperatures that are trending dangerously upward. As partial and fragmentary and inadequate as written words are, I say, they are one way of honouring what the world has made here, one form of offering to the future, one way of singing the subdued beauty of this place, one way of speaking a word in its defence.

I say to Neville that I think the scientists do this too, only differently. I mention the wonderful botanists and ecologists and naturalists and geologists like him that we've had—those who have observed and written truly of the high country, whose intuitive hunches and endurance in the field have built some bedrock on which later knowledge has been tested and amplified. What I desire though, I say, is to contribute to a tradition of place writing that tries to imagine how things might appear from the land's point of view, that attempts a contemplation of how the Earth is unfolding here, and how our human story is unfolding within it. High country ballads that swing with the human heroics of 'Clancy' and 'The Man from Snowy River' have their place, I say. They have certainly entered the psyches of settler Australians and devolved into a certain kind of mythology. But such mythology, for all its flattery of the skills of men, for all its celebration of the 'wild bush horses', tends to obscure what might be

happening to the land beneath the hooves of those much loved and defended equine creatures. But we have wonderful naturalists, I say again, and committed scientists, and the land needs their eyes and their words too, and that's why I have come to him, to learn, to understand and integrate, to transpose another way of seeing into words, into the geological story of the High Plains.

Neville nods his head slowly, appearing both attentive and thoughtful. When he speaks his eyes are sombre and his voice is low and he says that some of his recent work has been the researching of a major report on the impact of climate change on the high country. A tiny fissure of silence opens up between us, and our unspoken grief drops in, and we are segued quietly into our afternoon's work.

Why the high country is high

Neville's tanned hands uncurl the maps, and the wedge of land that is Victoria, with its scooped southern boundary and the wriggle of the Murray in the north, is arrayed in a way I have never seen before. The first map, a satellite image, shows the State in various shades of green, except for the brown of the western highlands, and the white of the higher eastern highlands. In another, the area of the State is filled with shadings of pink, yellow, blue and brown, some cross-hatched, some filled with tiny stars, some with broken waved lines, each indicating the various rock types from which this part of the continent is made, rocks that give rise to the State's green mantle. Another map is covered with concentric circles, giving the story of present elevations.

This geologist begins to take me down then, and he takes me back, his words dropping easily, laconically almost, through time, and under the mountains, under the oceans to the crustal formation that has gone on there, to the tempestuous, creative darkness of the lithosphere, that is never still, that is forever dreaming up a world.

We speak initially of the various theories about why the high country is high, why it is that a zone along the east coast should have been uplifted to become mountainous on a continent that is far from plate boundaries and which has had limited volcanicity. We

know a lot more, he says, than we did a few years ago. We discuss the various theories. How the earlier theory of the Kosciuszko Uplift—the idea that one major event raised a whole chain of plateaux along the eastern seaboard within the last two million years—has been overturned. How the ‘Hotspot’ theory—the proposition that the eastern part of the continent moved over a thinner and therefore much hotter part of the earth’s crust, causing a line of volcanoes to erupt—is discounted by the fact that volcanism in the area is very dispersed and inconsistent. The ‘Isostatic Rebound’ theory posits the idea that as sediments are removed from elevated country by wind and water, the weight on the crust reduces and disperses. This means that the area is pushed progressively upwards until erosional processes overtake those of rebound. Ice is the major determinant in this process says Neville, where the weight of an ice-cap can depress lands and then elevate them as the ice melts. Ice on the High Plains has never been substantial enough, he says, for such a process to be significant. It’s true that sometimes the deposition and subsequent dispersal of sediments can have a similar impact, but elevations caused by such processes are not easily distinguishable from diastrophic movements caused by forces originating deep in the body of the earth.

Current knowledge, he says, suggests that the opening of the Tasman Sea along the eastern seaboard which began about 80 million years ago, and the rifting of Antarctica from the southern coast considerably later, have been the major crustal disturbances that have given rise to the eastern highlands. Older cycles of mountain building in the Carboniferous and the Permian periods were subject to major episodes of deformation and denudation associated with various tectonic events, but much of the dissolved material of those ancestral ranges is raised once more here, and is surrendering to a new round of dissolution.

Neville goes back to his maps then, to a Shuttle Radar image of the south-eastern section of the continent. On this map you can clearly see the line of mountains and high plains that form the Australian Alps running parallel to the eastern seaboard in a north-south direction. You can see how this high country begins to trend westward just above the Victorian border. You can see the continental shelf that rims the coast before

dropping into the Tasman Sea. And you can see, about one hundred and fifty kilometres off shore, a chain of swellings and small islands that rise up out of that sea. These are the remnants of sea-floor rupturing, says Neville, of great suds of magma frothing upward through cracks in the sea bed when New Zealand was rifting away from its Gondwanan connections in a slow process that began eighty million years ago. And you can see why a stretching and fracturing of the Earth's crust at this point, and the lively intrusion of magma, would cause continental uplift both east and west of the fracture zone. You can see how on the Australia side the dissolved remnants of older mountains would be lifted to become the Australian Alps. And you can see how on the eastern side of the fracture, New Zealand would rise up out of the sea in a series of fiery volcanics that continues to the present day.

Neville's index finger then drops below the shapely toe of Tasmania. He points to the Southern Ocean and says that the same rifting process that took place in the Tasman also took place here, beginning about forty-five million years ago and pushing Antarctica towards the pole. It is the same rifting process he says, that is continuing to compress Victoria, squeezing it together and causing it to bow on a north-west, south-east axis. This makes sense of the chain of highlands, of old volcanics, that traverses central Victoria and that continues west to Gariwerd-Grampians and beyond.

Rocks

And then we speak of the rocks. The map with the coloured shadings comes to the top of the pile. Neville's finger stops at irregularly shaped orange pools of colour within a broad sweep of pink. These are the granites he says, of the High Plains. All the rocks around Rocky Valley and Falls Creek are granites. I double check this, pleased that my guess about the rocks on the Heathy Spur track is accurate. Granite also forms the Niggerheads (now Mount Jaithmathang) and Mount Buffalo which is positioned to the northwest of the High Plains and is a residual plateau, a plume of granite that has cooled slowly beneath a sedimentary surface and then been exposed as the softer rock above has worn away.

The granites of the High Country trend horizontally in an east-west formation, while faulting runs generally in a north-south direction. Neville points to these two features on the map, to the elongated orange swellings that sit at right angles to the rigid black lines of the faults. We think, he says, that the granite has oozed up between the fault lines, a bit like a bleed that pools between the walls of a wound. He points again to the bits of orange on the map and they do indeed resemble elongated pools that have dried and hardened as the fissure beneath them closed.

The geologist and I are working from memory now, from our imaginal sight. As his finger moves around the map our minds and imaginations are on the High Plains, traversing the terrain, pausing at specific spots, poring over those characteristic features that hold clues to the hidden story of the plateau. His memory and his visualization of the sites is much more tuned and oiled than mine, but we are moving fast beneath and then over the High Plains, lingering at certain places where I need fuller explanation.

The basalts of the High Plains are here, he says, pointing to yellow circles that indicate the Ruined Castle and Basalt Hill and The Temple over near Mount Jim. Basalt, he says, hits the surface as lava and cools quickly so is much finer grained than granite whose crystalline structure tends to be much bolder. Basalt cracks along vertical lines, in columns that are roughly hexagonal. The Organ Pipes near the banks of the Maribyrnong River are a fine city example of this type of rock.

I'm thinking of the photos I took of the Ruined Castle last summer. I'm thinking of Pat sitting in the car while I strode out along the path high above the village of Falls Creek to get a visual record of this volcanic outcrop. The Ruined Castle is, as its name suggests, in the process of decomposition. Fallen cylinders of rock tumble about its base, broken into dense, chunky blocks. The rock is the grey-blue colour of sheet metal overlaid with rust, indicative of the combined iron and magnesium in its chemical structure. The Ruined Castle is one place where basalt has erupted through volcanic activity, but Basalt Hill has no opening to the molten, viscous sea kilometres beneath it. The lava must have collected there in an old depression, before being covered with

sediment and then exposed as the water and wind-licked plain slowly deteriorated around it.

Neville sweeps his hand across the map, across the substantial area that is pink and cross-hatched, and says that the vast majority of the rocks on the Bogong High Plains though, are metamorphics such as gneiss and schist. Gneiss predominates on the Bogong plateau while schist and slate are common around Mount Hotham, on the south-western side of the Kiewa Fault. The species to which these rocks originally belonged is hard to determine, he says. They have been compressed, heated, cooked, and altered under pressure too many times to determine their original nature. What is certain, though, is that their ancestry is ancient. They are remnants, now much altered, of sediments deposited in Cambrian and Ordovician times when the eastern side of the continent was being formed, when great upwellings of magma were building the ocean floor on the eastern side of the Yilgarn-Pilbara blocks. Volcanic activity spread tonnes of lava, of basalt, and the seas began a long period of deposition where sediments, kilometres thick, were gradually laid down. As the sea floor rose, mountain ranges many times higher than the present elevations were pushed up and then worn down over time. It's from these depositions that the High Plains are made, those ancient sediments that have been transformed under heat and pressure to become the gneisses and schists of the mountain tops.

The Back Wall

On Mount Buffalo on the far side of the Buckland Valley there is a walking track known as the Back Wall. Over the seven or eight kilometres of the walk you move through snow gum woodland and open snow plain to the southern end of the plateau. The track ends in a jumble of massive granite boulders that are as smooth and shiny as dance floors. You can walk across them and sit near their edge and catch a bit of vertigo by looking down into the valley many hundreds of metres below. But you can also look up and out into the far distance and see the Victorian Alps spread out in front of you like a pale blue ocean. What you see from that smooth edge of granite is the distinctive 'range upon range' appearance that is typical of all the east coast highlands,

but particularly of the Victorian section of it.³⁴ Here the east-west trending high country has been intersected by north-south fault lines, and these fault lines have encouraged the rivers to renew themselves and to carve deep valleys into the great blocks of elevated land. These valleys, from a distance, look like troughs between ocean waves. The mountains and elevated plains rise up between them like ocean swells, fixed at their highest points, stacked up one behind the other, and seeming to run, at least from here, the whole length of the horizon.

It is this image of the high country that comes back to me when Neville puts before me the last of the images he has brought. This time it's on the screen of his laptop and he has made a dash to the car to retrieve it and get it cranked up while I brew some coffee and cut a few pieces of caramel slice. What he shows me is a three dimensional image of the Bogong High Plains and all of the surrounding high country rising up from deep valleys, from valleys that look like incisions in the land. The valleys of the West Kiewa River, the Cobungra and Big River almost circle the High Plains and seem to leave them poised and isolated there, infinitely patient and exposed. You can see how those rivers have inched their way into the fault lines of these once contiguous mountains and high plains, how they have made themselves large and fast on a diet of shale and mudstone and sedimentary rock. You can see how they are taking with them into the valleys the loose bits of flesh and bone of these peaks and plains, how they are carrying to lower elevations a cargo from another time, the depositions of a former sea. You can see they will keep on at this for as long as the rains and the snow hold out, for as long as there is water to descend from this high place, how these falling, flowing waters will take this place off and out, sliding it north and south to rich alluvial basins. You can see how this will go on until these ranges that look from a distance like ocean waves, become a low and becalmed sea, become a plain once more.

My eyes leave the screen for a moment and I look up at Neville, at his face, at the tanned skin and the creases that etch his deep-set eyes. And I catch him looking at the image on the screen as you or I might look at an old photograph of someone dear, a sister or a brother let's say, or a long-term friend, someone who shares a bit of history

with us but who, for all the facts and ordinary details we may know of their lives, remains slightly enigmatic to us, endlessly interesting and occasionally surprising, someone anyway, whose story, through a thousand threads and capillaries, is infinitely tied up with our own.

7.

The Issue of Love

Political winds have been fierce in Victoria since January 2011 when the newly elected Liberal-National government gave the go ahead for cattle grazing to resume in six trial sites in the Alpine National Park. The government says it is testing the capacity of cattle grazing to reduce the risk and intensity of bushfires. Environmentalists say it is a sham; a political payoff to the Mountain Cattlemen's Association for supporting the Coalition in the recent election.

The official announcement of the return of cattle to the national park was made after the fact. Four hundred head of cattle were already congregating in fragile moss beds and fattening up on rich alpine herbs and grasses when the press release was issued on 12 January. 'We have a legislative obligation to see that our parks are protected from fire and we're seeing whether we can use cattle grazing to do that', said Ryan Smith, the Environment Minister.³⁵

What rang for mountain cattlemen as vindication of their way of life carried portentous overtones for others. There was the claimed secrecy for one thing, the stealth involved in returning cattle to a national park prior to public comment or scrutiny. 'Just carrying out an election promise' said the Premier Ted Baillieu, or words to that effect. But for environmentalists there was the darker possibility that the trial was simply a Trojan means of reinstating widespread grazing throughout the Alps. '[T]he terrestrial version of Japan's scientific whaling' is what a representative from the Victorian National Parks Association called it.³⁶

From across the state scientists and conservation groups pointed to the sixty years of scientific research that had led to the removal of cattle from the national park in 2006. They pointed to the study conducted after the 2003 fires that found no correlation

between grazing and reduced fire risk. They claimed alpine grazing as ‘a lucrative form of public subsidy for a small number of privileged licence holders’.³⁷

The government claimed ‘a general lack of peer-reviewed science’.³⁸

The cattlemen claimed the return of cattle to the national park as a ‘victory for common sense’. National parks should never be locked away, they said. Cattlemen are the ones who keep tracks open, reduce fuel loads, control weeds and the impact of feral animals.³⁹

Aboriginal elders commented, ‘If they think 400 head of cattle are going to stop wildfires they are going to find they have barbecued beef on the high plains’.⁴⁰

Groups at the national level became involved. The Federal Member for the Greens, Adam Bandt, labelled the trials ‘an act of environmental vandalism’.⁴¹ The nation’s peak scientific body, the Australian Academy of Science, wrote to Environment Minister Smith questioning the scientific integrity of the trial. Federal Labor Environment Minister Tony Burke observed that ‘[t]his is the first time in living memory that a State government has deliberately introduced an invasive species into a national park.’⁴²

Midst the word-blown dust of debate and accusation, of claim and counter-claim, a deeper issue emerges. What is at stake here in the high country is the protection and preservation of our public lands. What is at stake is our collective resistance to those ways of thought and action that breach the bounds of health and longevity for systems of life other than our own. What happens here will determine the degree to which lands set aside for conservation remain protected from political whim and the restless, relentless eye of commercial opportunism.

* * *

For all their spare and windswept beauty, the Bogong High Plains do not constitute a wilderness area. Like almost all places on the continent the Plains have been known and cared for by hundreds of generations of Aboriginal peoples. And, as the cattlemen rightly claim, for more than a century they have been utilised for cattle grazing, for logging, mining, recreation and water harvesting. But the Plains remain rare, a specialised alchemy of altitude, climate, geology and biology. For the most part they have held themselves together.

As one region within the greater Alpine National Park they constitute the most intense biological hotspot in the State of Victoria.⁴³ From the heart of these ranges flow all the major rivers of south-east Australia. Here is where the snows fall and where the scouring winds from the interior exhaust themselves before dropping benignly to the coast. Here are to be found prostrate pines and the tiny possums who feed on their fruit. Here are flowers that bloom beneath the snow and wetlands that twist along the floor of the Plains with the sinuous poise of copperheads.

But most of what is here is not immediately obvious to the eye. As Bachelard reminds us, what any of us sees when we first encounter a place is largely determined by our expectations, by what we hope to find.⁴⁴ In the 1850s when cattlemen Jim Brown and Jack Wells first rode up onto the High Plains from their station at Cobungra they were looking for a shortcut through the mountains, a more direct route to the cattle markets at Beechworth. It's possible that they paused, took a silent breath when their horses cleared the valley and stepped onto the vast snow plains for the first time. It's possible that when the sun gained some warmth that morning and dissolved the low lying mists, they found themselves riding through fields of flowers, through swathes of dusted colour. They did name that place 'Pretty Valley' and they did find their track to Beechworth. But it's also true that within a few years the Plains had become pasture for thousands of head of cattle, and that summer grazing—the seasonal movement of men and cattle into the high country—had become a way of life. The place had become what those first cattlemen had seen. If Aboriginal communities continued their annual gatherings on the High Plains in the wake of the cattle, we have no record of it. Within

a dozen years their lifeways had been fractured and their communities decimated and dispersed. And if the soils of the plains went to dust under the hooves of those cattle, if the radiance of the wild flowering became just a little duller each summer, the moss beds a little drier, who was about to say so?

This tendency to respond to a place in terms of its usefulness is familiar terrain for modern humans, particularly for those of us from Western cultures. We harbour certain preconceptions and desires. Those who followed Brown and Wells into the high country were no exception—the early skiers and bushwalkers, the gold seekers and the foresters, the government surveyors and engineers in search of new ways to extend the State electricity grid—they all inscribed the place with meanings of their own. And so too did the scientists and artists who journeyed there. We see it in Ferdinand von Mueller's sense of reverent wonder at the botanical richness of the region, and in the lofty, romantic images of von Guerard and Chevalier.

So our internal templates, our habits of mind and culture fall, with our gaze, on the spaces and places through which we move. But our templates are not always fixed and places are not merely passive. They swell and slip from and exceed our perceptual nets. They are restless and dynamic, forever about their own business. Stories are enfolded there, heredities to which we are blind. Occasionally, if places are not too damaged by what has been done to them, and if we stay with those places long enough or are graced with some soft serendipity, some awareness may flash to the surface from the deep and we realise that we are moving in an arc of reality that can never be entirely fathomed.

American writer Barry Lopez considers this aspect of places, how they create and hold openings to unforeseen truths. He gives the example of Charles Darwin on his famous voyage. Lopez pictures him on the *Beagle*, walking the cramped decks at night, held within the two great spheres of sky and ocean, reading the works of geographer Charles Lyell, progressing cautiously, inevitably, to the very frontier of thought. ‘And it occurs to me’, says Lopez, ‘that [Darwin’s] experience in that space … gave rise to the idea

that man has no special significance, looked at with the kind of detachment that's possible, the sense of proportion manifest in that vastness; that man is just one of the many parts of the whole.⁴⁵

Lopez's point about the space is right I think. That it is that vast and fecund void through which Darwin travels that births in a sense, the revolutionary thought that was to become *The Origin of Species* (1859). But the world has grown smaller since Darwin's voyage; our human footprint has become larger, more emphatic. Where now on the planet does the kind of edgeless space experienced by Darwin endure? Where on Earth might we go now to find proportion, to hear the whisper of humanity's more modest place within the scheme of things? As Lopez himself notes, the vast spaces of the earth are rapidly diminishing. In so many places we are looking at the 'last tattered flags of the primeval world'.⁴⁶ So much of what was once wild and cohesive is 'going down the river'.⁴⁷

* * *

Australia's national parks occupy 3.4 per cent of the continental landmass.⁴⁸ They are islands of refuge and diversity in a sea of disturbance. Their ecological significance intensifies as global temperatures trend ever upwards and the rate at which species drop quietly into extinction—20,000 per year and rising—continues unabated.⁴⁹ At a time when the health of our public lands is assuming unprecedented importance, those same lands are coming under increasing threat; from cattle in this instance, but also from insularity, inadequate size, inadequate funding, the tendency to manage them as business operations rather than as sacred endowments. But this latest development, the marriage of political expediency with individual and local interests, is perhaps most troubling of all. In an alliance such as this, one wonders about restraint, about the capacity of our human selves to release our grip on rights and desires that run counter to the integrity and well-being of those places in which we dwell.

* * *

There are cattlemen who say they love the high country. I have no reason to doubt them. There are skiers who love it too. And bushwalkers and four wheel drivers and campers and cyclists and long distance runners. There are photographers and artists and ski lodge managers; scientists and chair lift operators, café baristas and rangers, sight-seeing pilots and those who gaze at the mountains from low and distant valleys. There are Indigenous peoples daring to dream again of their ‘country’. A surfeit of love for this high and unassuming place. Meanwhile, these preserved lands continue to shrink and fragment around us. The issue of love is complex. The times in which we live demand that we consider our terms. What does it mean to love a place? What does it mean to love this place? In our pondering of such questions, let us not discount beauty as a fundamental resource in our lives. And let us not assume that we are so wise that we need not hear the unforeseen truths that these high lands may whisper.

8.

The Mountain

Any bushwalker will tell you there's an art to packing a backpack; how to weight things so the pack sits evenly on your back; how to ensure everything is watertight; how to substitute heavier things with the lightest possible alternative; how to ensure you have enough of what's necessary but no excess. This is what my friend J. and I were doing the night before our planned climb of Mount Bogong. Everything was spread out on the floor of the tent and item by item we were determining what would come with us and what would stay, what was necessary and what was not.

We had come late in the afternoon from the Bogong High Plains. We had been walking and exploring there for eight or nine days and had decided to climb Mount Bogong—our final all or nothing fling—before returning to the city and our rhythmic workday lives. We had driven down from Falls Creek on a fine day in late January, following the course of the Kiewa River from the western edge of the plateau all the way down to the Kiewa Valley. As we dropped down to Mount Beauty and headed out beyond the township into the wide fertile valley of the Kiewa, Mount Bogong came into view, its presence commanding, entrancing.

The road cuts along the west wall of the valley, stretching long and straight towards Wodonga where the Kiewa verges with the Murray River. Mount Bogong extends along much of the valley's opposite wall, its great height and wide buttresses dominating the eastern skyline. At the township of Tawonga we left the bitumen and made a right hand turn down a dirt road towards the mountain, cutting through some pasture before crossing the Kiewa River and the low-lying flats beyond. The track then followed the course of Mountain Creek, a fast moving waterway that rises on Mount Bogong's northern flank.

The campground on Mountain Creek was empty when we arrived. We pitched the tent and got a fire going and had some dinner while the light held. It was later by the fire, straining to see as the alpenglow gradually faded from pink and gold to grey, that I read aloud to J. the final chapter of a remarkable account of three young men who, like us, had set their hearts on the mountain, had been drawn by it, and had, in another season and in a year far removed from this one, attempted to climb it.

1936

It blew hard and snowed heavily all across the high country the first week in August 1936. Friday 7 August though, began in bright sunshine and it might have stayed that way on the High Plains for most of that day. But up higher, on the ridges and peaks, fog and mist came and went, depending on the wind, and fell at times into the narrow valleys where it became trapped, waiting for wind persistent enough or sun strong enough, to send it on its way.

The best laid plans

They had come from Mount Hotham the previous day, climbing up out of the Cobungra Gap on their just-waxed skis and making good time over new snow until they reached—at 8.30pm that evening and by the light of their head-torches—Fitzgerald's hut on the eastern edge of the Plains. There they opened a box of food that had been pack-horsed in the previous summer and loaded their backpacks with enough food to last three days. They laid out their sleeping bags and went to sleep in the hut that night with their plans for the next few days firm and clear in their minds. They would set out early in the morning, crossing the northern section of the High Plains via Mount Nelse and Timms Spur, and if they made good time they would climb Mount Bogong via Quartz Ridge. They would traverse the long summit ridge from west to east and follow it round to the southeast, where it drops down into the sheltered gap of Camp Valley and where another box of food had been stored in Aertex Hut. They would then head back towards the High Plains via the same route and make it back to Hotham on the third or possibly fourth day. That was the plan they went to sleep with, and the knowledge that if something unforeseen happened they had a day's emergency rations,

along with enough food for an overnight camp at the foot of Mount Bogong if necessary before the ascent of Quartz Ridge.

They were Howard Michell, Cleveland Cole and Mick Hull, all of them experienced skiers and all of them strong and fit and in their twenties. They were acquaintances more than friends. Snow was what they had in common, their love of it and their courting of every challenge it could provide. They had all covered the route, or sections of it, before. They knew how quickly things can turn in such country and maybe that's why they wrote their intentions on toilet paper and left it in clear view on the table in Fitzgerald's hut when they set out on that fine Friday morning in August.⁵⁰

By the time they reached Mt Nelse fog had rolled in and with no snow poles to guide them on this section of the Plains they lost their way a number of times before making Timms Lookout just after lunch and the spur that leads down to Big River. Here the fog cleared and they could see across the river to the spur opposite, the white ridge that would take them up to Bogong itself. They skied down Timms Spur on good snow, weaving through a few scattered snow gums before the terrain became more difficult and they were forced to carry their skis the final part of the descent to the river. The fog rolled in again, and by mid-afternoon as they searched the high-walled valley for a viable river crossing, they knew that any ascent of Quartz Ridge and of Bogong must be left until morning.

On the opposite bank they broke up frozen slabs of snow and tossed them in the river and laid down fresh bunches of gum leaves before pitching their tents and bedding down for the night, Howard in one tent and Cleve and Mick in the other. Heavy rain fell through the night and while their tents had oilskin floors, the canvas walls leaked, leaving wet patches on their sleeping bags.

The dying of the light

The sky above us is deepening from a dusty violet to indigo and as J. kicks over the coals I wander up the valley, back the way we had come in, to stretch my legs before

bed. The last laughs of a couple of kookaburras and the sweet hurried conniptions of a flock of lorikeets are the final words this valley utters for the day, before the rustling and snuffling of the night. Mountain Creek slides quietly by just a few metres to my right and it is comforting to have it there, making its serpentine way in the darkness, continuing about its business, continuing to broaden and to deepen this valley that it has made. But I am watching the sky, the few strips of pastel cloud that rest on the far ridge of Tawonga Gap and how the ridge line itself is fading to black and throwing up the first scattering of stars. I am watching how the darkness deepens in subtle gradations from ridge to valley floor and how the trees around me are already performing black silhouettes against the curtain of grey that is falling all around them.

The track opens out as I approach the confluence of Mountain Creek and the Kiewa River and as I sweep my eye along the darkening valley the western face of Mount Bogong suddenly lights up, as if someone has turned up the dimmer switch for a final look at the mountain's grand design. The whole western face is glowing red and one long wisp of cloud is dispersing from its summit like a triumphant flag dissolving. The mountain is gathering this light from somewhere, holding to itself the refracted rays of a sun that has long since slid over the edge of the earth. And while the light is lasting I lift my right hand and align my fingers with the peak of the mountain where it rises above the lower hills in the foreground. With my hand I trace the jagged outline of Quartz Ridge as it descends like an outflung arm from the western summit of the mountain and disappears into the dark slash of Big River valley. This is the ridge that Howard and Cleve and Mick attempted to climb when it was white with hard-packed snow, as it was vaulting upwards, preparing to receive a sky that was bearing down with a wild blizzard in its belly.

Climbing

On the frozen bank of Big River the three men ate a solid breakfast and broke camp early to climb Quartz Ridge, Cleve on seal skins, Mick with his skis fully roped and knotted and Howard with half-roped skis. They cut a jagged, zigzag pattern up the side of the mountain as they went. As they approached the spur the prevailing westerly

winds had created a cornice along the top, a smooth icy overhang that needed to be broken in order to attain the ridge. Once through, the men picked their way carefully upwards, tacking frequently in order to stay clear of the cornice and aware of the deep gorges that threatened on the far side. As they climbed they noted the turn in the weather, how the wind, predictably strong on this exposed ridge, became increasingly severe, swinging to the south and coming at them with bite and vigour. They felt the clouds begin to congregate and then darken and drop low in the sky. By the time they had climbed the last of the three and half thousand feet that day and set their skis on the western peak of Bogong, the wind was pummelling their bodies and hauling in dense layers of fog. For five hours they had been climbing and now here where they had hoped to be removing their skins and ropes and skiing east towards the summit cairn gale-force winds were driving sago-snow directly at them and fog was thickening in soupy plumes and visibility was suddenly a major problem. They headed along the plateau in what they hoped was an easterly direction, searching through the fog for the cairn that would mark the summit and enable them to take their bearings and set their direction towards Camp Valley.

It's hard to know what Cleve's intention was when he stopped briefly to take off his skis. Perhaps, given how icy the snow had become underfoot, he figured he would make better headway walking in his boots across the summit plateau, or perhaps he was simply intending to tighten his seal skins, but either way, having taken off one ski and bending to unclip the other, the first ski slipped from his grasp and slid at speed down the slope. Mick made a stab at it with his pole as it went by but it was just beyond his reach and it disappeared into the fog. The three of them stood dumbfounded for a moment, knowing in an instant that retrieval would be impossible, that the ski would leave no track on the hard snow and that even if they did descend hundreds of feet on the steep slope below, the ski would be hidden by fog and likely as not its wooden tip would be broken, rendering it unusable anyway.

Shaken, the three of them decided to make one last attempt to locate the summit cairn. If unsuccessful they would retrace their tracks down Quartz Ridge and camp once again

on Big River. They would make another attempt at the summit the next day when they hoped the weather might have improved. By now visibility was so limited that they could only see six feet ahead and it quickly became apparent that finding the cairn in these conditions would be impossible. They made to return to the river via Quartz Ridge but this proved suddenly difficult. Because of the iciness of the snow there was no trace of Cleve's footprints or of Mick and Howard's ski-tracks. Quartz Knob, the distinctive outcrop that makes the ridge easily identifiable in good weather was impossible to see through the blizzard. With no obvious tracks leading safely off the ridge and with no markers by which to take their bearings in the fog and snow enshrouding them, they resorted to trying to set a compass course. Howard had had some blind-flying experience, but what none of them realised was that some rocks in the high country, particularly the older volcanics such as those found on the High Plains, including Mt Bogong, can sometimes interfere with compass bearings. They made three attempts to get off the mountain using this method, each attempt ending in spurs that dropped too steeply to be descended or in dangerous crevasses. Sometime between four and five in the afternoon they tried to get off the mountain any way they could, by any spur that looked promising, but each attempt ended in a sheer drop. By 5pm it became clear that they would have to dig themselves in and wait out the night. They found a slight gully about 500 vertical feet below the summit ridge on a slope that dropped at a twenty-five degree angle and began excavating snow for a dug-out.

The mountain

Mount Bogong was, before it became a separate massif, before it was dissected by Big River to the south and Mountain Creek to the north, the grand northern edge of the High Plains. Standing at 1,986 metres, it is the tallest mountain in the State. Its great bulk is visible from almost every vantage point on the Plains and from all the surrounding peaks. From the Kiewa Valley it seems to rise, as I say, from wide flanks to a pointed summit—but this is deceptive. If you were looking at the mountain from the north or from the south you would see a high curving bulk that is planar on top from which a number of residuals—the remnants of former mountains—rise to create the highest points. The immense rounded ridge that forms the summit of Mt Bogong

extends west for three kilometres to West Peak, the face of the mountain that looms over the Kiewa Valley. It continues for twice this distance in a gentle curve to the southeast. Giant buttresses descend from the open tops through thick forests of snow gum and alpine ash before dropping on the south face to the vertiginous valley of Big River and to the more open valley of Mountain Creek to the north.

Every route to the summit is arduous, involving a precipitous climb out of the valley to elevations that attract unpredictable weather. In winter the mountain must be approached with extreme caution, but even in summer conditions can become life-threatening for unprepared or unsuspecting climbers. Conditions that appear calm and stable in the valley can be wild and dangerous on the summit. There is the drop in temperature for one thing, and the wind for another. Even experienced climbers are at times forced onto hands and knees as they encounter gusts on the summit that make walking upright impossible. Hell's Gap that drops from Eskdale Point to the southeast is notorious in this regard. Perhaps the most exposed section of the ridge, the winds that blow through there can be treacherous in any season. In winter the combination of steep slope, exposed ice, poor visibility and wind is a particular kind of hell. The only way to traverse it in such conditions is with pick-axes in your hands and crampons strapped to your knees—and then, only if you dare.

Snow cave

Standing down slope at such a sharp angle the three men were acutely aware of the fate of Cleve's ski. They wedged their packs and poles and a number of skis firmly together and kicked deep footholes in the snow to give themselves a safe position from which to start digging. Using the heels of their skis initially, they broke and loosened the packed snow and scooped it out with enamel dinner plates they had in their packs. As they dug further in to the mountain the skis became less effective so they used their dinner plates as shovels, thrusting the rim of the plate vertically into the packed snow until it was loose enough to be scooped out. It was arduous, energy-sapping work grinding into the side of the mountain a hole big enough for the three of them to lie down in. As the temperature continued to drop and the wind to howl, Mick and Cleve began to tire.

Mick's hands particularly were aching and numb from the pressure of clamping the metal plate between thumbs and forefingers as he thrust it repeatedly into the hard crystal-like snow base beneath the surface layer of powder snow. It was Howard who remained indefatigable, battling on into the night as the fog thickened and the snow fell and the blizzard raged above them.

Eventually they had a hole roughly four feet wide and six feet long and deep enough to sit up in. They made the roof by placing skis and poles horizontally over the space and laying one tent with its oilskin floor over the top. They packed the lot down with snow and ice. They used the other tent as a groundsheet, placing it on the hard-packed snow floor of the cave in the hope that it would give some protection against moisture. They squeezed into the space and secured the corner flap of the roof so that the snow would not drift in. They struggled into some dry clothes, used a Meta tablet to brew some soup made of Oxo cubes and unpacked their sleeping bags. Cleve showed them the trick of using their empty rucksacks to keep the feet of their sleeping bags warm and dry and they went to sleep that night, pleased that they had made such a secure haven against the storm that continued to rage across the mountain.

On Sunday 9 August they ate a tin a bully beef for breakfast and then Howard and Cleve pushed through the snowy flap of the cave and stepped out to size up the weather, hoping for visibility good enough to search for the summit cairn. Mick's hands and feet were stiff and numb with the cold and he remained in the cave in his sleeping bag. Outside visibility had not improved and so when Howard and Cleve returned the three of them discussed their options. Based on their rations they decided to wait out the weather for as long as possible, figuring they had enough soup cubes and Meta fuel for three days. Howard massaged Mick's numbed feet and they all warmed their hands by the Meta tablets each time they made soup. Water dripping from the roof of the cave was useful for soup-making but a problem in terms of the groundsheet and the sleeping bags. They resorted to propping themselves up—their feet in their rucksacs, one boot under their heads, another under one hip and a billy beneath their ribs—all in an attempt to keep sleeping bags as dry as possible. Mick and

Cleve took turns lying in the central position where it was warmer, especially during the bitter nights. Howard selflessly—and perhaps assessing correctly the more compromised condition of his companions—retained his outside position for the duration

Monday 10 August the temperature dropped. Howard and Cleve again checked the weather conditions. While fine snow was falling through the fog, the winds were still fierce, quickly removing their tracks and making it dangerous to explore any distance from the cave. They hit on the idea of using fishing line from Howard's pack as a guide rope. They removed some skis and poles from the hard-packed roof of the cave and climbed the snow to the ridge, unfurling the fishing line as they went. They took a compass bearing, guessing where they thought the summit cairn would be, and examining the tops of some of the northern spurs off the ridge, hoping they would find Staircase Spur that descends down from Bogong into the valley of Mountain Creek before connecting with the Kiewa Valley. If they could find the Staircase they knew it led down to Bivouac Hut, halfway between the summit and the valley, where shelter and food would be available.

When land meets sky

If Howard and Cleve had been able to observe the mountain from a distance that day they would have seen a boiling, turbulent mass of snow-laden clouds bearing down in slate-greys and frozen, steely whites. They would have seen how those clouds descended on the mountain like a pall and dropped so low that half the mass of the mountain disappeared into the sky. If they had had access to barometric readings, they would have seen the tightly packed isobars of low pressure that were pushing across Victoria from the southern ocean, bringing great volumes of rain and hail to the central and eastern parts of the State and blizzard conditions all across the alpine region. They would have seen the wind warnings that predicted gale force winds in the low country and gusts of cyclonic speeds across the mountains. They would have seen how this weather system was spiked with all the strength and relentless fury of its Antarctic origin and how it was set to engulf the high country for the best part of six weeks. And

they may have realised that in climbing from a deep river valley up the exposed rib of the highest mountain in the State they had in fact been climbing into another country where instinct and instruments dissolve in forces that gust at the edge of what human beings can bear.

Another day

After two hours fruitless searching for the summit cairn and Staircase Spur Howard and Cleve returned. Once again the three of them took stock of their situation and decided to continue to wait out the weather in the cave. They used the afternoon to modify some aspects of their dug-out, levelling the floor and rebuilding the roof in the hope of stopping the constant dripping on their sleeping bags.

Tuesday 11 August snow had fallen heavily through the night and ventilation was becoming a problem in the cave. Howard was just able to push a ski pole up through the snow at the entrance but it soon filled in again. Mick's surprise find of a garlic sausage in the outside pocket of his rucsac raised their spirits enormously but by the end of that day they had exhausted their supply of soup-making Oxo cubes. All they had left was a small amount of chocolate, some chewing gum and an emergency ration of rum.

Wednesday 12 August they woke to weather conditions as bad as they had seen them. It was snowing hard, the fog was thick and the winds were relentless. Conceding the possibility that the conditions might not let up for many days yet, they decided on an all or nothing attempt to get off the mountain. Their efforts were focussed on Staircase Spur. Given what they guessed was their present position it was their safest and surest route down to Mountain Creek and to the Kiewa Valley. They put on all the woollen clothes they had—about five layers each—making sure their circulation remained unrestricted in order to prevent frostbite. They brewed up their last bit of chocolate and stepped out of the cave into the snow. They left behind their sleeping bags, now sodden and useless, and their skis, determining that because of the hardness of the snow it would be easier to walk rather than attempt to ski. They left one of their poles

upright at the entrance of the dugout to mark its position and took one pole each for the walk ahead. In their packs they had only a length of cord, a piece of oilcloth of Howard's, two compasses, and expensive cameras owned by Cleve and Mick.

Getting off the mountain

As they climbed up to the ridge the wind came at them in mighty gusts. Visibility was poor, twenty yards at best and often much less. Knowing that they were to the west of the summit cairn and of the route down Staircase Spur they set their course to the east, hoping that if they missed the cairn in thick fog the ridge would lead them around to the south-eastern section of the plateau where it drops down to Camp Valley and to the safety of Aertex Hut. On the ridge they tried walking in a line eastwards, with Howard's cord stretched between them, but it kept breaking on the icy pinnacles, so they linked arms, shouting 'check' to each other every twenty-five yards or so above the thunder of the wind, ensuring they looked constantly at their compass bearings. They walked for some time along the undulating ridge until they began a steady climb. Speculating that this might be the rise to Ledenfeld Point on the south-eastern curve of the summit plateau they were surprised when, looming at them out of the fog, the cairn that marks the summit of Bogong appeared, encased in ice and snow, but unmistakable. They chipped off some of the ice, just to be certain, and sure enough, the rocks of the eight foot cairn lay beneath.

Knowing the Staircase route was just north of the cairn the three of them were flooded with relief and excitement. They immediately imagined the fire and food and shelter that awaited them in Bivouac Hut just fifteen hundred yards down the spur. Beyond the hut they knew it was just a short drop to the snowline, and then an easy descent to Maddison's farm near Tawonga.

But finding the route down was more problematic than they anticipated. A precipice dropped just north of the cairn so they decided to set their course to the east, traversing for 100 yards before tacking 100 yards to the north-east and then 100 yards to the north, calculating that this would bring them to the wide slope where the Staircase first forms

into a ridge. The snow was extremely icy and dangerous and they were forced to kick sizeable steps to avoid falling. Their descent, however, ended in a rocky drop. They were forced to kick steps back up to the ridge and try another line off the mountain. They repeated this process numerous times, each attempt ending in a rocky precipice and necessitating an arduous return to the summit. It was obvious that lack of visibility was their problem, preventing them picking the correct line down the spur. Believing that they were constantly veering too far left and dropping into the gorge of Doorway Creek to the west of the Staircase, they decided to proceed east along the ridge from summit cairn and drop into the gully on the eastern side of the spur where Mountain Creek rises. They would then traverse horizontally across the gully and pick up Staircase Spur further down.

They couldn't know it then, but each attempt was leading them further off course. When they thought the summit ridge was beginning to slope into Eskdale Spur to the northeast, they dropped into the gully, believing that as they tacked to their left they would come eventually to the Staircase. In fact, they had in the fog swung around to the southeast rather than the northeast and had dropped into the rugged gully of Cairn Creek on the treacherous southern face of Bogong. Below the ridge they were immediately in softer snow which made movement quicker and easier. They linked arms and glissaded down slope, traversing to the left and glad to have found a sure course as evening fell. However, as they rose out of the gully towards the ridge, the wind came at them with such force that they had to drop back into the gully. The wind, its wild strength and the direction of its approach, were the first clues that they may be off course. Another was the unfamiliar shape of the spur. It was not the defined ridge that both Cleve and Mick remembered. As daylight was fading they had no option but to continue down the gully until they reached the tree line. From there they made another attempt to reach the crest of the spur. The last bit of rum, about a thimble full each, helped as they pushed into this twenty minute climb. As they got to the ridgetop neither Cleve nor Mick recognised it as anything resembling Staircase Spur. There were no long, flat stretches that step in stages down towards the valley that makes the Staircase so distinctive. Confounded they glissaded back to the central section of the

gully and made their way down through the snow gums, enjoying this freer movement after so many days in the dugout. As they came to streams they drank thirstily and Cleve recounted how he had once fasted for sixteen days during a bout of food poisoning, sustaining himself on as much water as he could drink. This reassured them and led them to believe that lack of food was less a problem than it actually was.

As the snow began to peter out and they dropped below the tree line, Cleve's sight began to worry him. Following behind Howard, a whippy branch of snow gum had flown back and struck him in the eye. Relying on his one good eye and making his way in the gathering darkness, Cleve's progress was slowed considerably.

Soon they were descending through alpine ash and thick scrub, crossing streams and slippery logs. When they came to a stream tributary that flushed into a steep gorge they could find no way to cross it in the dark and so they decided to bed down on the stream bank. They tried to light a fire but the wood was saturated. Instead they pulled down some saplings for a bed and Howard covered them with his piece of oilcloth and they went to sleep in the early hours of Wednesday morning, exhausted but warm enough in all the clothes they had on.

A light in the darkness

From a distance the orange walls of the tent, lit from within by gas light, resemble a campfire that has strangely become still life. It guides me back to camp anyway, that small orange light, and as I walk towards it along the valley of Mountain Creek, I see how modest and tenuous it is, shining away in the heart of the mountains, a moonless sky arching above and great walls of darkness rising up from every side.

J. and I sit on the floor of the tent deciding what we will take with us in the morning and packing our backpacks as we go. We pack for most contingencies of weather and concede more weight to water than to food. We go to bed early, our sleeping bags loosely about us, enjoying this milder night in the valley compared with those we shivered through on the Plains. When J. asks me how many kilometres I think it would

be to where Cleve and Mick and Howard camped that first night when they came down the south face of Bogong, I think for a bit before giving two answers. ‘As the crow flies, about ten kilometres from this valley to theirs’, I say, ‘but half that again with the mountain in between’.

Running with the river

When the three men woke on Thursday 13 August they crossed the stream without difficulty and continued their descent deeper into the gully. At about 3pm the creek they were following joined a much larger waterway, and this proved to them beyond doubt that they were not in the gully between the Staircase and Eskdale Spur. They knew that no stream other than Mountain Creek flows in that gully. They had little choice but to follow this waterway, crossing it several times when the bank they were on became impassable and scrambling over many small spurs and rocky gorges along its route.

This is how they continued for the next two days, gradually realising they were heading in an easterly direction but still unaware that the river they were following was Big River, the main drainage channel for the whole northern section of the High Plains. They drank from its waters frequently, remembering Cleve’s experience with food poisoning, and ate only a few berries that Howard found on an unfamiliar looking bush. They slept in hollow logs, covering themselves with fresh gum leaves where they could and enduring intermittent rain and snow through the bitter nights. Mick’s hands and feet were swollen and blistered with frost bite and mornings proved difficult for him. Once his joints warmed up though, he made good progress. Things were more arduous for Cleve. His vision continued to deteriorate and he suffered two serious falls that left him badly shaken. He struggled on, relying more and more on Howard for physical support.

Eventually it became obvious to the three of them that Cleve could not continue. It was agreed that Howard, being the fitter of the three, should push on alone and go for help.

Mick and Cleve would make what progress they could along the floor of the valley, following the course of the river and marking clearly each night's camp.

The fine art of waiting

Mick and Cleve made their way slowly along the river, taking frequent drinks, until they came to a triangular flat that had a couple of large hollow logs on its bank. They made camp here, Cleve resting in the last of the afternoon sun while Mick gathered fresh gum tips and made comfortable mattresses for them in the sleeping logs. Before they bedded down for the night Mick selected a number of large dead branches which he propped up near each log to make them obvious to any searchers that may come that way. He also made a pointer to each sleeping log made of burnt saplings and placed a woollen mitt on each one in case searchers should arrive when he and Cleve were asleep or too weak to respond.

This is how Cleve and Mick spent that weekend in the middle of August 1936, resting in whatever patches of sun they could find through the day and retreating to the hollow logs as night fell. While Mick remained reasonably fit except for his hands and feet, he grew increasingly worried about Cleve who became fitful, lapsing now and then into a kind of delirium. When he could and while the sun was up Mick would climb the riverbank and scour the valley and surrounding ridges for any sign of a search party. Every fifteen minutes he used his scout whistle to sound the S.O.S. distress signal. He would go on like that till sunset.

The journey down

Down river Howard was travelling as far and as fast each day as his strength would allow. It was a punishing journey, pushing through dense undergrowth, traversing the steep walls of the valley and climbing constantly over rocky spurs and around the edge of waterfalls and narrow gorges. A watery sun shone now and then and rain fell on and off and Howard, like his companions up river, was thankful at least to be moving through terrain that had returned to being more land than sky.

Over the next two days and over the roughest country imaginable, Howard covered an astounding twenty miles. Like Mick and Cleve he sought shelter in a hollow log each evening, falling into an exhausted and dream-filled sleep. As evening descended on the second day, Howard came to what he thought was a path in the scrub. That night as he bedded down he took off one of his boots and placed it on top of his sleeping log as a marker for anyone who may chance by in the early morning. This was the beginning of his own struggle with frostbite.

Monday 17 August Howard rose with the sun and decided to try his luck following the rough path he had found in the scrub. At 8.30am, gaunt and unshaven, Howard knocked on the door of Bill Batty's home in the small settlement of Glen Valley, pleading for urgent help for his friends stranded twenty miles up river.

Despite exhaustion, Howard was able to give Bill Batty fairly exact details on the location of Cleve and Mick. He was then taken to the Glen Valley Bush Nursing Centre where he received some initial attention before being transferred to the Omeo Hospital. He was treated for frostbite and placed on a careful diet after his period of starvation.

Search

After hearing Howard's story, Bill Batty and his nephew Allan Hunter set off almost immediately, taking with them a few rations and hoping to reach Cleve and Mick before nightfall. About five miles upstream they came across miners Arthur Nightingale and his son Douglas who also joined the search, taking to the north flank of the river while Bill and Allan kept to the southern side. They were soon joined by Bill's brother Jack and later by four other locals from the Glen Valley district, including cattleman Tom Fitzgerald from Shannonvale whose family hut on the edge of the High Plains had sheltered the skiers before they had launched into their journey of misadventure.

Back in Glen Valley, every available man in the district was readying himself to help with the search. As evening fell on that first evening Jack Batty made his way back to Glen Valley in the dark, seeking reinforcements as his brother and nephew had had to tether their horses about ten miles upstream and proceed on foot because of the roughness of the terrain. A group of men, many of them miners, returned with Jack, making their way by headlamps and lanterns in the dark.

And rescue

Three days later sixty-eight year old Arthur Nightingale climbed to the top of a ridge that overlooked the valley of Big River, cupped his hands to his mouth and let go the loudest ‘coo-ee’ he could. What came back at him was the sound of a scout whistle sounding out the familiar S.O.S. pattern, and when he looked over the ridge into the valley he saw Mick moving out into a clearing below, frantically searching the walls of the valley for the locus of the familiar bush call.

When Arthur and the six other members of his search party reached Mick and Cleve, it was clear to them that Cleve’s condition was so compromised that they had no time to waste. They felled saplings and made stretchers with the hessian bags they had brought with them and began their journey out of the valley, three men to each stretcher and Arthur going on ahead to muster reinforcements. When all the search parties converged just after dawn the following morning, things moved quickly and by the afternoon of Wednesday 19 August Cleve and Mick were receiving some initial first aid from Sister Watson from the Glen Valley Bush Nursing Centre. A doctor was summoned from Omeo and the all clear was given for Mick to be transferred to Omeo Hospital where he joined Howard who was on his way to recovery after his epic journey down river to Glen Valley.

Cleve’s condition however, was far more desperate. He had lapsed into unconsciousness shortly after the rescue party had arrived. For four and half hours Doctor Langdon and four of the local men massaged Cleve’s body, trying to restore

warmth and circulation to his hypothermic limbs. The effort was urgent and sustained but Cleve never regained consciousness and he died at about 9pm that evening.

The aftermath and the return

Howard recovered well from his ordeal and was soon transferred to a hospital in Adelaide, his home town. Mick was transferred to the Epworth in Melbourne where his recuperation was more prolonged. In the end he lost all the toes on his left foot to frostbite and underwent numerous skin grafts. Both men, however, returned to the high country as soon as they were able, climbing Mount Bogong over Christmas the following year. They walked the route across the summit they had been searching for in the midst of the blizzard the year before. They saw with new eyes the dimensions of the mountain, its bold features and its more nuanced, subtle face. They realised how little they had known it. They found the site of the dugout and built a small cairn of stones there in honour of Cleve. They retraced their steps around the summit cairn, gradually realising where they had gone wrong in their search for Staircase Spur. They understood why they had lost their way.

Many years after these events and as Mick was preparing to celebrate his eightieth birthday on the mountain at Cleve Cole Hut—the memorial hut built on the south-eastern arm of Bogong the year after Cleve’s death—he would reflect that there are times when Mount Bogong is no place for human beings to be. He would suggest that approaching this mountain in certain kinds of conditions and expecting the option of a safe retreat is a dire kind of folly. He would intimate that the mountain, in its enigmatic beauty and in its thinly veiled might, has been for him, the finest kind of teacher.

In the cold light of day

J. and I wake just after dawn and eat a quick breakfast. As the billy boils for some hot tea we secure our backpacks and test their weight and balance on our backs. We lace our boots and lather bare skin in sun cream. We savour our tea as the sky comes into the valley the way it left last night—in long streaks of rose pink and gold. We batten down our camp and make sure the car keys are safely stowed in an inside pocket of our

packs. We zip our jackets to our chins, swing our packs onto our backs and set off along the track, moving quietly through the cool air. The fire track winds east for two kilometres, crossing Sodawater Creek and then Doorway Creek before twisting from the southern to the northern bank of Mountain Creek and back again. All the while the great spurs of the mountain climb steeply to our right, dense with grey box and peppermint gums and a tangle of high grasses and wattles. J. stops to re-tie a bootlace and I wander on until I come to the sign indicating the track to Staircase Spur. I wait there at the foot of the spur, looking up through the trees, in the quiet of the morning.

9.

Still Country

New Year's Day on the Bogong High Plains. A cool, overcast January morning. From where we are standing the Plains are spread out like a high open field, like a stretch of canvas that has been lifted from the floor of valley and held aloft here by these mountains that rim its perimeter like a standing mob of ancestral kangaroos. Two men, two Aboriginal Australians, walk out onto the Plains where they rise behind the ski village of Falls Creek. The men's bodies are painted in the colours and ceremonial designs of their country. They carry a coolamon, a solid curve of bark within which black and red coals smoulder. These men dance as they move. They speak in language. They gather the leaves of the snow gum and place them over the coals. Ceremonial smoke, the palest of grey and heavy with the scent of eucalyptus, descends on the gathered crowd, and then drifts out, dispersing across the Plains for the first time in a hundred years. As the clap sticks sound and as the men continue their ritual dance, we who are gathered here—descendents of the first peoples and of the second—are joined in the poignancy of the moment. This opening of the inaugural Big Fella Festival, a celebration of Indigenous heritage in the high country, echoes in new ways what has been occurring for tens of thousands of years—the annual gathering of Aboriginal communities on the High Plains over the summer months, and the sharing of knowledge, of food and culture and music, all of it happening in the presence and protection of 'Big Fella', Mount Bogong.

Elders from the Dhudhuroa and the Way Wurru on whose traditional lands we are gathered are called forward to launch their clans' newly compiled Aboriginal language dictionary. They speak of what a long and committed labour of love the dictionary has been. They say that reconnecting Aboriginal people with right language and with right country is the bedrock of cultural integrity and vital to the care of country. As the ceremonial dancers move forward to complete their welcome to country the elders hold

aloft a copy of the dictionary, declaring it launched and looking out over the gathered crowd with unmistakable pride and quiet authority and a quick flash of joyous defiance. Among them is Dhudhuroan elder Gary Murray, smiling more sombrely and seeming to hold, on the curve of his solid shoulders, the weight and portent of this moment.

* * *

Two years later I am back on the High Plains, squeezing in a few days walking between other commitments. The sky above me is a brilliant blue and cloudless. The air is still and sharp and cold, a bit like cut glass as it goes down. The sun though, is high and is warming my back and shoulders. It is one of those unbelievable days that early winter sometimes throws up, and I am on the far side of Roper's Lookout where the land drops away sharply before rising again and undulating its way north in the direction of Mount Nelse. The rock on which I am sitting has been chilled through the night and is cold, like a block of ice, so I have folded my japara beneath me and have stopped here at the low point of this saddle for some fruit and chocolate and, really, just to be present here on this lovely day in the sun.

The valley from which I have come was below freezing overnight, so up here temperatures have been colder still. Sheets of ice have slid over parts of the track and anything still in shade is covered in thick white frost. Sections of soil that are without groundcover are white with needle ice, the thin tubular columns pushing up tiny heads of soil. All the bogs have turned purple, the heaths struggling to absorb as much warmth as possible before the snows come and cover them for the winter. Chunks of sphagnum moss that face south are already semi-frozen, their wick-like fronds having turned from bright yellow to deep golds and browns to retain their last bit of warmth. There are no insects or ants to be seen or heard. They have all bedded down for the winter. Only a few birds remain; crows and the occasional small flock of parrots moving incessantly through pockets of snow gums, chattering madly and cracking the last of the gum nuts and seeds before heading down-slope for more consistent feed

through the winter. The fluid notes of a currawong are carried on the air from some distance away, like someone singing underwater. While my shoulders soften and my body relaxes in the warmth of the sun, my gaze drifts into the shaded gloom of the valley below and then up to the sunbathed ridges each side of my sight line. My mind turns over a thought or two.

A dozen or more years ago any one of us might have received a day such as this unambiguously, a gift to be savoured, one of those rare and perfect days that this temperate pocket of the continent serves up occasionally, to be experienced and celebrated with joy and thankfulness. And I do; there is in truth no place I'd rather be right now. But it's interesting to speculate on what has happened to Australians—at least to some of us, and to Victorians in particular. When days such as this pop up in early winter—or in late winter for that matter—as they sometimes do, it unsettles us now, even as our spirits are lifted by the warmth and the clear uncomplicated air. The State has just emerged from a decade when days such as this came too frequently, when the warmth and the dryness lasted longer than anyone could remember; when dry winters turned to rain-starved summers and creeks dried up and pasture blew away and the summer sun parched everything. And then the fires came. And although the rains have since fallen and the high country has had decent snow cover in the last couple of years, most of us seem to know, and the creatures certainly know, that things are not the way they were, that change is underway, that climate which has been stable and predictable within a certain range over the last ten thousand years is now untethered, beginning to swing unpredictably between extremes.

And on this day as I ponder these new sensitivities to climate and to change, my mind is swinging too, back to Gary Murray, as it has many times over the last couple of years. To what it must be like to be in the early stages of reclaiming country, of re-establishing Indigenous presence on the High Plains through annual and public festivals, to be dreaming of an Aboriginal interpretive centre in the high country and perhaps a farm or cattle station in one of the valleys where elders can return to country and where the next generation can be initiated into Law and be tutored in skills that will

ensure employment on their own lands. To be achieving a return just at this time when all the poisons we have leached into the Earth and all the damage we have done is coming back to find us; when the great healing systems of the planet are faltering; when the cycles of heating and cooling, of filtering and purifying, of seasonal variation and of the great ocean currents are changing in ways we don't understand. What this means for the high country, for alpine and sub-alpine regions where particular life communities, where certain plants and animals and soils and waters have worked their way into unique and florescent patterns, is that life systems will begin to disentangle, will begin to unravel and fragment. The land itself will endure and if we're lucky, some of the waters, but the particular patterns of life here will quietly and gradually fade. 'Doubling up' is what Deborah Bird Rose calls this, when the initial altering or wounding of a place is intensified, where an action not only kills parts of an ecosystem 'but actually disables or kills the capacity of a living system to repair itself'.⁵¹ This holds true for human communities as well, for Aboriginal peoples such as Gary Murray and his ancestors for whom the initial loss of their land through removal and violence is perpetuated and amplified by the impending impact upon that land that climate change will bring.

* * *

Many weeks after that first Big Fella Festival I made arrangements to meet with Gary Murray at his home in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The re-assembling of Aboriginal communities on the High Plains for a summer festival had seemed to me such a reconstitution of earlier times that I wanted to speak with someone involved, to see how this had come about, to explore some of the related questions around reclamation and retrieval and continuity between peoples and their country.

It was these issues around country that filled our conversation when Gary and I sat down to talk that day. Gary, as I say, is a Dhudhuroan elder but he has other ancestry too. Wemba Wemba, a thin thread of Indian, an impressive Scottish pedigree. But it is

his Aboriginal ancestry that occupies him. He showed me some framed photographs on his walls; grainy black and white prints of elders of his clan, captured in set poses for the camera, their eyes staring fiercely into the lens. He unfurled across the floor of his flat a laminated scroll on which all the names of his known ancestors were written. Metres of heredity, more than six generations deep and hundreds of names wide. He spread out in front of me laminated maps too. Maps of language boundaries, of tribal country, of areas under Native Title claim. Gary's country is ridge and valley country. At its heart lies the Bogong High Plains. It is country walked, sung, cared for and storied by Gary's ancestors. It is country he is calling up, singing up, through language and ceremony, through art and education, pushing back the long years of displacement, of dispersal and silence. It is country he is claiming and celebrating once more in events like the Big Fella Festival. It is country he is determined to defend through western legal structures. And it is country into which he invites settler as well as Indigenous practices of restorative labour and care.

We covered a lot of ground that day, Gary and I, and what it amounted to, what it almost always amounts to, is a litany of violence and abuse, of rape and dispersal, of racism and injustice, of exploitation and supremacy, of survival and endurance and resilience against all the odds. What it adds up to in the end is a love of country that endures—that endures despite the depredations, despite the pain and the outrage and the loss.

Gary placed in front of me a series of photographs, recent colour snaps of pink sandy country along the banks of the Murray River where it sweeps down from the high country north of Mount Bogong. We had been talking about bones. Of the importance of bones being returned to country. Of how in death people re-enter the Dreaming and their bones continue to nurture the living.

In Gary's photographs a number of Aboriginal men stood beside long, hand-dug pits in which lines of human skulls had been carefully, ritually placed. Femurs lay vertically, like a row of pickets, below the skulls. Below the femurs, lines of tibia and fibula and

at their base a more eclectic row of knuckles and vertebrae and here and there the clean curve of ribs. These were the bones of more than eighteen hundred people, stolen from Aboriginal graves in the early part of last century.

Slowly, Gary said, universities and museums, governments and individual hobbyists are relinquishing their collections.

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From behind my closed and sun-warmed eyelids the world of the High Plains looks red. The air feels cool and bright and lively. And I try to imagine what view might be had from this spot if I were to open my eyes and the world was fifty years older than it is today, if I were to be transported somehow fifty years into the future. I try to imagine what it would mean if I opened my eyes and this lovely snow plain with its blue-green grasses and its mottled heaths and its last papery heads of golden everlasting was altered beyond recognition, was desiccating and in ruin. I wonder how it would feel to sit here in the midst of that ruin. How my sense of connection here might warp or wither, and what I would reach for, what I would hang on to in order to keep alive some original sense of place. What would remain, I wonder, beyond a confused and slightly saccharine nostalgia for how things used to be? And how would that original sense of connection be complicated further if this ground was also the site of violence to my human family, the place where their graves were opened and their bones carried off to be displayed as exotic peccadilloes in the cabinets of unknown collectors.

* * *

Gary got up from his chair and went briefly into another room. He returned and placed in my hands a possum skin cloak. The pelts were finely matched and sewn. The cloak fell from shoulder to floor in a smooth, warm line. Its under side, the skin side, was finely etched with images of mountains, of high rivers and clouds. In the foreground a row of people and animals faced the mountains, calmly deliberating them—yearning

for them you could say. The people all wore possum skin cloaks. You could see the designs of country on their backs. All were barefoot. Below them, beneath the ground on which they stood, was a series of concentric circles, small galaxies it seemed, whirling through the subterranean space. Here, the artist seemed to be saying, is a world of Dreaming, pushing up through the feet of its people, pushing up through the sacred marks of country, giving life and form to mountain, to river, to creature and cloud. The artist, I soon learnt, was Gary's daughter.

I held the cloak up high, admiring the beauty and skill of the work, admiring the careful curing of the skins and their artful adornment. I was not bold enough to wrap the full cloak around my shoulders but I did manage to hold the softness of the fur against my cheek. This was a cloak that would keep you warm on the most bitter of mountain days. I wondered out loud how old this cloak was and how it came to be made. Gary fixed me with a wry smile. He told me that because possums are now a protected species in Australia all the skins had to be imported from New Zealand. 'Possums are a feral pest there', he said.

I studied the fine designs Gary's daughter had etched in the skins. I asked Gary whether they were fully traditional designs or whether they were traditional symbols taken up in new and contemporary ways. 'They're new but old', he said. 'It might look like the Dreaming symbols and the Dreaming stories have been lost, but they're still there, still held in country. When you start to do some of the traditional things—walking the land, painting designs in caves and rock shelters, making the possum cloaks, country starts speaking again. Country is speaking here', he concluded, 'through these skins, in these designs.' When I told him of a friend of mine who spoke with some of the Aboriginal people whose traditional lands fall within Gariwerd-Grampians National Park in the west of the State and who claim that they received in a dream the missing section of a traditional dance, he nodded with a certain solemnity. 'Knowledge never goes out of country' he said simply.

* * *

I put many questions to Gary Murray that day as we sat at the table in the quiet of his Melbourne flat. One of them was delicate, at least from my point of view. It concerned Gary's attitude to settler descendants like me who confess some connection to, some love for a place that lies at the heart of his Dhudhuroan homelands. Gary just smiled and shook his head slowly. The question was obviously a familiar one. 'It's not who you are or where you're from', he said, 'it's whether or not you love the land and are prepared to do what's right for country.'

As I made my way home that day Gary's response to my question, his putting of the land at the centre of every concern and every deliberation, opened a pathway of thought to the changes that are already underway on the High Plains. Things are shifting there; patterns in the land are changing as temperatures rise and seasonal conditions become less predictable. Gary's country is on the cusp of another wave of change so pronounced that it is, perhaps, as difficult for us to imagine the transformation that will likely occur there as it was for Gary's ancestors to predict the impact of colonisation. But whatever the changes, they must be lived with. For Gary Murray, as for all Aboriginal people, his relationship with the land is forever. There are 'no greener pastures' to which he can turn.⁵²

And it occurred to me as I waited at the end of Gary's street, watching four lanes of traffic stream along Sydney Road, that this scenario of people remaining in and with damaged or radically altered places may become, in the context of climate change, an increasingly familiar scenario for all of us. How we respond to such changes and how able we are to attend to the fractured life of the land may depend on our capacity to 'share in the work of life', to put all our systems of care and knowledge—both Aboriginal and western—at the service of country.⁵³ And it may depend on settlers like me joining with Aboriginal people to learn how to stay with those places we love or have responsibility for, no matter how changed or damaged those places may be. Notwithstanding the fact that global warming will actually render some places uninhabitable, lost to rising sea levels or climate extremes, we may all need to find

pathways to what Aboriginal people have long since known—that while country can be wounded beyond repair it is, nevertheless, a living entity, it retains a will towards life.

As Gary Murray says of his own Dhudhuroan homelands, ‘The damage has been immense. But this is still country. Its spirit is still here, ready to be awakened’.

* * *

I stand, stuff my japara into my pack and swing it onto my shoulders. I head north, into the sun and up the far side of the saddle, watching my step on the lumpy, tufted snow grass. As I take the rise some of the surrounding peaks come into view and I look back towards Mount McKay and the ski runs as they drop down towards Falls Creek village. The Big Fella Festival comes once more to mind, and I ponder again the significance of that smoking ceremony after so many years of absence and of silence. And I remember how uncanny its last few unexpected moments were.

As the ceremony drew to a close that day, the smoke drifted out across the plains. It darkened as it merged with a cloud shadow and its circular stain skidded across the land and dropped abruptly into a nearby valley. The beat of the clap sticks and the drone of didgeridoo called us forward then, gathered us into a tight circle around those men who spoke in recognition of elders past and present. Shyly, some of us stepped out totemic dance moves and spoke the Dhudhuroan words we were taught. With touch of feet and sound of voice we were requesting safe passage through the lands and waters of these Indigenous homelands. From high above, the call of a raven suddenly filtered through the still air. It fell like a raspy lament, like some old fragment of song. ‘Wakarra’, one of the ceremonial leaders responded, his eyes and his hands soaring spontaneously towards that bird as it circled high above us. ‘Wakarra—one of the ancestors!’ With the decisiveness of confirmation he turned towards us then, smiling through clay paint and feathers. ‘Welcome to country’ he announced. ‘Welcome to country!’

10.

The Art of Breadmaking

Henrik Wahren has just stepped in a load of shit. He has said this, just now, as he begins what was to be a presentation on climate change and the high country. The shit, as it turns out, is of the verbal kind, delivered at a meeting Henrik was asked to attend at the end of the day's field trip. His fingers are punching computer keys and behind him images are flashing up of graphs and tables and tiny pygmy possums and alpine marsh marigolds and he is saying that Australia occupies a total area of about 7,700,000 square kilometres and of this only 11,000 square kilometres is classified as highlands, and within these highlands the treeless areas of the Alpine National Park occupy a mere 120 square kilometres. He is saying that within this ridge of elevated country that slides down the eastern seaboard, only 0.15 of one percent is truly alpine and of this, tiny pockets exist on the Plains. He is punching keys and pointing to graphs and saying that National Parks are not about attracting more users or about generating income or about promoting Australian locations overseas. They are about the fragile flowers that bloom beneath the snow. They are about the palm-sized possums whose shining billiard ball eyes now fill the screen. They are about preservation and protection and holding in trust for future generations. His own dark eyes burn across the audience. As the first four stanzas of the National Parks Act leap onto the screen, Henrik walks out. The silence left in his wake is mighty. We shift in our seats. A few of us slide glances left and right.

* * *

The High Plains in mid-January is a good time to hold an Alpine Ecology Course. The skies tend to be clearer, the temperature warmer, the winds less fierce. That's the theory at least, and this year it has proven to be the rule, though all of us keep our eyes

on the sky and stuff rain gear into the bottom of our packs. The language of the Plains is spoken in lines of tempestuous weather.

This week-long course, initiated and coordinated by Melbourne ecologist Warwick Papst, has been attracting groups of students—academics, interested lay people and those whose work requires some specialised alpine knowledge—to the High Plains for twenty years. In some ways this makes for an eclectic mix of people: post-graduate students, ski-lift company employees, environmental engineers, hydro-electric workers, rangers from Parks Victoria, managers of alpine resorts, apprentices from the alpine nursery, environmental consultants, all rub shoulders and mindsets for five days as they consider the broader ecological context of the High Plains. In other ways the Alpine Ecology Course continues those early pilgrimages of Maisie Fawcett and her ‘High Plains Hounds’ in their quest for greater scientific understanding of the ecological cycles of the Plains. Indeed, it was Warwick Papst who inherited the bulk of Maisie’s primary research on the Plains, and who, with geologist Neville Rosengren and other scientists, has expanded her scientific quest. Over the years they have gathered around them colleagues in specialised areas such high mountain fauna, climate, soils, ecological processes, flora, terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates, rehabilitation and vegetative management. Some of these colleagues, such as Henrik, are ex-students who are now highly regarded in their own scientific fields. Others simply have, like Warwick and Neville, a great commitment to the Plains, have spent a good part of their working lives striving to understand the place; see the sharing of knowledge and the education of others as part of their duty of care, part of their advocacy and protection of an environment under increasing stress. Over the five days of the course their love of the place is as transparent as their knowledge and as deep as their deposit of experience, though it’s doubtful any of them would say as much, and certainly not in such fussy terms.

* * *

Ross who is sitting just near me stands, suggesting that perhaps he can explain, give context to Henrik's unexpected departure. A walking track is to be built, he says, on the undeveloped side of Rocky Valley Dam. It will sweep around the southern shore of the dam and then head north over Rocky Knobs to connect up with the track to Wallace's Hut, one of the most visited spots in the National Park. If the track is built, he says, it will link tracks within the excised area of Falls Creek to the network of tracks in the National Park. By doing this he can, in his role as CEO of the Falls Creek Resort, provide visitors with access to thirty kilometres of walking tracks. He can provide wheelchair access to at least a portion of the National Park. He can promote Falls Creek as an all-weather resort and go a good way to filling the five thousand beds that are mostly vacant in the village outside the snow season. If he fills those beds then there will be jobs for people from Mount Beauty and from other parts of the valley whose average income is around thirty thousand dollars. More jobs on the mountain means that perhaps he can provide a local school and not have the children of permanent residents bussed down to valley schools each day. If the walking track is built, says Ross, it will suit the increasing number of long-distance runners who are coming to the high country for altitude training. It will suit horse trail operators and mountain bike enthusiasts and it will give all members of the community access to the Alps. We all should realise, he says, that in Tourism Australia's 2020 development plan the Victorian Alps is listed as one of fifteen sites in the country to be promoted internationally as a key tourist destination. As such, he says, it is his job to ensure that Falls Creek caters for a diverse range of needs and interests and that projections show that a walking track around the dam and linked to the Wallace's Hut track would be one of the most popular tourist activity options he could provide.

* * *

'When you're trying to identify plants, use all your senses'. Henrik says this to me as we are strolling from the tall closed heaths on the lee side of the valley to the wetlands at its base. I have asked him about a small prolific shrub that has showy lemon flowers that are similar to those of *Kunzea* heath. 'Don't just use your eyes', he says, 'or

touch'. He bends and snaps off a sprig of the shrub I have pointed out. He squashes some of the rounded, fleshy leaves between his thumb and forefinger. 'What does this smell like?' he asks. 'Orange', I say, 'bitter orange.' 'See how the juice of the leaf is oily? On your tongue it is sharp citrus.' I trust him on this but don't taste. I do my own picking and squashing and smelling, and the citrus oil of the *Asterolasia* remains on my fingers long into the morning.

* * *

Neville Rosengren is on his feet, freshly showered and looking sharp in his Kevin 07 tee-shirt. 'There are volatile issues here', he says. 'Important issues about development and preservation'. He sets some boundaries for discussion. He nominates himself as Chairperson. All comments or questions must go through him. 'Feelings may run high', he says. 'Directing comments through the Chair will ameliorate any pointed or pointedly personal remarks'. He says that formal discussion will conclude after forty-five minutes, the time originally allotted for Henrik's presentation on his involvement in the International Tundra Experiment (ITEX), a world-wide study of the impact of climate change on alpine vegetation. If anyone objects to these procedures or feels any discomfort with the discussion itself they are welcome to leave at this point. One of the guys representing a ski lift company from the Kosciuszko area suggests that a fair discussion, particularly in relation to Ross's position, is unlikely. He rises, can of beer in hand, and leaves. Everyone else watches him go.

'Perhaps first', says Neville, 'a little more context setting. The design of the walking track in question will be submitted to the Minister for the Environment as a joint proposal between Falls Creek Resort Management and Parks Victoria. The proposal has never been open to public comment or consultation. No environmental effects studies have been conducted. No scientific bodies or individual scientists have been invited into the consultative process. The proposed track will open up the more remote areas around the dam and cut through a large and intact wetland. It is designed to enter the National Park at Rocky Knobs and will cut a swathe across one of the least

disturbed areas in the whole of the Park. It will run right by one of Maisie Fawcett's exclusion plots, one of the oldest scientific studies in the country, before connecting up with the track to Wallace's Hut'.

* * *

Thirty of us are perched on outcropping rocks on the steep side of Mount McKay. It is the first afternoon of the course and we are gathered on a high ridge, under a clear sky, being introduced to the high country landscape. From here the colours and characteristics of the High Plains are painted clearly on the canvas of the land. Straight ahead the tilted sedimentary peak of Feathertop. Nearby the gathered marbles of the Niggerheads⁴. To the right on the Fainters, and way over beyond Pretty Valley on Mount Jim, basalt has flowed like warm icing leaving the surfaces brittle and planar. Over there is the incision of the Kiewa Fault, a fracture in the rock that is thirty kilometres deep. When that rock broke, says Neville, one half of the plateau shot fifty metres north. What is now the West Kiewa River, which then would have been a tired waterway sleepwalking across the Plain, would have leapt into the fissure, shaking itself awake as it carved a new escape route off the plateau. Under our feet Mount McKay drops almost vertically to the edge of Pretty Valley. The valley itself is shallow, as if the prevailing westerly has bitten off its high ridges and smoothed them over with long tongues of wind blown sand. Granite boulders are scattered around down there, sticky plumes of molten rock, Neville tells us, which have melted their way into and between the stratified layers of much older rock. Their burial ground, more than three kilometres below the old metamorphic surface of the valley, has been gradually exposed, laid bare by the patient process of denudation.

The mottled greens that pattern the surface of the valley are clues, says botanist Keith MacDougall, to its botanical face. The sage and grey-green of the grasses indicate areas that are too cold for trees, and even for shrubs. Exposed ridges, as you might

⁴ The Niggerheads have recently been renamed 'The Jaithmathangs'. Dhudhuroan elders, however, claim that this cluster of granite peaks falls within Dhudhuroan country and have once again been misnamed.

expect, attract only the hardiest of grasses and mat-forming daisies such as *Celmisia*. But the floor of the valley, which is more sheltered and seemingly more suitable to tree growth, is also a smooth run of grasses with a dark vein of wetland twisting along its centre. Cold air is heavier than warm air, says Keith, and it descends from higher ground to settle along the floor of valleys such as this. These cold air drainage spots can be as cold and inhospitable to larger plants as the high ridges. Here and there clusters of heath gather around the protective backs of rocks and boulders and a few snow gums have pushed up among them.

* * *

Neville's face and arms and his white tee-shirt are the colour of burnished jarrah. The sun dropped behind the ridge half an hour ago but the valley on whose southern flank we are perched has not yet given up its wedge of sky and the sky is holding on to the burnt out ends of the day. The first of the stars blink and shiver into eyeshot, seeping through the firmament and arriving here in the upper reaches of the valley. Down below the wind meanders around, rattling some gums and pressing the rubbery spines of the heaths. A raven rides the bucking branches of a snow gum on the other side of the plate glass windows. Its song has died with the dying of the day but it watches us through the glass with its quick white eye.

Someone asks Neville how it could be that Parks Victoria would back this plan. He chooses his words carefully in response. A number of senior managers in Parks Victoria are direct Government appointees. They have backgrounds in corporate management and development. But surely, someone else says, they must be bound by the Parks Victoria Charter in terms of process, in terms of making such decisions available to public scrutiny and comment. That's what it says in the Charter, says Neville, but it seems that a loose agreement has been entered into giving in principle support to the track proposal before the proposal has been finalized or scrutinized.

When botanist Keith McDougal speaks his voice is soft, measured, old—as if he has been having this conversation for the last forty years. The problem as he sees it is of a higher order than competing interests between the resort and the national park. Two government departments have been established, he says, whose specific briefs and management plans are diametrically opposed to each other. The explicit mandate of one is to develop high value natural environments for economic purposes while the mandate for another is to protect the unique natural features of those same areas from development, from unsupportable visitor numbers, from the intrusion of feral plants and animals.

I will raise again, says Neville, the issue I mentioned today out in the field. What is the carrying capacity of this place? Whose interests are being served when the carrying capacity of a place, a fragile place, is exceeded? What are the measures that need to be implemented when the popularity of a place impacts adversely on its ability to renew itself, to regenerate and to flourish?

* * *

To walk in the high country Henrik wears sandals, light cotton shorts, a tee-shirt, sun glasses and a battered, sweat-stained felt hat. Summer or winter, this is how it goes, except for a polar fleece jacket on really icy days. His body is lean, more than a greyhound's length of condensed energy. He is reclining just near me on the sharp slope of New Species Gully, another exclusion plot at the head of Middle Creek. Twenty or so of us are listening to Neville talk about the geological formation of this gully which, he says, is not really a gully at all. A gully has a u-shape he says; this is more like an amphitheatre. He and Henrik have been doing some joint work here, trying to piece together the geological and ecological story of the place. I glance at Henrik. He has his sunglasses off. Bush flies are clustering near his eyes, crawling across his cheek to his mouth. He listens to Neville. Smiles. Answers questions. Raises a casual hand to the flies only when they block his line of vision.

* * *

Tony from Snowy Hydro says that all places now, no matter how fragile, must be open to the competing uses and needs of the community. These areas hold precious resources he says. You can't lock away those resources and expect everyone to be happy about it. Much better to manage them properly. Lisa, a post-graduate student, mentions limits. We know about limits, she says. We know that not everyone who wants to go the Grand Final at the MCG can go. We know that there are strict limits on the number of campers and walkers at Wilson's Promontory National Park. We accept limits in other aspects of our lives. It's time to realise that limits must now be applied to our most popular natural environments.

Paul from the Mount Hotham Resort says that in his experience every operation carried out by any company that has an economic stake in or adjacent to National Parks—those concerned with the harvesting of water, ski lifts, snow making, or tourism—is subject to severe restrictions. You can't do anything, he says, without showing how and to what degree you are protecting the natural environment. There's just no way a walking track could go in here without stringent controls. An engineer who is responsible for the sealing of the road through the National Park from Falls Creek to the Omeo Road is sitting somewhere in the group. He says nothing.

Voices from ski lift companies at Mount Buller, at Kosciuszko and at Mount Hotham go into great detail about the increasing emphasis that is being placed on the rehabilitation of ski slopes and visitor gathering points. How previous practices of sowing slopes with exotics to stabilize the soil has been superseded by more sophisticated knowledge of the botanical structure of the area. All this knowledge and this more enlightened approach would, they assure us, result in a sympathetic and responsible building and maintenance of this new walking track. I think of the slopes I walked on today just above this room on the other side of the ridge. The mosaic of low-growing heaths and tufted snow grasses, of silver mats of daisies and pink-headed trigger plants, of plump green cushion plants and orange and black lichen-painted rocks

had all been bulldozed away in the construction of the ski lift. The nearby ski run had also been stripped of its heathy cover. Native heaths are the first to break through the snow pack in winter, drawing heat down into their roots and causing the snow to recede from their base. On a warm summer's day this south-facing slope was now a sweep of chest high Rye-grass and Timothy Grass, with thistles and St John's Wort spreading at ground level. Another nearby run had been covered in weed-retarding felt which had slipped and buckled and was sprouting weeds in the gaps. None of the indigenous species which had originally been sown onto the felt had taken hold. Those of us walking this slope gathered around Henrik, stopping at the edge of this devastation. His only comment was that the felt had been laid several years ago. On the books the ski lift company's requirements had been met, the job considered done.

* * *

Outside the last of the alpenglow has faded and the windows that wrap around the room have become black mirrors in which strange caricatures of ourselves ape our every move. Discussion has fractured for the moment into a scatter of discreet conversations, small groups seated near each other, heads and shoulders straining forward, words flying in the intimate space that cannot confidently be spoken in the context of the whole group. Just near me Lisa urges scientist Dick Williams to go and look after his boy, meaning Henrik. Neville calls for last comments before wrapping up. A couple of the younger men press points they have made earlier. Neville suggests that emails to Gavin Jennings, the State Environment Minister, calling for due process to be followed in this matter, may be timely. As the discussion closes Neville and his colleagues leave promptly. Many of us hope they find Henrik and check that he is alright. A number of the male participants leave, either for their rooms or the pub, but many of us stay on, talking long into the night.

No one knows if Henrik will appear the next morning, but he is outside the ski lodge at eight o'clock as planned, ready to lead his workshop on the ecology of the wetland

system. I thank him for his gesture of the previous evening, for his passion and his care. Not everyone feels the same way he says.

* * *

It is a word Henrik uses that first gets my attention, that connects with my own gathering sense of foreboding and the ecological future that awaits us. It's fundamentally pathological, he says, referring to the relationship of most Australians to the land. We are in a mini-bus with three young men from the Mount Buller Resort—one a member of the management team and the other two working on rehabilitation projects on the ski slopes. It is the second day of the course and we are heading out in convoy to the track at Watchbed Creek and a long day's walk to the snow patch on Mount Nelse. I have been asking Henrik about his work, about what drew him to the High Plains, about his family background. That was one of the first things I noticed when I came here, he says. I was only a boy, but I knew something was different, something was wrong with the way people felt about and treated the land. I think about the strength of that word. *Pathology*. The science of disease. It is a word that has made more frequent appearances in my own lexicon in recent years as the signs of ecological stasis continue to mount and the denial becomes more trenchant. As the mini-bus crunches and jolts over the gravel road I muse that from the land's point of view, the behaviour of settlers during the last two hundred years could well be likened to some pestilence that first obtained to the coastal skin of the continent and gradually spread to its heart. We have become carriers, somehow, bearers of a sickness that is rampaging through all the species of the Earth. Tracking that illness, understanding the origins of that disease, is surely part of the work of change, of becoming more truly of this place.

So I have followed this word of Henrik's through weeks of email contact and phone calls until now, many months later on a fine morning in Spring, I am making my way to his property on the other side of the Great Dividing Range in the foothills of Mount Buller.

Don't be put off by the dogs, he said in his last email, they are full of sound and fury but essentially harmless. Still, I am glad that Henrik's wife Annie is nearby as I pull into the driveway and am instantly set upon by three large dogs that seem to materialise from the shadows. As I open the car door and step gingerly into their doggy cacophony, Annie scolds them and grabs at their collars and welcomes me to her and Henrik's work in progress. Her eyes are kind and lively and her greeting warm. It's good to be out of the car, to be stretching in the sunshine and the cool, clear air. My eyes do a quick sweep of the property. A couple of large buildings, one of straw bale, are still under construction. Four or five long garden beds run parallel to the driveway with rows of vegetables emerging from the pea straw. A hot-house for seedlings has been constructed nearby. Citrus and fruit trees are in blossom. Beyond the buildings one whole slope is planted out in olive trees. On the other side the land drops away steeply to a valley and then rises to a densely wooded slope. Beyond that the snow crusted peak of Buller meditates on the near horizon.

Annie pushes at the muscled shoulders of the dogs as she leads me over to a converted shed that is presently home to both Henrik and herself and to Henrik's brother and his wife while they continue to work on their joint straw bale home. Nearby is another partly finished building which will eventually become a gathering place for small groups. It houses a large kitchen along one side, a storage area on the other and a large work space in between. Off to the side is a large wood-fired oven. Someone here is a serious baker. Henrik is on the phone as I enter the dimness of the shed but I greet his brother Michael, and place the wine and apricot jam I have brought on the communal bench. The dogs whimper and pace at the door.

Soon Henrik and I are seated in the sun on the other side of the straw bale house, its lime-washed walls dropping behind us like a protective curtain. Annie has taken the simmering kettle from the wood-fired range and made us a pot of tea. The sun spreads on our shoulders like a pair of warm hands—a gift after a cold winter—and I can feel my car-tense body begin to soften and unfold. But Henrik is not relaxing and he is not

one for small talk. We get down to business. It's the expanse of the High Plains, he says, that has always drawn him, its open, low-relief, heath and herb architecture. His work has always been in open, mostly elevated environments—the High Plains, and the Arctic, and the high deserts of south-western U.S.A. But over the years his work in each of these places has convinced him that there is a great sickness at the heart of Western culture. He has lived his adult life trying to fight it and mitigate its excesses and understand its causes, but more and more he is having to walk away. As he is here on these hundred acres. As he did on the Ecology Course. It is why he is making plans to leave his scientific career and throw his energies into the flourishing of this bit of land, into building a workable and self-sufficient local community, into supplying two hundred or so families with his own wood-fired breads.

The thing is, he says, that when a pathological trajectory is far enough advanced, facts make no difference. We have known the facts about what is happening to the biotic community of the planet for more than forty years. We know the science but science has been a grossly ineffective tool of change. Scientists themselves are now talking about ecosystem services. There's no relationship in an ecosystem service, no sense of a whole community of beings—in a stream for example—living their lives in mutual exchange within a dynamic, changing place, no sense of any ethical requirement on our part towards such a community.

That night of the Course, says Henrik, things just got too much. After our day in the field as we returned to Falls Creek, Warwick waved my car down and called me into a meeting with himself and Neville and two guys from the Resort Management Team. Ross, the CEO, came in half way through. I knew the track around the dam had been mooted, but what we were confronted with was a set of fully engineered plans. Somehow it had become a fait accompli. We were simply being asked as a courtesy to suggest any ways things could be tweaked to mitigate the worst of the damage. It was madness.

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Henrik is hitchhiking in British Columbia. He is young and curious and a long way from home. His journey into the land and his formal training in the biological sciences is about to begin, but he doesn't know this yet. He is picked up by a Native American man, a 'medicine man' as it turns out. This man is troubled by the Christianisation of his community and the ready adoption by his people of the Western religion and Western ways of life. He explains to Henrik how he is being ostracized for his 'old ways', for his determination to safeguard traditional culture and the depth of his people's connection with the land. The Medicine Man stops the car by a river and invites Henrik to participate with him in a ritual of cleansing and of guidance. From a small cigar box he takes a series of sacred objects that embody his ancestors. He places each object on the river bank in a rough circle. He then takes a small rock from the river and on its smooth surface lights some sage and another herb, perhaps artemisia, and wafts the smoke within the area of the circle, and then cleanses the personal space around Henrik and around himself. Finally, he lights some native tobacco—not within a pipe as Henrik had expected—but in the form of a cigarette. The vessel is not important says the man, but the smoke. Spirit is breath, and the smoke makes spirit visible.

As Henrik speaks of this unusual encounter his eyes darken, recede into memory. I look out for a moment over this most Australian of valleys, and consider the potency of this Medicine Man's words and symbols. I consider the power of his smoke. I look out to where the wattles and the gums cleave to the old soils, where the voices of the cockatoos swoop along the length of the valley and intercept our own, and wonder how long it has been since the smoke from Braiakaulung ceremonies slumbered here among the eucalypts. Henrik doesn't yet know the people who could smoke him into this country, doesn't know if there are descendants of the First Peoples still living in the area who could introduce him here, announce his name and his intentions to the Dreaming figures and Ancestors who may still reside in the land. But he tells me later that forging such connections is at the centre of his work of restoration here, at the centre of his vision for community.

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The heart of the pathology says Henrik, is a sense that has developed in the West that human beings are separate from the natural world—as if our increasing dominance and control negates our dependence on the earth for every aspect of existence. We have the dust of stars in our blood and bones, he says, and the accrued, encoded wisdom of the earth in every twist of DNA in every cell of our body. We are a walking, talking manifestation of the earth, a rational, creative expression of the universe. Yet we act as if the living earth is one vast resource for our use, an endless standing reserve that has no value apart from how it can be manipulated and exploited for profit.

This sense of separation probably began, says Henrik, with the rise of agriculture and the attendant development of symbolism and of writing—enormously useful tools of communication and exchange, but problematic when reified. Agriculture enabled, for the first time in human history, the accumulation of a surplus of goods, which inevitably led to the beginnings of hierarchical social structures and the centralisation of power. Within this growing structure of civilisation—classical civilisations as we now call them—symbols initially represented aspects of the real world—real beings, real phenomena, like animals or streams or tracks through the forest. With writing though, and particularly with the formation of the modern alphabet, that representation is lost. The symbols on the page become, for the first time, shapes and sounds in and of themselves, with no external referent. I recognise in these lines of Henrik’s the thought of ecological philosopher David Abram and ask Henrik about this. He seems pleased that we share knowledge of and respect for the work of this important thinker and writer. I didn’t understand what Abram was on about when I first read his book, *Spell of the Sensuous*, says Henrik, but after my encounters with native peoples in Canada and those living a more traditional existence close to the land in Europe, I finally got it.⁵⁴ Essentially, Indigenous peoples encounter a rock or notice the way the sunlight falls in a particular way upon a tree or observe when and how an animal reveals itself, and they hear voices in their heads. We look at scratches on a page and we hear voices

in our heads, too. But the voices we hear are only of the human kind. We have allowed alphabetic symbols to replace the actual earth. We have lost connection with what those symbols are actually representing, so the rock or the tree or the animal becomes objectified. It becomes a thing, a scientific category—*Granodiorite* or *Leptosperm* or *Trichosurus vulpecula*—rather than a distinctive presence. We have drained our culture of its species capacity to sense, to hear, to read, the voices of the more-than-human world.

The way back is slow, says Henrik, and who knows if it can be accomplished in one lifetime, but many people here in Australia and elsewhere are trying to reposition our lives within the earth community, to live out something of the bioregional vision enunciated by Kirkpatrick Sale and come home to the land, come home to ourselves within this tired but beautiful valley.

Later, as I'm about to leave, Henrik puts a number of books in my hands, books of ecological and anarchic philosophy that have fueled and inspired his interrogation of the Western mindset and have suggested an alternative path forward. One book contains a number of articles by Sale and as I read these in the weeks after my visit I see how the bioregional vision both critiques the Western pathology and proposes an integrative model for living and working. The edifice we call the Modern Age rests, says Sale, on the cornerstones of humanism, rationalism, materialism and nationalism. It is upon these foundations, and fueled by the treasure extracted from the New World, that European civilisation has been able to expand and to dominate not only other peoples, but the other species of the world—‘a dominance of white male over dark, technics over sodality, mechanical over organic, and, above all, of human over nature’⁵⁵. We are now at the end of this five hundred year arc of supremacy and we see that the European subcontinent and all the continents it has peopled and all the cultures it has touched is now a society in crisis, a crisis not only of substance, but also of spirit. The future, says Sale, must be an ecological one, and this will come about either by design, whereby the institutions of the industrial world prove themselves utterly inept in responding to ecological challenges and people begin looking for eco-centred

alternatives, or by catastrophe, where some devastating ecological event alters or eliminates existing systems and structures and threatens the survival of many species, including the human.

* * *

Henrik and I have been talking for hours and it is only when Annie arrives with some of Henrik's breads and salad for lunch and a lemon cake she has just taken from the wood oven that we realise that the sun has passed its zenith and is in the first stages of its descent into the west. Henrik's sourdough is delicious, moist and hearty, as is his fruit bread and a loaf containing nuts and spices. We layer slices with hummus and cheese and greens and watch the snows receding from the western ridge of Mount Buller.

It is after our meal, as Henrik walks me around a section of his one hundred acres, that I am reminded of the physical fluency and intense, localised knowledge I encountered in him on the High Plains. His strong palm pats the trunks of the blue gums that have been struggling through years of dry while his fingertips check the pliant, tender shoots of the saplings that were planted during the winter. Almost under his breath, as if in greeting or in incantation, he speaks the names, scientific and common, of each bank of grasses, each bush, each tree or vine as we pass. He reaches to touch the shaggy heads of the grasses, to run the leathery leaves and seed pods of each acacia and each eucalypt through his hands as we ease our way down the slope. Down at the creek he points out various exotic species that my untrained eye has missed, points out the geometrically pleasing shapes of the exposed mudstone blocks, points out the fruit trees that have seeded near the water and need to be pulled, points out the hidden home of a family of antechinus. He steps languidly around a ferocious looking thorn bush, talks of the various snakes that frequent this area, mentions that for him the first principle of ecological restoration is to limit human interference, to trust that it is the land itself that best knows how to achieve balance.

Weeks later, after I have read Kirkpatrick Sale, it will occur to me how comprehensively Henrik embodies what for Sale are the three things essential to the implementation of the bioregional project—a depth of scholarship about the species and habitats within a local area; restorative efforts that return an area to its largely wild state, within which humans fit their social and cultural constructs; and the development of human communities that will commit to these tasks and guide the rest of us in ways of living within these restored areas as one species among many—but for now, as Henrik meanders through his home place quietly speaking its story, I am reminded, perhaps because of its incongruity, of his final public gesture on the last day of the Alpine Ecology Course. We had gathered for lunch at a spot overlooking Maisie Fawcett's Rocky Valley exclusion plot. After Dick Williams had explained the significance of Maisie's work here in documenting the impact of cattle on soil erosion and the hydrology of the Plains, and after Neville Rosengren had pointed out the visceral impact the proposed track will have if it is allowed to be built here, Henrik rose awkwardly from where he was seated on the ground and asked for a chance to speak. He stood erect, arms by his side, his gaze focused in the middle distance, focused, I would guess, about where the extensive wetland darkens the centre of the exclusion plot. He stood and gave a brief, lean apology for his unexpected departure the night before. Apologised to those who had complained that they had paid for a presentation on climate change as part of their course fee and that this had not been delivered. Apologised that, in the heat of the moment, he had not considered this perspective. Apologised for any inconvenience. He sat down then, to a smattering of applause.

* * *

As we make our way up to the road from the creek and amble past the olive plantation the full pattern of the valley comes into view. The bare paddocks of neighbouring cattle properties drop to the road on our right while straight ahead the cluster of buildings and gardens that constitute Henrik's property perch, almost precariously it seems, above the deep gash of the creek. The opposite slope, land for which Henrik and those he loves have taken on custodial responsibilities, is darkly wooded and, in

this soft afternoon breeze, moving like a slow body of water. In the weeks to come I will think back on this view, back on this day, as I read from another of Henrik's books. I will find there words about hope, words that Henrik has underlined in grey pencil, words that reveal the mischievous Trojan cargo that is deposited within us when hope lingers. Hope is a curse, these words announce, it is a bane which leads us away from our own potency and power and keeps us focused on a future that will never arrive. It is only when we give up hoping that someone or something—the government or the corporations or the public or God—will suddenly act to curb the destruction of the earth that we will begin to do whatever it takes to stop the destruction ourselves. I will read that it is not hope that will save anything. It is action, and action—the honest work to resolve the situation through our own agency—will only truly be liberated when hope dies.⁵⁶

Back near the vegetable patch we find Annie, who is clearing an area where some new trees will go. I hug her and thank her for her hospitality, and as I move towards the car she and Henrik fill my arms with limes and kaffir leaves and thick red sticks of rhubarb. The dogs reappear, but they are lazy now, and disinterested and my departure barely causes the lift of a tail. Come again, says Henrik, and next time stay overnight. The mornings here are beautiful this time of year. He wraps me in a strong hug before I load the car and am gone.

11.

Eagle

Say you are nine years old and your family has run cattle in the Kiewa Valley for close to one hundred years. Say this valley with its fertile flats and its low forested hills walled on one side by the Tawonga Gap and on the other by the broad-shouldered bulk of Mount Bogong is all the world you've known for as long as you have lived, and that from your bedroom window the whole valley looks bowed in the centre like one half of a hollowed log with a river running through it. Say for the first time in your life your father says you can skip school and ride with him and the other stockmen as far as Mountain Creek as they take the stock up to the High Plains for their summer grazing. Say that in the valley in this early part of spring the days start out cold but you know that when the sun gets up the air will heat up fast and that even though you don't know for sure, you think that droving stock will be hot and thirsty work and so instead of trousers you pull on your shorts and a short-sleeved shirt and a jumper over the top that you can easily strip off. And say you pull on your boots over yesterday's socks and reach for the felt hat that was there under the tree last Christmas because you know that by the time you reach the creek you'll be squinting into the heat and the haze.⁵⁷

And say you sit up high in your saddle and pull your hat low over your eyes as you've seen your father do a thousand times and how you can't help but grin as you lift your hand in a quick wave to your mother and dig your heels into the side of your mount and follow your father's horse out of the yard to the corrals where the Herefords are lowing softly and moving restlessly and fidgeting with their feet as if they know something is up, and that that's setting off the bulls in the other yard who are snorting and pacing and fidgety too even though they won't be going anywhere. And say there's a vibration in your feet and a shiver in your spine as your father and the other stockman begin to whistle and shout and crack their stockwhips to get the herd moving and you think to yourself how those whips when they go off sound like double-bungers detonating on

cracker night. And say the cattle dogs slide and scrabble in the dirt of the yard and growl and nip at the hooves of cows and skirt around the edges of the herd and do the work of a dozen men getting those cows moving. And say you find your voice and your whistle and you start whooping like the men and keeping your horse to the side of the herd like your Dad shows you and you keep watch for any strays and you see how some of the older cows, the seasoned mothers of the herd, head out front and lead the others down the well worn pathways and you can hear the bulls back in the yard bellowing like—well, like bulls—and you decide that from a distance their bellowing sounds a bit like yodelling and that what they're yodelling sounds a bit like ‘we'll aaaaaaaaaallllllll go, we'll aaaaaaaaaallllllll go’, and you smile because that's how you've felt for as many years as you can remember on this day each year as your father mounted his horse and rounded up the cattle and headed for the mountains while you watched from the yard or from the verandah and wished that that was where you were headed too.

And let's say that on this day once the herd gets moving it goes along nicely and as the last long tails of mist rise in the valley and burn off under a bright sun the stockmen shout out to one another and banter with your father and fill each other in on what they've been up to over the winter in this valley and over on the Ovens, what work they picked up, tending tobacco vines or blacksmithing or forestering or milling or following the rodeo circuit. And you hear the relief and the high spirits in their voices as they head towards the mountains and you see how well they sit in their saddles and how their horses seem to move beneath them like extensions of their own bodies, as if they are riding slow-moving waves and you adjust how your backside sits in your own saddle and how your legs are spread wide over the flank of your horse and how the reins rest easy in your hands. And you listen to the voices of these cattle and these men and these dogs and you notice how delicately messages pass between them, how an almost imperceptible tug of the reins or press of a heel against a flank sends a horse sprinting to a young steer who has wandered or how a low whistle calls a dog close or how the seasoned cows nose the calves and heifers forward or back so that they are

clustered in the safe centre of the herd, and how the whole moving, murmuring mass seems like one colourful and fleshy organism pressing along the floor of the valley.

Let's say an hour or two goes by and the sun is high and you have already taken off your jumper and tied it around your waist and your hat band is moist with the sweat from your brow and your clammy skin is attracting the dust and small black bush flies and you keep wiping them away and they keep returning and that in the distance you can see the line of trees and shrubs along Mountain Creek and you are just waiting for your father to give the word for the cattle to water there and to give the nod for you to head back home. But let's say that as the cattle stamp into the creek you take off your hat and are just thinking about dismounting and leading your horse over to the creek for a drink when your Dad walks his horse by yours and reaches out a rough hand and ruffles your damp hair. And let's say that although he doesn't say anything or even look at you you hear him tell the nearest stockman that the poor little bugger may as well come along, and you feel your heart lift and swell and you get off your horse in a flash and lead it to the water and re-mount and settle in your saddle and pull your hat down and take the reins in your hands and get ready to ride as soon as your Dad gives the word and nobody says anything but one of the stockman gives you a secret wink and you try to make your face settle and look like you're ready for business but you know you have no hope of getting the silly grin off your face.

And say that you ride with the herd for three days and two nights as you climb in long slow stages up the valley towards the high country and that when your horse follows the cattle over the crest of the final rise and you see the Plains rolling in front of you for the first time you can't help but stand up in your stirrups and raise your hat high in your hand and let go the longest loudest hoot that has ever come out of you. And say that all about you the cattle are moving at a trot and spreading out over the wide open plains and that as they move they seem to be shaking off the confines of the valley and the claustrophobia of the climb and are singing their own weird and syncopated song that comes in long notes from somewhere way down in their guts. Say that you feel for the first time the rush of mountain air in your face, how cool and clear it is and how it

tastes of sweetness and of spice and how in no time your sweaty shirt feels icy on your skin and your bare legs go goose-bumpy and you pull the jumper from your waist and wrap it around your shoulders and tie the arms under your chin. Say that the other horses are cantering about and the stockmen are yelling and filling their lungs with mountain air and sending the cows on their way with a few final cracks of their whips. And say one of those stockmen rides by you and gives you a belt on the bum and tells you that you didn't really need to dress for the occasion and you sit back down quickly on your saddle because you remember that all the riding you've done in the last few days has worn the seat out of your thin cotton shorts. And you can't seem to stop the colour rising in your cheeks as you rip off your jumper and tie it around your backside to stop your undies showing through. And say your blush only deepens when the stockman laughs at your discomfort and calls out to one of the others about your bare bum and you kind of want to die right there until he gives you a soft punch on the shoulder and rides off and you realise that you have just been ribbed in the way stockmen rib one another.

And say you look over at your father who is calling the dogs in and pulling on his oilskin and motioning for you to draw your horse close to his before you and him and all the stockmen press your horses into a slow canter and head towards the hut on the edge of the Plains where you will spend the night before starting for home the next day. And say that as you ride down the valley early the next morning, down through the snow gums and the great stands of woollybutt and on through the peppermints and the bluegums and the grey box and the wattles and out finally into the open expanse of the Kiewa Valley, you can't think of another thing that has ever filled you up this much or got your blood going or made you feel as much part of something bigger than yourself as this ride into the mountains with these men. And say that as you reach the home paddocks and swing into the yard to dismount, one of the stockmen pats you on the back and another says that next time he'll show you how to throw a rope and your father hugs your mother as she comes out into the yard from the house and they both smile as she takes you in her arms and kisses your damp head and they both agree that a good scrub in the bath can wait while you sit up with the men and have some tea and

cake that she'll get ready while the horses are rubbed down and watered. And say that as you get busy with the rest of the stockmen, unsaddling your horse and muscling the heavy leather into the shed you're already thinking about next year, about this time next year, and hoping you can do it all again.

And say you *do* do it all again, the next year and the next year and the next, until your body grows into your horse and into your hat and school itself becomes a distant memory and that between the droving and the mustering of the cattle to and from the High Plains each season you work with your father, fencing and branding and cutting hay. And say manoeuvring a stock horse and cracking a stock whip become as natural to your body as walking or throwing a hay bale and that half of what you love about the High Plains is the chance to test your skills and to watch others use theirs. And say that it is at mustering time that those skills are most needed when all the cattle on the Plains are mustered into three huge mobs, one in Pretty Valley, one over near Mount Jim and one on Bucketty Plain. And say that the best horsemen from all the surrounding valleys begin to sort out whose cattle are whose by concentrating each herd into a tighter and tighter circle until the whole mob is moving in a slow wheel on the mustering flat. And say once those cattle are settled and moving steadily around and around, the riders enter the wheel from the periphery, moving counter to it and gradually cutting out a selected beast, walking it sideways away from the others. And say that process is repeated time and again until each cattleman has sorted his stock from the herd and is ready to lead them back down familiar routes into their home valley. And say that the agility needed and the quick eye and the fluency between horse and rider are skills you'll never tire of using and forever be perfecting.

But say you are out on Timms Spur one day well before the muster and you are putting out some salt licks and droving a mob of cattle over to the more remote section of your run and you are out there alone—alone except for your horse and the cattle and the dogs and the pipits that dash in and out of the low growing heaths and the snow gums that stand down slope in clumps of twisted origami watching the whole procession go by. Say you are riding slowly, moving the cattle along with a few whoops and whistles

but leaving it mostly to the dogs and that you are day-dreaming a little, enjoying the crisp air after the heat of the valley and looking out across the ridge tops and spurs that fan out from where you are in progressively paler shades of blue. Say you are staring out at that blue and glancing occasionally at the space above where white clouds billow like bed sheets across the sky and fast moving shadows are hauled behind them on invisible wires. And say that with every step it feels like your horse is leading you further into that space and that light and you allow yourself to feel the breadth of it and the expanse of it and the way it falls onto you and blows through you and enters you through all your small and fleshy openings.

And say that out of that large and open sky a form rises slowly from a distant valley, gaining height and size as it courses on thermals towards you and you think at first it is a crow out hunting for carrion and then a hawk as it works the wind and moves its wings in stately, lugubrious beats and then finally, as it continues to lift and to soar, you realise it is an eagle and you pull absent-mindedly on your reins to halt your horse and you track with your eyes the spiralling upthrust of this great bird as it rises incrementally on the warm currents of air, dipping and soaring and gliding in relaxed and commanding spirals. And say as it approaches you see its powerful breasts holding aloft those darkly painted wings and how the slender feathers of the wingtips splay like long black fingers modulating the movement of air across its back and gesturing in the delicate way of Balinese dancers. And say as it glides overhead you see how it strafes with its gaze this pastoral scene below and you wonder if it is wondering about calves or perhaps the memory of calves and you think that a stray or two left behind from the last muster may have seen this great bird through the long lean months of winter. And you can't help but watch as it passes over you and its shadow smudges you and your horse and runs off into the snow grass as the eagle swings out over the gully between this spur and Spion Kopje and then gives a few long beats of its wings and takes a wide turn and begins to double back and you see how it drops altitude and swings in a perfect arc and comes back towards you. And let's say as it approaches for the second time you see how its powerful legs are fully trousered in copper coloured feathers that fade to black near its mighty claws that are folded under its wedge-shaped tail and that

the tail itself is listing subtly this way and that as it sets its course towards you and fixes you with its dark eye. And let's say as it flies low and straight and softens its speed your whole face and chest are open to the sky and to this bird, to its wide wings and its fierce gaze and its majestic presence that looms over you like a dark angel, like a rare emanation of this land and this sky and you know that this eagle knows you are there and that as it passes it drops its wing just low enough for you to see the fullness of its face and the quickness of its eye and the way it drops its head slightly towards you in the way friends may nod to one another in passing and for all the years you have been riding these tops, these high and undulating plains, you have never felt so known, so seen for who you are and how you factor in the scheme of things.

And say that many years from now—forty years or more let's say—you are recounting your life on the land, in the valley and on the High Plains and all the things it has held; the droving and the mustering and the whip cracking and the adzing of timber on the mountain huts and the bushcraft and the horsemanship and the camaraderie of the stockmen and the rescues in the snow and the fighting of fires and the pack horsing of supplies and the rope work and the running down of the brumbies. And let's say that of all the moments of your long life with the land, it is that fleeting moment with the eagle out there on that lonely spur that day that you most long to share, that first slides from your tongue, that comes most powerfully to mind, that means the most to you and captures somehow what your one human life has been for.

12.

Winds of Homecoming

It is some time past midnight when the air shifts. The canvas wall of the tent behind our heads starts to bow and bend. The limb of one of the snow gums creaks, as if sighing under some new weight. Branches knock against one another dully. A line of air moves below us in the Bundara valley, sending up a soft hiss as the wind sweeps through the canopy. Shadows swing on the moonlit canvas. An irritated, troubled growl begins somewhere above us, rumbling in and out of earshot. A long way up the slope a low roar of wind gathers and begins its descent. The sound comes in waves, thick and fast propulsions, like the frantic wingbeat of a chopper descending. It seems to crest the ridge of Mount Cope and bear down upon us at tremendous speed. Instinctively I reach out in the darkness and take hold of the nearest upright pole.

The wind explodes in the snow gum canopy above us. Bark and branches are hurled and scattered in the maelstrom, propelled like missiles against the canvas of the tent and pinging against our car some distance away. The tent itself reels as a fist of wind slams into its side. I feel the shock in the steel and the mad vibration that courses through the pole in my hand. Rather than keeping it steady, it is I who am shaken. Pat flicks on the lamp in time for us to see the two main uprights bent and shuddering and the tent floor beginning to lift. We scramble to shift bags and food boxes into the corners to weigh the tent down and stop it becoming a billowing bit of sailcloth. When the second gust comes through the wind grips one side of the canvas in its great hand, straining to rip the tent from its base and hurl it to the sky. Pat and I hold one another, terrified that the tent poles will snap, or that a snow gum will be uprooted and bury us here in this canvas bag.

With the next press of wind one of the verandah poles goes down, clattering in the darkness and making the whole structure of the tent lurch violently. I leap from the bed, throw on pants and jacket, pull on some boots and open the zip in the tent door. A gush of air shoots past me knocking over cups and water bottles and flipping the pages of books and magazines with a frantic finger.

Outside the whole of the night has become a swirling cacophony of force and sound. A shattering, like broken glass, erupts behind me as a branch tears loose and comes down. I hear Pat scream, a muffled and distant sound even though she is only a few feet away. I yell in response, attempting to hoist my voice over the rush of oncoming noise. I stagger against the muscle of the wind to the car, fumbling with the key to the boot. As soon as the lid is released from its catch the wind snatches at it, banging it back against its hinges. I grab the hammer and a new tent peg and slam the boot shut. Back under the verandah the canvas edge of the roof is flapping and bucking like a live thing. I grab at it, fitting its steel eyelet to the spike at the top of the tent pole. By the quivering light of my headlamp I search for the guy rope, attaching one end to the pole and holding it down firmly until I can slam the new peg into the ground.

I step to the side of the tent, aiming to re-sink the tent pegs that have lifted, but the force of the wind out here is mighty, the detritus whirling in the darkness dangerous and frightening. I punch two of the nearest pegs back into their holes before leaping, shaken and half frozen back through the door of the tent.

* * *

Winds like this are one of the reasons this high country looks the way it does. Nothing loose or meandering can resist its power, deny its persistence, hold back its shaping hand. The fluid architecture of undulating plain, smooth monadnock and polished stone are what the wind—along with its erosional sister, water—has made of this place. And what it has made rolls and ripples like the wind itself. The long smooth dance between element and form, between force and resistance, between what is still and

composed and that which is hungry, restless, perpetually in motion. Snow gums mark the step and flow of this slow waltz, accentuate its rise and fall, adumbrate its form. On the highest ridges they steady themselves, sink thickened toes into rock and soil. But they too are what the wind makes of them, their torsos flung back, their branches bent into elbows and folded into long, elegant wrists, as if shielding themselves from the icy blasts. These Plains are the sculpture born of complementary powers.

Wind. Wind. The movement of air is more present here where the land stands open to the sky than in the box and dice of the city. In fact, the whole of the natural world seems more present here—or is it we who are more present to it?—the intensity of sun in this thinner air, the moon as it sails its river of night, the Southern Cross in its stately progression, the waft of birds from plain to valley, the slice of frost and ice. But this is an illusion of course, a convenient deceit in a way, a fancy that we in the West perpetually entertain, this idea that the earth moves closer to us as we move away from the city. The poet Rilke captures these dual impulses well, the yearning for immersion and the daily communion that is our lives:

*Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.

The inner—what is it?
If not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming'.⁵⁸*

To be sure, there are intensifications, places like the High Plains where the biotic community is especially diverse or at least less fractured than is generally the case in highly urban and industrial locations. But really, we are never cut off. The natural world is the milieu of our lives, as immanent and intimate as breath. And the wind. The wind shakes the forgetfulness from us, awakens us, is one of the agents of ‘homecoming’. The wind calls us back to a remembering of the ever present air, the

‘intensified sky’ that is in us and around us, that element into which everything emerges, through which all things move, in which everything has its being.

The wind reminds us that we never speak in the singular—not the rasp-throated raven, not the heaths that whip and whoosh or the deeper roar of the snow gums, not me as I hum an absent-minded tune along Fitzgerald’s track, not Pat as she moans involuntarily when I kiss her deeply in the night. It is the air that speaks within us, with us, sounding through throat and larynx, vibrating through leaf and bud.

* * *

The following morning the winds are still raging. The sky though is clear and blue, the temperature gradually lifting with the sun. We bring the camp stove inside to boil some water for tea and then armour ourselves with coats and scarves and step out into a clearing to survey the night’s damage. We anchor our feet and hold onto one another for balance as we look around. Many branches have come down and a number of trees have been uprooted. The forest floor appears to have been swept almost clean, as if a mighty brush has gone through. The snow gums around our camp have been stripped of loose bark and any dead wood they may have been carrying. The canopy above is torn and ragged but still rearing as the wind hauls its way through. So long as those trees can keep their feet in the ground, their bodies are providing our tent with some protection from the gales.

By midday we have reset all the poles and re-peggd the tent and sit inside watching the walls shudder. Eventually we wonder if there is anywhere on the Plains sheltered enough for a walk. We should know better, but we decide to try the aqueduct near Langford’s Gap, figuring that because the track there is cut into the eastern shoulder of the Plains it will be protected from these prevailing westerlies. For the first twenty minutes or so we congratulate ourselves on our decision. The winds are still gusting but are manageable, the real turbulence in the air rolling above our heads into the valley below. When we round a corner though, the slight shift in angle brings the wind

barrelling directly into our chests. We pull our beanies over our ears and our scarves across our faces and try to hurry to a more protected section of the track. It's no use though; each forward movement feels like we are pushing dead weight uphill. Our bodies curve into sharp Cs, our foreheads are being sand-blasted, our eyes tearing. After only a few minutes we surrender, turning our backs to the wind. It pushes us along, hurrying us back from where we came, our trouser legs flapping and snapping at our heels.

* * *

For the Dhudhuroa and the Way Wurru, some of the high country's first peoples, 'karri' is the generic word for wind. It is also the root word for 'call', for the communicative exchange between and among species.⁵⁹ In Aboriginal communities in northern Australia where language systems are more intact, there is a whole vocabulary for the nature and movement of air, words that name the subtleties of wind, its various forms and strengths and directions, whether it is cool or warm, dangerous or benign, predictable or peripatetic; words that name air currents that are personal, related to one's breath, to the way air moves along one's windpipe, forms into sound, into speech.⁶⁰ But air also has deep associations with the Dreaming, that implicit realm of 'everywhen' in which all that is visible and present is continually emerging.⁶¹

Like indigenous peoples the world over, wind, air and breath have sacred associations for Aboriginal peoples. The air is the locus of awareness, the interior or unconscious aspect of the Dreaming from which all conscious and concrete forms—rocks, persons, clouds and high plains—arise and crystallise. While we in the West tend to regard 'mind' as an exclusive aspect of personhood, existing in a sense inside an individual's head, 'mind' for Aboriginal people is the latent and unconscious quality of the air, the space around and between crystallised forms and from which those forms emerge. For this reason birds who wing their way through empty air are understood as messengers of the unconscious; flashes of lightning are seen as violent discharges from this same

realm, while the Rainbow Serpent that arcs across the sky is understood to embody all the most dangerous and yet life giving forces in the land.⁶²

* * *

Back on the track there is nothing passive about the air around us. It is alive with purpose and with power. It echoes in our eardrums and booms percussively in our mouths as we stagger back to the car. Our breaths, rapid and laboured, join the varied musics the wind is coaxing from the land. As we slam the doors and turn the engine over we pause in the sudden calm, the whole car smelling like wind in our clothes. Outside the wind rocks our vehicle as if trying to loose some memory and as it lifts and swirls about us, it keens a haunting, inconsolable song.

* * *

In a week or so, back in the city and enduring an uncharacteristic humid patch of weather that has pushed in on the back of this turbulence, the wind will return to us, surprisingly, powerfully, in another form.

On a day when the thermometer hovers around the thirty degree mark, when the usually dry heat of a Melbourne summer has turned moist and sluggish, Pat and I enter the Augustine Centre—a converted church in the heart of inner-suburban Camberwell. The convenors of this spirituality centre run an interesting and progressive program and have invited writer and philosopher David Abram to address a public forum.⁶³ As we take our seats we notice many familiar faces, activists, academics, bushies, gardeners, church people, those whose commitment to the earth has spanned the course of their adult lives. And we notice our dear friends, Jan, Wendy, Marg and Mary, who greet us with hugs and smiles, and nearby another of our friends, Tina.

Through a long cycle of stories David Abram returns again and again to the subject of the air, to the air that is the ‘breathing earth’, to the air as a key to our forgotten

intimacy with the earth's enduring presence. It is what he reiterates in his stories about his travels in oral cultures where air, breath and wind are still entwined with sacred attributes, have not been emptied of their potency through confinement in alphabetical symbols. It is what he emphasizes in his investigation of languages and their roots in the animate earth. It is what resonates for him in his study of ancient Hebrew, a language that is central to his own Jewish heritage. Our isolation from the earth is what he is trying to breach by reminding us that the sounds we make, our languages, can, if we pay attention to them, lead us back, lead us to the sounds and the song of the lively earth itself, from which all our languages come.

He reminds us that in the ancient Hebrew writing system, the *aleph-beth*, there are no vowels sounds. Meaning-making requires the participation of the body, of the breath, and breath is the personal intake of wind, and wind is always associated with *ruach*, with spirit. *Ruach*, the sacred breath, the holy wind, enters not just into human beings, but animates and sustains the whole of the sensible world, 'from stones to sparrows', just as it did at the beginning of time.

It is remarkable, he says, that the most holy of God's names, the four letter Tetragrammaton, 'Y-H-W-H', is composed of the most breath-like consonants in ancient Hebrew. The most sacred of God's names is an utterance spoken, in a sense, by the wind. He places his open palm on his chest now and begins a slow, dull, beat. The forgotten pronunciation, he says, may be shaped by forming the first syllable, 'Y-H', on the whispered inbreath, and the second syllable, 'W-H', on the whispered outbreak. His palm is beating on his heart and his lips are forming the syllables and the air is making low sounds in his throat as he pulls it in and releases it rhythmically, and something is rising on this single cycle of breath, some other presence is moving here, some voice is pressing up through the alchemy of air and lungs, pressing through the breath and the sounds and the sounding of the divine name and reaching back, pressing into our bestial memory, carrying all of us, for a moment, deep into the flesh we share with all the world, and we fill our lungs with it and it seems as if we share a single breath and the air that enters us tastes of soil and of seaweed, and it rolls on our animal

tongues like the rich and budded breath of the earth itself. I look away, to Pat who is crying, lost in the air and the water. And I glimpse Tina, who is sitting just beside and to the back of us. Her eyes are soft and full of tears too, and her mouth is open and the air is gliding in.

* * *

But for now, here on the Plains and under the open sky, the winds blow all through the night and into the next day. Everything that we need is about us in the tent—food, books, camp stove, lamp, esky, hammer, pegs, wine, chocolate. Periodically, between gusts, we step outside and nervously check the snow gums around us. Each blast sets our nerves on edge. We vacillate between a shaky conviction that this front will finally blow itself out, and the safer option of moving off the plateau to less dangerous ground below.

Sometime in the night the violent gusts moderate and a more consistent, pressing wind blows in, constant enough in its rhythm for us to catch a few hours sleep. By dawn there is a soft drumming on the roof. Now that the rains are here, we think, the winds will soon be gone. By the time we boil the billy and have some breakfast the rain has turned to sleet and is hammering the canvas roof. The wind picks up again and sends the sleet hurtling into the side of the wall of the tent. Water starts coming in, a thin stream at first from the corner of the saturated canvas, and then coursing in fat rivulets along the floor. We grab towels and newspaper to soak up and stop its flow. The air is freezing, our breath rising in puffs of white smoke. With so much stuff in the tent it is hard to keep our bedding dry. We stack up the bedrolls and lay them on the food boxes, mopping up moisture as we go. When the gusting wind returns, we look at one another and silently agree that it's time to surrender.

We pack up everything inside the tent, then put on our boots and coats, keeping aside a dry set of clothes, and step into the rain and sleet to pack the car and lower the tent. By the time we are putting the last things in the car the wind drops, suddenly exhausted, as

if hauling in heavy clouds has sapped it of all energy. As we huddle on the lee side of the car, stripping off our wet clothes and replacing them with dry ones, the sleet turns to snow, millions of flakes falling with the softness of eyelashes on our skin. We drive along the road to Falls Creek, slipping and sliding over the muddy and half-frozen road, watching silently as the snow pulls a crisp white sheet across the bare shoulders of the Plains. The wind gives those same shoulders a few last sweet licks and disappears into the valley.

13.

Fire

2009

January finally lays down its defences. The uncharacteristic run of mild weather that has persisted since Christmas, that has held no rain but has held back the heat sweeping in from the centre of the continent, is suddenly seared to the margins of memory. This southern corner of Australia readies itself, lays out its garments of bark and leafy tinder; anticipates the beginning of an old and well worn choreography. The sky does not disappoint. Into that clear space moves air of low humidity and heat that draws the last lick of moisture from the gardens and the grasslands and the bush. In the city the great avenues of elms and plane trees begin to shed their leaves. Crisp brown bundles of them clatter along the bluestone gutters.

As temperatures climb even the gums begin dropping leaves, baring flesh, opening wide their canopies. If there is a whisper, though, of the winds that will come and the spark that will throw that wind to flame, then it is knowledge that the trees pass amongst themselves. Even the animals seem heat struck. They move quietly, carefully, sniffing for news. Hundreds of fruit bats die from the heat in Yarra Bend Park. Train tracks warp and buckle. A burnt out electricity transformer in the Latrobe Valley creates power outages across the city. Hospital emergency departments swell with the elderly, the very young, the heat-distressed.

Entering the crucible

Mid-morning on the second day of temperatures in the mid-forties I collect Pat from the airport, arriving home from an extended work-related stay in the United States. The

house she comes home to is only slightly cooler than the sun-cooked car and the wavering, heat-riddled road.

At night the temperature barely gets below thirty degrees. We leave all the doors and windows open and pull the camping mats out near the double doors at the back. We aim the air of an old fan at our naked bodies and fall asleep by moonlight, with trams rumbling in the distance and flying foxes squealing from the plum tree next door. We have plans to travel north to the coast, to the Sapphire Coast and the dreamy town of Tathra, but we wait for the weather to break. It is high summer and Victoria is pushing into its second decade of intense dry. New records are being set for the state's lowest rainfall, for highest daytime temperatures, for the number of days over 40 degrees. The new category of 'catastrophic' is prescribed by the Weather Bureau to describe days of unprecedeted temperatures and extreme weather conditions. It is high summer and the state's forests are brittle and fatigued. Like the rest of us they slide into the slow, meditative torpor of heat haze, but they do not burn. We pack the car and head out of the city on the only morning that offers any coolness in a week of high temperatures.

2003

Weather moves fast and unpredictably in the mountains. A perfect summer's day can be cut short by a king tide of cloud rising fast from a valley and swamping the place in a dense and freezing fog. Winds come in, howling across the open plains and then fall into gullies and are gone. The winter snow pack can be hurled to fury by blizzard winds and then just half a day later lie still and blinding under a bright sun. Rain can fall hard, an iron curtain of it, only to stop suddenly, as if some distant weather switch has been flicked. And sometimes, mostly in summer and mostly after spells of hot, dry weather, it is fire that comes.

It was this kind of ephemeral weather band that pushed across the High Plains one moonless mid-summer night. We had felt the shift in the air, heard the rumble of thunder and seen the flashes of sheet lightning that had turned the darkness soft rose and blue. But the night remained dry and the weak front had quickly danced off to

trouble another part of the range. We stepped out the next morning into a day that was cool and cloudless and headed into Pretty Valley. As we reached the edge of the diversion dam where it sleeps in the shade of Mount McKay we noticed a thin stream of smoke rising from the foot of Mount Feathertop. Dry weather changes can do that, cast about a few stray swords of lightning and then get out quick without sending accompanying rains to mop up the damage. By the time we crossed the dam and climbed the Fainter fire trail to the cairn at its highest point, we could almost see the base of the fire, flashes of black and red darting within dense pillows of slate grey smoke.

We turned south on the track and headed towards Mount Jim. The fire was to our backs but a stream of smoke began to arch over us, high and thickening into angry contusions. We quickened our step, grateful that there was little wind here on the open plains, but wondering what the natural convection currents were doing in that dry and inaccessible valley. Back at the car we tried the radio for news. The Feathertop fire was only one of many that had ignited through the night. Fire crews were mobilising across the mountains and water-bombing helicopters had been called in from Melbourne.

What the body knows

These bodies of ours, Pat's body, my body, have no physical memory of bushfire. We have never lived through one, never felt the radiant force of one-thousand degree heat peeling back the skin on our face and hands, never felt the panicked suffocation when oxygen is sucked suddenly from the room, the shed, the dug-out we might be sheltering in, never heard the sonic boom of a forest erupting, the thunderous cacophony of a fire-front passing like a thousand jet engines raging across the land. Never seen with our naked eyes the wavering giant of a fire-front throwing its fiery might a thousand metres into the air, never seen sticks and embers shearing through roofs and walls with the force of an angle-grinder, never felt the interior atomic winds that a fire front generates.

Our bodies have no memory, but on that day as we listened to the radio, our psyches fizzed with warning, our minds imagined the threat that was to come. We knew enough of the mountains to know that it would do no good to be stranded here, to be caught on these open tops while wildfire raged through the valleys. We knew that if those fires intensified they would have nowhere to go but up, and that up was where we were and that here, on these open plains, there was nowhere to go to hide.

It took us less than an hour to pack up our camp and head down into the Kiewa Valley. We crossed the range over the Tawonga Gap and stopped in Bright where the whole town was turning itself over to firefighting and reconnaissance. We stayed as the mountain fires accelerated around us and the town filled with smoke; as fire fighters poured in from around the state, and as the sound of water-bombing helicopters became a constant drone, getting water into places that fire trucks couldn't. We stayed until this valley town and all the other valley towns each side of the range became threatened with fire themselves.

Here's what happened

Eighty-seven fires broke out that night when sheet lightning flickered across the Dividing Range. Eight of them, including the Feathertop fire, were in difficult terrain or were too intense to be contained. These eight fires joined to create a massive fire front across the alpine region. This one fire burnt 1.2 million hectares of bush, becoming the largest bushfire in Victoria since Black Friday 1939. It raged for fifty-nine days before the fire fighters and the rains brought it under control. Forty-one homes were burnt, nine thousand head of stock were lost and thousands of kilometres of fencing. At its height the fire front stretched from Mount Buffalo on the south-western side of the Great Divide to Namadgi and the Brindabellas in the northern part of the range in NSW, an area that extended across thirteen thousand square kilometres of alpine terrain. Swept along by increasingly intense winds the fires erupted on the outskirts of the national capital, searing suburbs along the western perimeter of Canberra and taking four lives when they joined with an exploding pine plantation. At

its end in early March great swathes of alpine country in Victoria and New South Wales had been scorched.

What happened on the High Plains

The thing about eucalypt forests is that they are made to burn. And while not all forests burn the same they all need fire to renew themselves.⁶⁴ But this does not hold true for the High Plains, or at least not completely. Fire is not a symbiotic player here as it is in the lowlands. Aboriginal communities did not fire-farm this place and the Plains escaped, for the most part, seasonal burning by early cattlemen. The dense, moist grasses of the snow plains do not burn easily or well, and wetland systems actively resist fire. Even heath beds, as combustible as they are, will senesce and be replaced by tussock grassland if left to their own devices.

When fire arrives on the High Plains then, damage can be swift and severe. While ephemeral species like the heaths will experience some renewal, the dominant grassland communities and the endangered wetlands will do it hard. Healing in this high, cold climate will be slow—up to ten years for grasses and, if wetlands recover at all, they will need twenty years or more to re-clothe and re-establish themselves. In the meantime, erosion, the curse of the grasses and the bogs, will be on the move, an ever-present threat.

Not long after we had packed up our camp and headed for lower ground, the fire had leapt from the West Kiewa valley and devoured eighty per cent of the high open country. Almost all the slopes around Falls Creek burnt, the village itself only being saved by intense water bombing. The snow gum forests that had matured in the aftermath of the 1939 fires were decimated, along with mosaiced patches of grassland. Many of the wetlands were burnt over, their swamp heaths and mosses swept away, leaving exposed their precious subterranean peat. Fragile mountain soils were scorched and left open to the elements. Heath beds exploded, their woody stems and their hard oil-rich leaves turning them into great fiery torches.

The ash type forests that grow below the snow gums in the highest reaches of the mountain valleys were burnt out right across the range, entering their death throes by sending billions of seeds showering down from their canopies to impregnate the ground below. Smoke swamped the valleys and headed south before arcing out into the Tasman Sea, a great plume that showed up on satellite imaging, as dense as any weather system—the same smoke that filled our lungs and mouths with the acrid taste of burnt eucalyptus as Pat and I limped quietly back to Melbourne.

Tathra

It is the keening of the black cockatoos that accompanies us to our campsite among the leathery coastal banksias at Tathra. They fly before us in slow-moving squadrons, their plaintive cries seeming to ring with heartbreak. We pitch the tent at the base of a weathered rock face and build up a sweat under a heat addled sky that is tempered and cooled by a gentle offshore breeze. It is late afternoon and a mob of kangaroos lies sleeping in the shade of a grand old banksia. Our arrival is barely noticed. Occasionally a roo raises its head and glances at us sleepily through long flirtatious eyelashes. Another scratches its blonde belly, sniffs a bit at the air, lets its head melt back into the dry grass. Their company reassures us somehow and we sleep well that night, becalmed by the kangaroos and the coastal air.

A Flume of Fires

When the last remnants of the ancient Gondwanan super continent finally broke up, its southern section drifted towards the pole and made of itself an Antarctic desert of ice and snow. The circumpolar seas pushed the remaining continental cratons north, and Australia found itself drifting in some of the driest latitudes on Earth. There it lingered, far from tectonic plate boundaries where episodes of mountain building or volcanics might renew its soils, and very far from periods of intense glaciation that might grind its rocks to dust and release their minerals. Ancient Australia lingered, and quietly wore down to become the flattest and most geologically stable of the continents. Its soils became poor, leached of minerals by wind and water.

Aridity settled in, becoming seasonal, episodic and chronic. As the continent began to dry it also began to burn. The ancestral rainforest that had covered much of Australia was pushed to small enclaves and replaced by species that could cope with dryness and with the disturbances that fire brings. Firstly it was the casuarinas that replaced the beeches and the pines of the rainforest, and then came the acacias, the grasses and the scrubby scleromorphs. Then, about 34 million years ago, the eucalypts began their great march, spreading and adapting to almost every climatic range the continent had to offer.

What the trees know

Along the way the eucalypts learnt a few things about surviving in a dry and depleted place. They learnt how to scavenge trace elements from the desiccated soils and how to store those elements in caches tucked under their bark or in their sap wood or in swellings on their roots. They learnt to be miserly with the use of those nutrients and how to recycle them obsessively. They learnt about holding on to their oil-rich leaves while shedding instead their impoverished bark. They learnt to keep their canopies dynamic for maximum efficiency, dropping aged branches and sprouting new ones from their crowns. They learnt to tough it out, at least for a while, when water was scarce. And they learnt that when everything has been leached, drained, salvaged and stored from leaf and bark and branch before it falls, the final phase of recycling is fire. In the sclerophyll world that Australia had become, where most of what arrives in the air and in the soil is dry, fire is the final and only solution to how those last traces of nourishment may be released. So the eucalypts learnt about fire, how to court it and conjure it and—at least most of the time—how to survive it. They did a deal with hellfire, and even though most of what comes in this Faustian bargain looks and feels like death, if you thought that was the end of the story, you'd be wrong.

What happened in between

Between 2003 and 2009 the drought deepened and fire activity worsened along Australia's eastern seaboard. Fire returned to the alpine region early in the summer of 2006, burning over some of the ground still recovering from the previous fire, then

extending south through one million hectares of mountain forests and into Gippsland. Thick smoke was carried by northerly winds into the centre of Melbourne where Christmas shoppers breathed into their handkerchiefs and those with lung complaints were warned to stay indoors. This fire burnt for six weeks. Victoria entered its second decade of drought. 2007 was the hottest recorded, 1.2 degrees above the state average. By the end of 2009 records were showing the new century had ushered in the hottest decade since measurements began. The La Nina effect that was expected to dominate Victoria's weather during 2007-8, bringing longed-for and sustained rainfall, failed. In 2009 Melbourne's water storages dropped to 27% capacity and the Murray River no longer made it to the sea.

Tathra

The Pacific waves come in hard against the Tathra sand, heavy and swollen with a thousand miles of ocean at their back. We walk the headland at the end of the beach and along the coastal cliffs, with sea eagles floating on high thermal currents and bellbirds ringing clear in the low forested enclaves. Sea breezes keep the clear hot days manageable and at night the salt-laden air fills our lungs.

We drive to Mimosa Rocks and to Nelson Lagoon and we leave our clothes on the deserted beach and dive naked into those curling waves. We surface and float under a blue vault of sky, our eyes falling now and then on the forest of green that tumbles to the shore and frames a pure white rind of sand. We lie like lizards on sun-warmed rocks and we stare out at that dazzling ocean, its surface a glittering field of crushed diamonds. We are drenched, saturated with beauty and it barely dawns on us that some subtle alchemy, some rare and gracious wing is lofting beneath us, delivering us to momentary enclaves of rest and peace. So we go with the beauty and we give ourselves over to the rhythm of the days, and we somehow miss the fact that the high pressure system that has stalled in the Tasman Sea, that has brought to us this run of hot, still, perfect days, is on this day, bringing great shares of terror and death to our home place six hundred miles south.

Living in the fire flume

If you live in the southeast quadrant of Australia you live in one of the most fire prone places on Earth. On a mainly arid continent it is here that you'll find the best soils, the best-watered landscapes and the greatest fuel loads. The climate is broadly Mediterranean, the summers tend towards drought and the winds that sweep through have a particular geography. It is these factors that shape fire in a most dramatic and deadly way.

When summer weather fronts approach this corner of the continent they draw down northerly air from the central deserts and from the Nullabor Plain. This air is hot, dry as tinder and parches everything it passes over. As the fronts approach Victoria the northerly winds accelerate, streaming out of the Red Centre in violent gusts. If a high pressure cell stagnates in the Tasman Sea the fronts slow their progression and a prolonged desiccation by desert winds sets in, leaching the last bit of moisture from the land. If a fire begins at this point it rips through blistered bush in a driven, explosive way, the fire-head pushed narrowly forward by the wind at its back.

As a fire scenario you'd think this was bad but more or less predictable, able to be planned for. It's what happens next that takes a serious bushfire and makes of it a holocaust. As the weather front passes, drawing increasingly violent northerly winds into the fire path, there is an equally violent shift in wind direction. A southerly change blows through, bringing with it ferocious winds that are cold and blustery. It is this wind shift that punches new heads out of what had been a fire flank. Fires double, triple in size in a matter of minutes, becoming vicious conflagrations that sweep back on themselves and erupt in crazed, unpredictable ways. These massive fronts generate internal whirlwinds of combustion that reach temperatures in excess of a thousand degrees and hurl flaming shrapnel deep into unburnt bush.

The practice of the wild

If you want to know what kind of threat eucalypts pose to human life and property, think about a wild creature—a nest of brown snakes let's say, or a clutch of Tasmanian

devils, or a pack of dingoes. Think of them living in your backyard, contentedly growing to maturity there, intriguing and beautiful to look at to be sure, passing their days quietly until some slight and unpredictable disturbance launches them into rabid and unrelenting attack. This, says a concerned ecologist, is how we should think about eucalypt forests, especially if we choose to live among them.

2009

It is barely 6am when I make my way over to the amenities block for an early morning pee. A couple of blokes, retirees by the crusty sound of their voices, are already up and showering, discussing the morning news over the sound of falling water. Their raised voices bounce around the concrete walls of their shower stalls and filter through to me as I stand at the basin washing my hands and surveying my sleep-softened face. Twenty-four dead in the Victorian fires is what they say. Twenty-four dead and plenty more to come, by the looks of it. It is Sunday morning and the camp ground is just stirring; we are all just waking to news of catastrophe.

Back at the tent I peer through the fly mesh at Pat who is still dozing and break the news to her. As I put the billy on to boil and prepare breakfast she rises and goes immediately to the car. The static swoops in and out until she finds the local ABC station. She is just in time for the latest news bulletin. I glance at her profile. Solemn. Concentrated. I am just spooning muesli onto the Weetbix when she says that Brian Naylor and his wife are dead, their house in Kinglake burnt to the ground. The good-looking, mannered newsreader who anchored the Channel 9 news for years and years. Pat calls out the names of other well-known people—actors, musicians, journalists, academics—who are known or feared to be dead, those living, like the Naylor's, in the beautiful forests north of the city. It was nearly 47 degrees in Melbourne yesterday, she says, the highest temperature ever recorded, higher than anything any capital city in the country has ever known.

Pat calls out news as she hears it. A massive fire began around midday yesterday. Power lines were felled just outside Kilmore East. Wind speeds of 125 kilometres per

hour. The front was pushed southeast towards Wandong, and then on to Strathewen, Narbethong, Kinglake and Flowerdale. A separate blaze in Churchill in Gippsland has taken ten lives. Other fires are burning outside Horsham and Bendigo and Beechworth. Marysville has been hit. Nobody has been able to get in there yet. Predicting many deaths. A fire in the Bunyip State Forest has broken containment lines. Fires are burning in a northeast arc close to Melbourne. The worst firestorms since European settlement; worse than Ash Wednesday, worse even than 1939.

We get out the map of Victoria and lay it open on the bed in the tent. We touch those places on the map that are under fire. Kinglake, less than sixty kilometres from the city. Parts of Whittlesea, only forty kilometres out. It has become a centre for those fleeing the fires just to the north. Marysville, a village of Tudor styled guest homes and quaint tea houses surrounded by mountain ash forests near the Blacks' Spur, an hour or so east of the city. Beechworth, much further north and a stylish stopover point for those heading up to alpine country. We don't say it, but our hearts contract at the thought of the high country once again being at risk.

By the afternoon the number dead has risen to 37. In the car after nightfall a sombre voice announces the death toll at 84, with expectations that it will continue to rise as members of the Country Fire Authority and police begin to search communities and townships they have so far been unable to reach.

By Monday morning the number dead has reached 127. We wait until 2pm for *The Age* to arrive at the small Tathra newsagency. We pour over the photos of catastrophe in disbelief. Hillsides of powdery white earth and jagged, coal black trunks. Swollen, contorted farm animals. Cars liquefied on country roads. Houses still smoking in a jumble of twisted metal. The forest town of Marysville looking bomb-struck. 'Nuked' is how one police sergeant describes it. Images of the Kilmore fire just after the cool change came through around 5pm. A massive wall of flame screaming out of a forest and above, a pyrocumulus cloud climbing 15 kilometres into the air.

The language of loss

In Tathra we learn new words for where we are and what is happening to us. Southern oscillation, the Indian Ocean dipole, the Asiatic aerosol effect—these terms pepper the responses of climate experts interviewed in newspapers and on radio and on TV news programs that blink at us in shops and pubs. They speak about intensifications of the El Nino and La Nina effects that bring prolonged periods of heat and dryness and dramatic unpredictable periods of rain and flood.

And what it all adds up to is a call to all of us to get prepared for more of what we did not want to see coming, for what is now among us; for higher temperatures and longer periods of drought and more catastrophic fires that occur more frequently. And every so often, those experts tell us, major rain events will sweep in, not so much to balance the periods of dry but as a swing between extremities, bringing weather that will be unpredictable, hard to plan for. And we'd all better get used to it is what those experts seem to be saying, even though they don't say as much—not yet when saying it might be read as neglecting due deference to the dead—but the place, the whole place, is getting warmer and drier and weather events more intense and less predictable and adaptation is now the vital partner of mitigation.

And you listen and read and watch, and you might just be able to go along with the occasional apologist who gets on the radio and claims that these events are just part of the natural cycles of a continent prone to ‘droughts and flooding rains’, you might just be able to convince yourself that these events are one-offs, rare, hard-wired to occur every century or so. You might be able to bounce around the idea that conditions that led to this catastrophe are unfortunate but unavoidable, the raw edge of living in this place. You might just be able to believe such things, that this is some antipodean form of normal, if it weren’t for the knowledge of what it takes to keep your lounge room light burning and your fridge running and your car on the road; if it weren’t for all the plants and all the creatures hurrying to find new habitats or simply succumbing to extinction under new weather regimes; if it weren’t for all these people, more than a hundred and fifty of them now, who have ended up dead, caught in a holocaust of

flame, and if it weren't for all Earth's children whose bequeathed task it will be to fashion different kinds of lives in a depleted and warmer and less predictable world.

After the deluge

In the days that follow the fires survivors begin to put words on what they have experienced. The deafening noise, the darkness that rolled over them, the pace of the flames and the heat, the heat. Terror is what they are describing, in the words they mouth and in the ones they cannot find, in the gestures they make, in they way they look to camera with concussed, bewildered eyes.

On Wednesday we pack up camp and head down the coast, breaking our trip at Orbost for a few days, at the holiday shack of Pat's sister and her partner. The cool change that swept in at the height of the fires and blew everything to hell has kept temperatures in Victoria much lower than when we left. The television is full of images and stories of the fires. We absorb them tentatively. We give them room to become coherent within us, to fill the gaps in our understanding, to make some kind of whole. It's what one does I guess—what we all do—in the face of shock, in the face of great forces sweeping into our lives. It's what Pat and I do that night on a slow walk through Orbost's quiet streets. We speak frugally, we leave space, and we apprentice ourselves to feelings we do not yet understand.

On the fire ground

If you walk on the High Plains now, through a snow gum woodland or through the alpine ash forests high in the valleys, you walk through two forests at once. The bare, silvered branches of the dead forests arch stag-like above, while the new forests, lithe and lively, are rubbery at your feet. So it is in the high country, so it will be here. But that doesn't make the loss any easier. And it doesn't change the fact that if fire arrives more frequently and more intensely in the years to come, more deaths will follow, and that some of these forests, especially the high ash forests, will be lost forever.

In the months after the 2009 fires we drive through the fire ground, through St Andrews and Kinglake and over the range to Toolangi, making our way to Mansfield and the Howqua River beyond. Not much is moving, but the bakery in King Lake is open, and the pub is doing some late morning business. And you wonder as the car creeps along those narrow roads, where the birds have gone and how many creatures have survived and what those creatures are eating and what water they are finding, and you wonder what it must be like to start each day in the midst of these blasted hills. You look all along the valley and most of what you see is black calligraphy on walls of ash and dust and above it all the great gash of open sky. And you are silenced and saddened but are compelled to look again, and again, until finally you begin to notice more, and you see here and there a few small snarks of life. You see that many of the eucalypts, even those that have had their protective bark seared completely off, are sprouting small bunches of sessile leaves that gush from the skinned and wounded trunks like spilling handfuls of softly glowing sapphires. At times, when the sun is right, they glint and shine in clusters of reds, blues and the palest of sea greens.

14.

The Eyes of the Future⁶⁵

Six women gather in Melbourne's city square. It is the morning of Good Friday. The air is clear, the sky is blue, the wind is cold, sweeping down the concrete tunnels of the central business district. The women are dressed in white—the colour you might wear to show singularity of purpose or solidarity of heart or the kind of hope that commitment brings. The colour that may cover you in death.

The women stand in a wide circle. They face inwards. A Tibetan bell is sounded. Three high sweet rings that hang in the air. The women begin their witness. They stand facing into the circle, their eyes lowered, their hands open, their bodies concentrated, composed.

Beside them, each side of the circle their bodies have cast, they have placed a sign.

*As the planet continues to warm
we bear witness to those who have no voice.
We turn inward in solidarity with endangered species everywhere.
We turn outward in celebration of Earth's wild voices.*

After five minutes a single bell tolls. The women move slowly, each making a half-circle turn. They face outwards from the circle and into the street. They resume their reflective pose. They hold their position for another five minutes before turning inwards once more. They settle into the rhythm. The circle. The concentrated reflection. The bell toll and the turning.

Each woman has an image pinned or stitched to her back—a powerful owl; a western plains grassland; a section of the Kimberley coast; a wetland on the Bogong High Plains, a swamp wallaby, a delicate tree frog. Other-than-human faces held quietly in this fast and densely human place.

* * *

In the 1970s fourteen women walked in a circle in Plaza de Mayo, the central square in Buenos Aires. They carried or had stitched to their white headscarves, images of their children, their husbands, their brothers, their sisters who had ‘disappeared’ under the ruling military junta. They walked in silence and then they stood in silence, the images of those they loved emblazoned on their bodies. They walked every Thursday for the better part of thirty years. They were mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, appearing for the disappeared.

A woman passing by joins the circle. She turns inward and outward with the women at five minute intervals, moving with the sound of the bell. She then enters the empty space in the centre of the circle, standing before each of the women. She holds her hands out to each one in turn, imparting energy, as if in blessing. She bows and then leaves.

Another woman comes and joins the circle, and a man, each remaining for a few rounds, keeping the rhythm, turning inward and outward with the sounding of the bell. They too bow as they leave.

In Chile in the 1970s women started appearing in the central square in Santiago outside the presidential palace of Augusto Pinochet. They carried photographs of their missing husbands, sons, fathers. They danced the ‘cueca’, the national dance that is traditionally performed by a woman and a man. These women danced, holding their photographs, dancing with their invisible men. Appearing for the disappeared.

Passers-by ambling along Swanston Street stop. They read the signs. They watch the solemn, slow ritual. Their expressions are complicated, inscrutable.

A seagull wanders in to the circle, fluffs its feathers, walks a bit.

A child comes near and stares. Her mother takes her hand. ‘They are standing so still,’ she says to her mother.

* * *

In Africa the cross of decimated forests is a heavy one for the land and its people to bear. Erosion, dry rivers and hunger. In 1977 Wangari Maathai planted seven trees and founded the Green Belt Movement. Since that day ten million trees have been planted in and around Kenya. ‘The environmental crisis that rural women have been carrying on their backs is being lessened’, Maathai has said, ‘one seed at a time’.⁶⁶ New forests are appearing, growing from the ground of the disappeared.

* * *

Organ music wafts into the square from the nearby cathedral. A thin high voice tolls the chant of the Good Friday service; ‘Jesus crucified. For us you suffered for us you died’.

The chant sounds to one of the women like a lament, a ritualised kind of keening. As the sombre song repeats it wraps itself around one of her memories and carries her, in her mind’s eye, back to the Bogong High Plains. Her feet she knows are stepping and turning on the manicured grasses of the City Square, but under each instep she can almost feel the lumpiness of the tussock grasses and the scratch of their wires. She sees herself picking her way down a shallow slope to a wetland, how she bends at the edge of the bog and places her hand on a trough of bare soil, how she notices the drying chunks of sphagnum moss and candle heath that lay scattered nearby. She sees her

slow search of the drying bog pool, how she looks for traces of frogs and tadpoles, of stoneflies and caddis larvae and small native fish—traces of those who once made their home there. The woman sees herself press the dried out moss and sprigs of heath back into crumbling soil, how she cups water from her drinking bottle onto the mound. She sees how small the action is, and how futile. The clear tolling of the bell filters through her imaginings. She turns inwards towards the circle. She considers the nature of suffering.

* * *

Wangari Maathai tells the story of a hummingbird. A bushfire erupts in a forest. It is a mighty force, consuming everything in its path. All the animals of the forest rush to escape the inferno. They stand at the edge of the forest transfixed and daunted by what they see. They are powerless, overwhelmed. A small hummingbird who has also escaped the flames flies to the nearest stream. She takes a drop of water in her small beak and she returns to the forest, releasing her one drop on the flames. She makes this journey again and again until the gathered animals stop her. ‘Why are you doing this?’ they ask. ‘You are so small and your beak is so tiny. Your single drops of water will do nothing to stop the flames’. ‘I know I am small,’ she replies, ‘and I know this water will do little to quench the fire. But I must do what I can do.’

* * *

After one hour one of the women tolls the Tibetan bell three times. As the sound rings out into stillness the women look up, loosen their shoulders, step in close. They put their arms around one another in a tight circle. They look into one another’s eyes. They look down the long years ahead. Softly they recite:

*The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint, that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come.*⁶⁷

The women join hands, kiss, and check their diaries for their next gathering date. They disappear into the Good Friday crowd, white wings of hope and mourning dispersing through the city.

* * *

Notes

Shoulder to the Wind

¹ Some of the details and statistics related to the Alpine National Park can be found in the field guide, *Australian Alps: Kosciuszko, Alpine and Namadgi National Parks* written by Deirdre Slattery. The statistics mentioned here are to be found on p.5 of the guide.

² Barry Lopez discusses this insight on p. 11 of his seminal work, *Arctic Dreams* (1987).

Geomorphology

³ This quote is found on p. 14 of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974.

⁴ Much of the information included on the geographical formation of Australia's eastern seaboard comes from Rudolf Brunnenschweiler's revised version of Charles Laseron's *Ancient Australia: the story of its past geography and life*, published in 1984 by Angus & Robertson. Also useful were Ollier's 'Tectonics and Geomorphology of the Eastern Highlands' in Davies and Williams' *Landform Evolution in Australasia* (1978), E. Sherbon Hills Physiography of Victoria: An Introduction to Geomorphology (1975) and Rosengren's 'Mountain areas of south-eastern Australia: topography, geology and geomorphology' (2008).

⁵ Tim Flannery provides a good summary of the geological formation of Australia in the first two chapters of *The Future Eaters*, published in 1994 by New Reed Holland, Sydney.

Maisie Fawcett

⁶ This information on the water-holding capacity of *Sphagnum* is noted in the first paper Maisie, in collaboration with Professor John Turner, published on her enclosure experiments on the High Plains. It was published in the *Australian Journal of Botany* in 1959.

⁷ Maisie makes this observation in 1943 as part of her ongoing correspondence with Professor John Turner. Many of her letters, field notes and notebooks are held as part of the Turner collection in the archives at Melbourne University. UMA. 2nd Turner Papers, box 13, item 70/5, Fawcett to Turner, 18 September, 1943.

⁸ Extract from letter from Maisie to Lilian White, 6 July, 1952 in Carr, D J 2005, p. 90. *A Book for Maisie*, Pirion Printers, Fyshwick, ACT.

⁹ See Carr S.G.M. and Turner J.S. 1959a, p12-18.

¹⁰ Gillbank, 1992, p. 230.

¹¹ Gillbank 1993, p. 149.

¹² Anecdote from Maisie's notebook, 10 June 1946, in Carr D.J. 2005, p. 86.

¹³ From a letter to Lilian Bennett, 27 January, 1979, in Carr D.J. 2005, p. 178.

¹⁴ Australian Academy of Science 1957, *A Report on the Condition of the High Mountain Catchments of New South Wales and Victoria, Canberra*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Turner, J.S. 1960, p. 30.

¹⁶ Carr, S.G.M. and Turner, J.S. 1959b, p. 60.

¹⁷ Extract from letter from Maisie to Alex George, Western Australian Herbarium, 29 October, 1977, in Carr, D.J. 2005, p. 164-5.

¹⁸ Costin, A 1957, *High Mountain Catchments in Victoria in relation to land use*, Soil Conservation Authority, Victoria, Government Printer, Melbourne.

¹⁹ Williams, R.J and Ashton D.H 1988, Cyclical patterns of regeneration in subalpine heathland communities on the Bogong High Plains, Victoria, *Aust. J. Bot.* 36: 605-619.

²⁰ Wahren, C-H, Papst, W. A, Williams, R. J 1994, 'Long-term vegetation change in relation to cattle grazing in sub-alpine grassland and heathland on the Bogong High Plains: An analysis of vegetation records 1945-1994', *Australian Journal of Botany*, 42:6, 607-639.

²¹ Williams, R. J 2003, Does alpine grazing reduce blazing? *Vic. Nat.* 120: 197-200.

Consummatum Est

²²Williams, 2001, p. 61.

²³ Williams, 2001, p. 70.

²⁴ Williams, 2001, p. 71.

²⁵ In her groundbreaking work *The Moth Hunters: Aboriginal pre-history of the Australian Alps* (1980), Josephine Flood provides an extensive survey of the literature concerning the movement of Aboriginal people in and around the high country in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

²⁶ In his book *Cattlemen of the High Country* (1983) Tor Holth makes the point that all so-called ‘explorers’ of north and south-eastern Victoria relied on the knowledge and skills of Aboriginal guides. Don Watson makes the same point in *Caledonia Australis* (1984).

²⁷ In her essay ‘Decolonising Relationships with Nature’ in *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, 2002, No.2, Plumwood discusses the ‘colonising politics of place names’ in Australia and suggests ways in which re-naming could be a tool for ‘de-colonisation’.

²⁸ Mueller, F 1855, ‘Report of Government Botanist’s Journey to Omeo, 16 December 1854’, *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council of Victoria*, 1854-5, 2(1):233, Paper A45.

²⁹ Gillbank, L 1992, ‘Scientific Exploration of the Botanical Heritage of Victoria’s Alps: Nineteenth and twentieth-century contributions of Ferdinand Mueller and Maisie Fawcett’, Scougall, B (Ed), *Cultural Heritage of the Australian Alps; Proceedings of the symposium held at Jindabyne, New South Wales, 16-18 October 1991*, Australian Alps Liaison Committee, pp211-234.

³⁰ This statement specifically references Hovell’s often-quoted observation that ‘Whatever place we have been in, whether on the top of the highest mountain, or in any of the deepest ravines, we always find evident marks that the natives occasionally resort to them ...’, and is found in Hovell’s journal – see *R. Aust. Hist. Soc.* 1921, p. 347.

³¹ In *Colonial Earth* (2000) Tim Bonyhady refers to Mueller’s deep regard for Australian forests and botanical fluorescence (p. 251). Along with his position as Victoria’s first State botanist, Mueller was also the inaugural director of Victoria’s Botanic Gardens.

³² Val Plumwood discusses John Locke’s criteria for ‘forming property from land conceived as “wilderness” by adding human labour’ in her essay ‘Decolonizing relationships with nature’ in Adams & Mulligan, *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era* (2004) pp. 51-78.

³³ This essay appears as part of the collection *Words for Country: landscape and language* (2002) edited by Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths. Arthur extends the themes introduced in this essay in her seminal work *The Default Country: A lexical cartography of twentieth-century Australia* published in 2003 by UNSW Press.

Rocks

³⁴ Writer and photographer Harry Nankin uses this phrase in *Victoria’s Alps: An Australian Endangered Heritage* (1983).

The Issue of Love

³⁵ Environment Minister Ryan Smith made this statement in an excerpt titled ‘Federal-State battle brewing over alpine grazing’ on the ABC program *Lateline*, 28 February 2011.

³⁶ Phil Ingamells from the Victorian National Parks Association is quoted in Melissa Fyfe’s article ‘Top scientists urge halt to alpine grazing’, *Sunday Age* 30 Jan 2011.

³⁷ Tony Lupton’s remark appears in the Editorial ‘State takes two steps back on conservation’ in *The Age*, Jan 14, 2011.

³⁸ Fyfe, M 2011, ‘Top scientists urge halt to alpine grazing trial’, *The Sunday Age* 30 Jan., p. 3.

³⁹ MCAV Media Release, Jan 12. Professor Peter Attiwill is quoted in Stephanie Bunbury’s article ‘Gazing into grazing future marks low point for high-country greenies’ *The Sunday Age* January 9, 2011.

⁴⁰ Gunai/Kurnai elder Uncle Albert Mullett is quoted in Melissa Fyfe’s article ‘Trampling on our Rights: Aborigines’, *The Sunday Age*, 6 Feb., 2001, p. 10.

⁴¹ Bandt’s words in parliament are quoted in a press release issued by his office on Feb 28. <http://adam-bandt.greensmps.org.au/category/issues/environment/environment-planning-issues/heritage>

⁴² Minister Tony Burke made this statement in an interview on the ABC’s 7.30 program, March 11, 2011.

⁴³ David Meagher makes this observation in his article ‘Alpine bryophytes and lichens’, in the ‘Course Notes’ of the *Alpine Ecology Course*, Bogong High Plains, 14-18 January 2008, La Trobe University, Victoria.

⁴⁴ Bachelard, Gaston 1969, *The Poetics of Space*, transl. Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, Boston, p. 196.

⁴⁵ Lopez in conversation with Mark Tredinnick in Tredinnick’s 2005 monograph, *The Land’s Wild Music: encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams & James Galvin*, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Lopez in conversation with Mark Tredinnick in *The Land’s Wild Music* 2005, p. 69.

⁴⁷ Lopez, B 1996, ‘Natural Grief’, *Famous Reporter*, no. 13, pp 2–3.

⁴⁸ www.australianationalparks.com

⁴⁹ This statistic is taken from the program titled ‘Seamlessnes’ on the 2004 DVD series ‘*The Powers of the Universe*’ by mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme.

The Mountain

⁵⁰ This story of the travails of Cleve Cole, Mick Hull and Howard Michell on Mt Bogong in the winter of 1936 is well known and much reported. In my own re-telling of this story I have drawn extensively from the self-published account by Mick Hull titled *Mountain Memories: Sixty Years of Skiing* (1990). A detailed account also appeared in *Schuss*, the magazine of the Skiing Club of Victoria, shortly after the ordeal, written by Eddie Robinson, a skiing colleague of Hull’s and of Cole’s who had participated in the rescue. Arthur Nightingale, the miner from Glen Valley who first reached Hull and Cole on Big River, also wrote an account which he published locally just after the event.

Still Country

⁵¹ This quotation is from Deborah Bird Rose’s *Wild Country: ethics for decolonization*, 2004, p. 7.

⁵² Rose, DB 2002, *Country of the Heart*, p. 14.

⁵³ Rose, DB 1996, *Nourishing Terrains*, p. 63

The Art of Breadmaking

⁵⁴ Abram, David 199, *Spell of the Sensuous*, Random House, New York.

⁵⁵ Sale, Kirkpatrick 1997, ‘The Columbian Legacy and the Ecosterian Response’ in H. Hannum (Ed), *People, Land, and Community: Collected E.F. Schumacher Society Lectures*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, pp. 13-21.

⁵⁶ Jensen, Derrick 2006, *Endgame: The Problem of Civilization*, Seven Stories Press, New York.

Eagle

⁵⁷ This essay is based on recollections by cattleman Ian Roper as recounted on the oral history CD *Victoria’s High Country Heritage* (2008) produced by Parks Victoria. It is informed by Dick Johnson’s chapter on high country cattle grazing in *Alps at the Crossroads* (1979), Tor Holth’s *Cattlemen of the High Country* (1980) and James Cowan’s *The Mountain Men* (1982), particularly his chapter on the High Plains.

Winds of Homecoming

⁵⁸ This poem by Rilke is found on p. 191 of *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell, 1995, The Modern Library, New York.

⁵⁹ This combined Way Wurru and Dhudhuroa Language Dictionary was launched at the Big Fella Festival at Falls Creek on 1st January 2009.

⁶⁰ A.W. Reed lists more than a dozen names for wind, breath and air in his compilation of Aboriginal words and place names from various regions in Australia.

⁶¹ Renowned anthropologist, WEH Stanner uses this phrase in his seminal essay ‘The Dreaming’, first published in 1953 and reprinted in 2009 under the editorship of Robert Manne, p.58.

⁶² Robert Lawlor comments on some of these links between the element of air and the Dreaming in his 1991 study of Australian Indigenous cultures *Voices of the First Day*, p41-42.

⁶³ A textual version of some aspects of Abram’s address is found in his 1996 monograph *The Spell of the Sensuous*. See particularly chapter 7 for a more detailed exploration of the element of ‘air’.

Fire

⁶⁴ For a general fire history of Australia see Stephen Pyne's *Burning Bush: a fire history of Australia* (1991). Tom Griffiths *Forests of Ash* (2001) focuses specifically on the ash forests of Victoria, and the article 'Does alpine grazing reduce blazing? A landscape test of a widely-held hypothesis' by Williams et al (2006) explores the function of fire on the Bogong High Plains.

Eyes of the Future

⁶⁵ This essay is written in honour of—and in solidarity with—Earth-patriots and friends, Jan, Wendy, Mary, Marg and Pat—courageous women all.

⁶⁶ This statement by Wangari Maathai is quoted directly by Terry Tempest Williams in her essay 'The Wild Card', which is part of her collection *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field* (1994, p. 137). It comes from a conversation Williams shared with Maathai in 1985.

⁶⁷ This statement is an excerpt from a single paragraph titled 'Wild Mercy' which is the final entry in Terry Tempest Williams' book *Red* (2001). The entire passage is as follows: 'The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint, that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come. To protect what is wild is to protect what is gentle. Perhaps the wildness we fear is the pause between our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this same grace. Wild mercy is in our hands' (*Red* 2001, p. 229).

Shoulder to the Wind

Exegesis

Of Words and World

An Introduction

So, a long flow of words. A river of them, you could say. How to theorise such a thing? How to relate this collection of essays, these stories of place, these words that are not the place but which reach for the place—for the slow arc of its coming and going and for the swifter migrations of those within it, the birds and the moths and the people—how to relate these essays, this work of words, to discourses—literary, ecological and philosophical—that weave and dance and deepen in the world of women and of men? How to place this place-based work of creative nonfiction within theoretical conversations concerning all manner of things, but especially within the fundamental question of how we should live and how we should die in the places that support and nourish our lives. This question, this perennial question that meanders through all the areas of knowledge and experience we can name, accrues particular relevance when situated within the ecological context of our times.

As I made the final adjustments to these essays of place, two important reports were published. The first, *Caring for our Australian Catchments*, was released in October 2011. It is a major survey into the current health of high country catchments in south-eastern Australia and into how those catchments might fare in response to climate change.⁵ The findings of this report are sobering. Projections are that if carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere keep trending at their current levels a temperature increase of 2.9 degrees is forecast for the alpine region by the middle of the century. With this will come severe interruptions to water yield and hydrological regimes. More droughts, more frequent fires and more intense storm events will result in unprecedeted levels of erosion, a matter of ‘special concern’ (p. 6). Precipitation will

⁵ This survey was commissioned by the Australian Government, The Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, and was conducted by scientists Roger Good and Graeme Worboys. It is available at www.climatechange.gov.au

drop by an estimated twenty-four per cent and snow cover will be greatly reduced. Feral pests will increase, the tree line will lift, wetlands will dry out and tall heathland will extend across the snow plains. In other words, within fifty years the high country landscape will be significantly transformed, its rich biodiversity fragmented and its ecological systems either broken or under extreme stress.

In November 2011, an article appeared in *The Age*, Victoria's major broadsheet newspaper. Written by American journalist Seth Borenstein, the article commented on a report released by the United States Department of Energy that measured the global output of carbon dioxide for 2010. It showed that increases in atmospheric carbon were 'the biggest amount on record', jumping by a huge 512 million tonnes—a six per cent increase on 2009 levels. The 2010 figures mean that greenhouse gas emissions are 'higher than the worst-case scenario outlined by climate experts just four years ago' in their Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report to the United Nations (2007).⁶

These ecological realities, articulated so starkly here in both their global and local manifestations, are the context within which this project on the Bogong High Plains has unfolded. They were the context of its beginning and they are—regrettably, heart-breakingly—the ever-more threatening and urgent context of its end. Intimations of this threat to the sub-alpine ecologies of the High Plains are woven through the essays, becoming clearer and unequivocal towards the end of the collection. Although it was important not to swamp the essays with all that could be said of the fragility of the High Plains in the face of global warming, there is, I concede, an underlying note of melancholy, at times almost lament, to this work. This was not always conscious. The exigencies of climate were rarely the starting point for my writing, but over the course of the project they occupied more and more of my concern.

I had other concerns too. The writing of place within a context of Indigenous dwelling, dispossession and reclamation was both intensely rich and at times, very fraught. So

⁶ This syndicated article titled "Biggest jump on record in global warming gases" appeared in *The Saturday Age* on 6 Nov. 2011, published by Fairfax Press, Melbourne.

was the question of the relationship between the text I was producing, the place as I was experiencing it, and the High Plains as they exist in their own integrity. Like others before me, this relationship between text and world was one I thought long about, that I read and wrote myself into, putting ideas aside at times and circling back to them over many months. My arrival point may not be agreeable to all or even most literary critics but it is one that is ‘ground-truthed’, to use a term from Kathleen Dean Moore, one that accords with the shape of the land as I walked it, as I came to know it, with the evidence I saw of how the place casually exceeds mere words—those frail nets we cast in the hope that we may capture an ocean or a sky or a great rolling plain (2004, p. 7).

As this PhD project unfolded, dilemmas about how communities and individuals—myself included—identify with, and remain connected to, significant or ancestral places in the midst of ever intensifying pressures of mobility, of the labour market, of consumerism and of communication technologies also came into view. What happens to our identification and attachment to places when those places themselves undergo significant alteration or near destruction was an important aspect of this. I wrestled with these dilemmas in a number of the creative essays and they make another, more theorised appearance in the pages that follow.

Underlying these realities of the High Plains, of my own—and others’—connection to the place and the internal and external forces at play there, is the question of writing. In these days of ecological imperilment, the unavoidable question becomes ‘What is writing for’—especially a genre as marginal and maligned as nature writing? As I worked and re-worked the creative essays in this PhD, I thought often of Judith Wright’s decision, taken at perhaps at the height of her poetic powers, to put aside the poetic word and devote her considerable creative and intellectual energies to activism on behalf of the Earth (Wright 1977). Like Wright I concluded that words are never enough. Many forms of activism are needed, many forms of work for change and transformation if we are to salvage something of the diverse and variegated life of this planet. But the word, particularly the poetic or lyrical word, can do some things: it can help us to see more and hear more, it can attune our senses more sharply to where we

are and what might be required of us as we negotiate these times in which we live. And nature writing as both a form of witness and as a form of ‘ontopoetics’, of response to the communiqués of ‘country’, has a role to play in this broader endeavour (Mathews 2009, p. 2). These considerations, along with others concerning the internal functioning and historical unfolding of the genre of nature writing are explored here. So too is the particular history and role of nature writing in the Australian context. In a land where, as I have said, Indigenous belonging and place-making remains so powerfully present, a genre such as nature writing assumes a particularised character and purpose.

So the creative essays of place in this thesis, these essays that I assume you have just perused, while they emerge in an initial sense from my own extensive and phenomenal encounters with the High Plains and with the systems of life that cohere there, are also highly situated cultural artefacts, they occupy a particular socio-cultural and political space. They carry certain inflections about issues of both human and planetary concern. But the essays are, in the first instance, centred on the land, on a specific place. It is from this standpoint, this perspective, that issues of human and planetary concern have been considered.

Perhaps then, the exegetical reflection that follows can form a bridge between the river of words that has just passed, just flowed by, and the ecological, philosophical, literary and cultural concerns that both contextualise and inform this work of nature writing. The following exegetical reflection is structured then, as a positioning of the creative component of *Shoulder to the Wind* in relation to three broad theoretical areas; ecocriticism as the field of literary theory with which it is most closely aligned; nature writing as the relevant literary genre; and Australian nature writing as its locally inflected variant that exists within a rich and biotically diverse continent that has been shaped by millennia of Aboriginal place-making.

Each of the exegetical chapters follows a roughly consistent progression: an introduction to the field that includes a brief overview of how that field emerged and

developed; a consideration of two or three significant issues that have been or are presently contested within the field; and a positioning of the creative, nature-based essays in *Shoulder to the Wind* in relation to those issues. The chapter on ecocriticism, for example, considers the issues of representation—the relationship of the written word to the more-than-human natural world—and the implications of increased globalisation for local and place-based texts. The chapter on nature writing explores the capacity of this genre to shift and intensify our perception of the land and of the broader life community and to include that community within our moral purview. The final chapter on Australian nature writing deals with local considerations, such as various forms of *terra nullius*, along with the capacity of nature writing to contribute to a ‘singing up’ of the land. Other issues, other concerns and considerations are examined along the way, but this is the general trajectory of how things will run from here.

1.

The Text and the World

In these times when the biological systems of the planet are in such peril, the question of how a work such as *Shoulder to the Wind* is situated in relation to the physical world and in relation to ecological and global contingencies is both a critical and a complex one. It is also a question that engages with the fundamental concerns of ecocriticism, a comparatively young and vital strand of literary criticism.

Shoulder to the Wind is a work of nature writing born, as I have said, of my own personal engagement with one animate, lively, and still reasonably biologically coherent place, the Bogong High Plains. As such, it seeks to bear witness to, to foreground and to celebrate the endurance and quiet beauty of this place.

Notwithstanding what I have just said regarding the socio/political positioning of *Shoulder to the Wind*, as a literary work centred on place it runs the risk, as do all modes of nature writing, of dropping into various degrees of naïve realism, of accenting the direct, embodied encounter of one person with one place while screening from view other complex dimensions that impact a place and those human and Earth others who make their home there. And to be honest, as I thumb through this collection of essays that I have made, traces of Joyce Carol Oates' well known dismissal of nature writing as a form of literature camouflaging its limitations beneath earnest exhortations of 'AWE' and 'REVERENCE' does come to mind (Oates in Lyon 1989, p. ii). But celebrating the world of the Bogong High Plains is not the only thing *Shoulder the Wind* sets out to do, and moreover, praise of a place is not necessarily at odds with, or in opposition to addressing, the urgent social, political, economic and cultural ills of the day. In fact, as Kate Rigby states, the 'greater crime' at this historical hour of ecological imperilment, may not be so much to articulate and celebrate the ever-diminishing florescence of the earth, but to remain silent, to refrain from speaking

words of praise or of protection, to fail to draw attention through words, to the world beyond the page (Rigby 2008, p. 2). To this end, *Shoulder to the Wind* not only notices the world beyond the page, it notices the inescapable fact that this world, even as it precedes and exceeds anything that may be said of it, is engulfed in an environmental crisis of catastrophic proportions. So while this project attempts to ‘be true to the earth’⁷ by producing a text that is sensitively realist in tone, it maintains an awareness of its own limitations as a cultural artefact, and of its positioning as a landscape focused work within an increasingly global—and globally perilous—context.

It is from within this context that *Shoulder to the Wind* engages with the field of literary criticism and with ecocriticism in particular. It holds its own ground as a creative work centred on place and considers from there an array of theoretical questions. Many of those questions are ecocritical in nature.

Definitions

Ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism that engages with texts as if the natural world, as if ‘actual places matter’ (Cranston and Zeller 2007, p.7). Ecocriticism considers the substantive and the subtle ways in which place—that complex interfusion of material world, of natural agency and human meaning and significations—might influence or evoke a work of words. In the same way that other forms of literary criticism consider the influences of class or gender or politics or culture on an author and on their work, ecocriticism examines the interrelationship between author and place, between literature and landscape. Ecocriticism holds that ‘literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether’ but is connected to, imbricated just as surely in the material and energetic dimensions of the world as it is in the world of ideas (Glotfelty 1996, p. xix).

Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) gathered together many of the seminal works of ecocriticism and helped establish its critical

⁷ This term of Nietzsche’s was used as the title of the inaugural ASLE-ANZ Conference held at Monash University, Melbourne, 2005.

legitimacy. In this work Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (Glotfelty 1996, p. xviii). She explicates this point by saying: ‘[j]ust as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies’ (1996, p. xviii). To further distinguish the ecocritical approach from other forms of criticism, she goes on to explain that ‘[l]iterary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory ‘the world’ is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the “the world” to include the entire ecosphere’ (1996, p. xix). As an indicator of the veracity of this point she observes that with even a cursory review of the major literary critical publications of the late twentieth century one would conclude that issues of race, class and gender were the ‘hot topics’ of the period. One would never suspect, however, that the life systems of the planet were in such dire peril. ‘Indeed’, she comments, ‘you might never know that there was an earth at all’ (1996, p. xvi). It is this omission of the earth from the purview of literary criticism, from any consideration of its influence on writing, and writing’s influence on it, that ecocriticism in its multifarious approaches and perspectives, seeks to address.

Beginnings

While a disparate range of articles, projects and publications exploring the connection between literature and the environment appeared from the 1970s, it was not until the establishment of ASLE, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, at the 1992 convention of the Western Literature Association in the United States, that ecocriticism became a more coherent and recognisable movement within the field of literary criticism. Soon after its establishment ASLE launched the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* and in 1995 began holding biennial conferences. A number of seminal texts and anthologies appeared soon after; including Jonathon Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991), Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), widely regarded as the first

theoretically integrated work in the field, Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), and Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells' *Writing the Environment* (1998). At the same time, newly identified ecocritics began to trace their intellectual concerns back to foundational works in American and British literary thought; works such as Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Raymond Williams *The Country and the City* (1973), Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974), Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975), Neil Evernden's 'Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy' (1978), John Elder's *Imagining the Earth* (1985). Publication rates for ecocritical texts increased rapidly throughout the 1990s, as did membership of ASLE, reaching over a thousand at the turn of the millennium. Associated organisations were soon founded in Japan, India, Korea, the United Kingdom, China, Taiwan, Canada and Europe. The Australia-New Zealand branch of ASLE (ASLE-ANZ, now ASLEC-ANZ – Association for the Study of Literature, Environment & Culture) was established in 2000 under the leadership of ecocritic Kate Rigby and writer Mark Tredinnick, with its first national conference being held in 2005.

Given the urgency of environmental problems it is perhaps not surprising that ecocriticism has been the site of such intense academic interest and rapid expansion. What is surprising, however, is that the environmental turn in literary studies happened so late in comparison with other disciplines such as history, law, philosophy, sociology and religion which have been 'greening' since the 1970s. Literary theorist Ursula Heise understands this delay in terms of the influence French philosophies of language exerted on literary theory between the late 1960s and early 1990s. Within this intellectual context nature was seen as a 'sociocultural construct that had historically often served to legitimize the ideological claims of specific social groups' (Heise 2006, p. 505). Cultural and literary criticism became concerned therefore, to 'explode the category of "the natural"' (Turner in Heise 2006, p. 505) by embarking on a project of 'denaturalization', a project that involved taking a fresh and more sceptical look at questions of 'representation, textuality, narrative, identity, subjectivity, and historical discourse' (Heise 2006, p. 505). Such a project clearly did not encourage or facilitate

connections with social movements seeking to ‘reground’ human cultures in the natural world and ‘to rescue a sense of the reality of environmental degradation from the obfuscations of political discourse’ (Heise 2006, p. 505).

Kate Rigby explains the difficulty that literary criticism has experienced in taking account of the actual Earth this way:

Although the practice of criticism has ancient origins in the exegesis of biblical and classical Greek texts, modern literary criticism only began to be institutionalized as an academic discipline in the early nineteenth century. This was precisely the time when a rigid separation began to be drawn between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ sciences. This is a divide that few literary critics and cultural theorists have dared to cross, until recently. The compartmentalization of knowledge effected by this divide is central to what Bruno Latour (1993) terms the ‘Modern Constitution’, which sunders the human from the non-human realm, while defining society’s relationship to nature predominantly in terms of mastery and possession ... Thus, to regain a sense of the inextricability of nature and culture, *physis* and *techne*, earth and artifact—consumption and destruction—would be to move beyond both the impasse of modernism and the arrogance of humanism (2002, p. 159).

From these two scholars we glimpse some of the internal defences mobilised against any major consideration of the relationship between literature and the natural world. As Heise reveals, any inference a piece of writing may bear to nature was considered spurious and in need of vigorous deconstruction in order to reveal its hidden ideological biases. This continues a long tradition, begun, according to Rigby, with the inception of modern literary criticism itself, whereby nature is excluded from the human realm, and literature understood as an abstracted, purely human artefact. As we launch into the third millennium however, the state of world and the ecological crisis in which it is engulfed has become impossible to ignore. It is the growing depth of this crisis that has

prompted many literary critics—Heise and Rigby among them—to attempt the re-imagining of literature and literary criticism and its relationship to the earth.

Phases of Development

Writing more than a decade after the publication of his seminal theoretical work, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell identifies two broad trends or waves in the development of ecocriticism since the early 1990s. First wave ecocriticism, suggests Buell, generally equated ‘environment’ with ‘natural environment’ and assumed some degree of disjunction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’(2005,p. 21-23). Its goal was to identify and appraise the effects of culture upon nature, to add its voice to those celebrating the inherent worth and beauty of the natural world, and to politically champion its preservation and protection. To this end, a certain valorisation of literalism and realism, particularly as expressed in nonfiction nature writing, attended the early ecocritical movement, particularly in its American incarnation. Deep ecology, with its valuation of rural and wild spaces, with its emphasis on sense of place and local knowledge was also influential in this early phase of ecocriticism. This accent on literary realism and its complementary praxis in attachment to one local, bounded place had a number of positive outcomes. Firstly, it contributed, albeit implicitly, to a more ecologically oriented critique of the way in which nature is constructed in certain texts of the western literary canon. It also effected a recuperation of the highly marginalised genre of nature writing, as Rigby and others have noted (Rigby 2002, p. 160). On the downside, however, ‘a disproportionate amount of first-wave energy was probably directed at texts and genres that seemed to provide dense, accurate representation of actual natural environments ...’ (Buell 2005, p. 40). As a consequence, the environmental aspect of any and all texts was overlooked, along with the capacity of genres other than nature writing to effect successful carriage of environmental themes.⁸

⁸ In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) Buell suggests rhetoric, poetry, performance writing and science fiction as genres in which the reciprocity between text and environment may be productively explored (p. 44-63).

In many respects *Shoulder to the Wind* was conceived as a project within this ‘first-wave’ context, born of a desire on the part of this writer to render a lyrically nuanced though realist account of the High Plains in all their spare and windswept beauty. It began as a work of witness for a loved, fragile and somewhat threatened landscape. It bore the hope of contributing to the protection of both the High Plains, and by extension, to other similarly rare and endangered places. But, like the High Plains themselves, and like the global environmental context in which they exist, this project has continued to evolve. Other contextual, ethical and ecocritical dimensions of the work have come into view; some of which are resonant with the concerns of ‘second-wave’ ecocriticism.

One of the major insights advanced by ‘second wave’ environmental critics is that natural and built environments have long since been mixed and permeable. In the light of this, literature and environment studies have expanded to include forms of ‘social ecocriticism’ that take seriously not only ‘natural’ landscapes but also urban and degraded landscapes (Bennett 2001, p. 32). This has been an important move, a recognition that protection of the natural world is enmeshed with issues of environmental justice, particularly as those issues pertain to the poor. It needs to be noted here though, that this move was already underway on the other side of the Atlantic in texts such as Jonathon Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991)—which suggest that Buell’s ‘wave’ theory is highly U.S.A.-centric. That being said, this shift has nevertheless enriched the movement and, as Buell points out, it has also expanded ecocritical thought towards a more ‘mature environmental aesthetics – or ethics, or politics – [that takes] into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns’ (Buell 2005, p. 23). Additionally, it has applied a more complex gloss to ideas of personhood and ‘environmental entanglement’ advanced in earlier ecocritical works (Buell 2005, p. 23).

As a result of this rapidly expanding horizon, my project on the Bogong High Plains has itself become more nuanced and complex. The relationship of the Plains to other local and distant places has come into sharper relief. Water harvesting, the generation

of power and long-term cattle grazing are obvious connections between the Plains and more urban centres. Perhaps less obvious is the subtle and extensive ways in which shifts in climate are impacting these stretches of open tundra—impacts that are similar to those currently being recorded in other high plateau regions of the world. The impact of human inscription in the landscape—both Indigenous and settler—has also come into view, both in its more pedestrian uses of the land and in its various forms of cultural potency and construction of meaning. How these cultural and economic inscriptions intersect with increasing climatic threats to this already fragile ecology has also caused a shift in register as *Shoulder to the Wind* has proceeded.

Another important emphasis of second wave ecocriticism has been the redefining, not only of the western literary canon, but of its own ‘environmental’ canon. In the space of less than a decade ecocritics have moved from a consideration of the ‘environmental text’ as being one in which the ‘nonhuman environment’ is envisioned as ‘an active presence’ in the text, suggesting ‘human history’s implication in natural history’, to environmentality ‘as a property of any text’ (Buell 1995, p. 7-8 vs, Buell 2001, p. 2-3).

Two Issues

Within this broad unfolding of the ecocritical endeavour, much vigorous debate has been generated by two contested issues. One concerns a theory of aesthetics—the relation of the creative word to the actual world—the relation of the world of words to the physical, material world as it manifests in place. The second concerns the manner in which increasingly global forces and influences are reconstruing sense of place discourses in the most fundamental of ways and repositioning both place itself and human relationships to place within contexts of planetary connections and global modes of ethics and responsibility. How *Shoulder to the Wind* is positioned in relation to each of these issues has become increasingly significant as the project has unfolded.

Representation

Shoulder to the Wind is a work of words. It is a series of marks on a page, marks that are constituted in certain ways to convey meaning. Words that are strung together in

order to evoke, or perhaps even to invoke, a high and lovely and complex place. The question of the relationship between those marks on the page, those words, and the Bogong High Plains themselves is part of a wider conversation within literary theory about textuality, about whether a text can ever be said to correspond, even in a fragmentary or partial way, to the physical realm of rocks and trees and waterways—can ever be said, in other words, to effect any correspondence between the world of words and the natural world, between text and place, between culture and nature.

This question of the mimetic function of place-based texts—the capacity of words to represent the Earth in its material and dynamic actuality—occupied much early ecocritical debate and while in hindsight that discourse now appears ‘narrowly focused and overblown’ its underlying issues remain, as Buell has commented, ‘as relevant as ever’ (2005, p. 32). The concern of ecocritics—a concern I share as a writer of place—is to reposition the Earth as a ‘tangible concern’ within a text and in doing so, to challenge the disjunction that poststructuralism is understood to have forged between text and environment (Dixon 1999, p. 87 in Buell 2005, p. 29). The question of whether a work of words can in fact represent the Earth though, the degree to which it can do so and the means by which this may be achieved, continues to be a fraught and contested business.⁹ But let me leap into the fray!

Perhaps it is wise to state from the outset that my own position on this issue, and one which I will explicate more fully below, is that the essential value of ecologically leaning texts such as *Shoulder to the Wind* is not located in their capacity to replicate in words, or even to effect some form of equivalence to, the particular place or aspect of the world with which they are engaged—in this case the world of the Bogong High Plains. Their value, their true work, is to be found, I would argue, in three critical aspects: in offering a mindful, attuned response to a place; in calling us, the readers, to

⁹ In a fine early essay, ‘The Land and Language of Desire’, in Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. 129, SueEllen Campbell notes that while poststructuralists and nature writers share some ground—both hold that every ‘reading’ of a place is partial and ‘situated’—there are some important differences too, differences she equates with ‘realism’ and ‘idealism’. While nature writers hold that the land retains a reality and integrity that is more than and apart from our meanings and interpretations—and that the land itself shapes who we are and any texts we may produce, the idealist locates agency within the human mind alone.

pay attention to both the dynamic life of a place, and to its endangerment in the contemporary context; and in revealing the connection of one place to other places, and to impacts that operate in both local and global spheres. The means by which an environmental text achieves these things is not primarily through its mimetic function but precisely in its falling short, in its failure to give us the world. But perhaps this is to short circuit some of the nuances of the debate. Let me backtrack just a little and offer a brief map of the territory.

The first phase of the debate on mimesis, ‘the relation of image to world’ (Buell 1999, p. 706), can be best framed perhaps by outlining its polarities. In his early and influential book *Imagining the Earth* (1996) John Elder proposed the idea that the life of a place, the evolving complex of geography, geomorphology, of light and weather is manifested, finds expression, not only in the particular species to which it gives rise, but also in the vernacular speech of local people, and in the text that an author, present and attuned to such a place, may produce. ‘Poetry’, Elder states, ‘becomes a manifestation of landscape and climate, just as the ecosystem’s flora and fauna are. A human voice becomes the voice of a place’ (1996, p.39). Such a position echoes Thomas Lyon’s earlier conception that the function of the poet and the nature writer is to effect, or at least to attempt, a re-forging of the ‘fundamental continuity between inner and outer, so that for the reader the world is alive again, seen precisely for what it is, and the mind is alive to it’ (Lyon 1987, p 221).

Dana Phillips, an ecocritic himself but also a fierce critic of what he sees as the field’s reactionary disregard of theory, responds to Elder’s proposition with a note of summary dismissal. ‘Poetry is not a “manifestation” of anything’, Phillips announces, ‘apart from the conscious decisions and unconscious motivations of poets, and the structural and aesthetic effects of the genres and languages in which they write. To suppose otherwise is occult’ (Phillips 1999, p. 580). The text, in other words, expresses nothing beyond author and language. These two positions define the outer parameters of the debate.

Thoreauvian scholar and ecocritic Lawrence Buell entered this debate attempting something of a middle way between these two positions. In his book *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and in his essay ‘The Ecocritical Insurgency’ (1999) Buell describes his position as ‘a qualified version of literary representation as extratextual mimesis’ (Buell 1999, p. 703). What he means by this is that texts maintain a certain ‘biodirectionality’; they gesture ‘outward toward the material world notwithstanding their constitution as linguistic, ideological, cultural artifacts that inevitably filter and even in some respects grotesquify their renditions of the extratextual’ (1999, p. 704).

At the heart of Buell’s thesis—at least here in its first phase—is the view that certain texts—mostly those of the nonfiction variety—in their ‘stylization’ as he calls it, in their lyrical use of language, in their rhythm and voice and sound—in their least literal and most personal aspects in other words—can effect an ‘*adequation*’ for the reader between text and place (Buell 1995, p. 86). By this Buell means what poet and critic Francis Ponge meant when he first coined the term; that the stylized image, that stylized language, while never being able to produce an exact replica of the world or of one place or one being or object within it, can nevertheless be equivalent to that place or being or object, that in some measure such writing ‘bridges the abyss that inevitably yawns between language and the object-world’ (Buell 1995, p. 98). Poet and critic Sherman Paul who also uses the term puts it this way: *adequation* is ‘a literary equivalence that respects the thing and lets it stand forth. *Adequation* is not to be confused with correspondence: It is not a symbolic mode but an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself’ (Paul 1992, p. 19).

In adopting *adequation* as the descriptor for the relation between text and world, Buell is endorsing the idea that imagination, creative distortion, invention, extrapolation, even a degree of fabrication are the things that will deliver a closer reading of the object world in a way that precise but flat description won’t. A form of ‘gestalt’ is what he claims is possible, where the text impresses the reader in much the same way as the object or the place impressed the writer (1995, p.86).

Australian writer and ecocritic Mark Tredinnick has joined this debate by proposing his own version of Buell's notion of *adequation*. The enterprise of a place-based work, he argues, 'is not really mimesis' (2005, p. 293). 'Representation' or 'making facsimiles' is not what these works are about. Rather, he says, nature writers 'are taking part in the land, listening and being changed'. 'Their work is not dislocated from the land', he says, 'but a kind of participation in and a continuation of it' (2005, p. 293). In Tredinnick's formulation place-based works may 'accompany' and 'transpose' aspects of a place into words through mobilisation of the musical dimension of language. (2005, p. 245). Drawing on the work of Australian theorist Paul Carter, Tredinnick argues that places are soundscapes as much as they are visible, material realities, and a piece of writing, through mindful use of language, can re-enact the land 'in all its dynamism through its rhythm and roll, by playing out patterns of sound, through the shifting dance of tone and timbre - through its music' (Tredinnick 2005 p.16). It is in this sense, he argues that 'word' and 'thing', that 'poem' and 'place' become 'essentially the same' (2005, p. 238). Not that the 'song of the text' will ever '*be* the song of the earth', he clarifies, but 'it may echo it, ring true to it, always in a human voice, always shaped by letters on a page, while letting the fragmented music of the real world sound on, out of the poet's ultimate hearing' (2005, p. 240).

Granted, this is a lovely idea, but it perpetuates, in my view, earlier claims in the mimesis debate that a text can stand in for a place, that it is capable of sharing, albeit in partial or highly refracted ways, the substance of a place. It continues the idea that really good writing, writing that is sensitively attuned to a place can, in some sense, render that place truly, can embody some aspect of its life. Such claims for the efficacy of the text do no favours for the places those texts claim to celebrate. Mimesis, even in these nuanced forms, runs the risk, as Kate Rigby rightly claims, of making an idol of the text, of celebrating, not 'nature' but the 'human capacity to capture it'—or at least some aspects of it—'in writing' (Rigby 2008, p. 5) .

It seems to me then, that *adequation*, including Tredinnick's musical variant of this notion, is too ambitious in its claim for the written word. Even Buell in a later work moves away from his original advocacy of *adequation* to more modest notions of place residing as a 'trace' within a work of words, of texts leaning towards places.

'Language', he states—a decade or so after his original proposition of adequation—'never replicates extratextual landscapes, but it can be bent toward or away from them' (2005, p. 33). This 'bent' language incorporates such aesthetic elements as the foregrounding of local toponymy, the use of indigenous names for native species and the inclusion of vernacular inflections—all elements I would argue that function as indicators of, as pointers to, the patina and tone and integrity of a place, while forgoing the claim that such 'bentness'—or the 'trace' of a place—in any sense replicates or embodies that place.

In the light of this, Buell's current view that no 'single distinctive theory of mimesis and/or reference is likely to command assent from environmental critics across the board' is an obvious but important point (2005, p. 39). So is his observation that where one ends up on this issue is determined in large part by what your starting point is. Nevertheless it is crucial to consider both the ecological and social contexts within which such theories and such debates exist. As the concepts of the 'trace' and of 'bent' language suggest, texts that cause us to consider, to remember, to apprehend newly or differently or more deeply the place to which they refer are vital at this time of ecological diminishment. But even this misses the deeper, more urgent work that texts, that literature, are required to accomplish in this historical hour. What is needed of literary works themselves, and what is needed in any theorisations of those works regarding their relationship to the Earth, is recognition that the text, as I stated at the outset, can never give us the world. As Kate Rigby argues, 'it is the very inadequacy of literature as a vehicle of representation or mode of response that is its saving grace' (Rigby 2008, p. 5).

The unsayability of the Earth

Let me explain. In a move that is in essence post-Heideggerian but which acknowledges the rich contribution Heideggerian thought has made to the field of ecocriticism, Rigby argues for a ‘negative ecopoiesis’ (2004a, p. 436). What she means by this is that the poetic word best serves the Earth by remaining cognisant of its inherent limitations. Rigby is responding here to what she regards as an over-valuation of the poetic word by Heidegger who claims in *Underway to Language* that ‘[o]nly the word grants being to a thing’ (1979, p. 164). Rigby sees this overvaluation perpetuated in the mimesis debate in ecocriticism and reified somewhat in Jonathon Bate’s important work, *Song of the Earth*, where, echoing Heidegger, Bate claims; ‘Things need us so that they can be named’ (2000, p. 265). It’s not that Rigby repudiates the power and efficacy of poetics in enabling us to perceive Earth newly and to dwell more ethically and sensitively within it. To be sure, she encourages, even champions, the use of the poetic word in drawing our attention to both the engaging liveliness of the Earth and to the ‘dark times’ in which we live, to the various sufferings that presently afflict so much of the non-human (as well as human) community (2008, p. 1). But Rigby is also emphatic in her argument that texts must also alert us to what they cannot do, to the ‘inevitable loss’ entailed in translating into mere words the ‘givenness of more-than-human nature’ (2004b, p. 8).

Whatever may be said of the Bogong High Plains, they are more—inevitably more—than what my words, or any words, may suggest; more than what this thesis that you may presently be holding in your hands, has recorded or intimated. And what I have experienced and witnessed in that place, the things that have come into view because that place is what it is, is more than I can say. It is like beauty. When we are struck by a moment of beauty, joy tends to be the spontaneous response—a response that, often as not, finds expression in word or song or some articulation of thanks or praise. And yet, as Chrétien asks, ‘how could the response not fall short’ of that original disclosure? (cited in Rigby 2004b, p. 122). ‘[I]t is only in the inevitable inadequacy of our response’, continues Rigby, ‘that we remain open to that which lies beyond the self and beyond the text’ (2004b, p. 122). It is in what my words are unable to express, in

realities they cannot hold, that you as reader are called on to ‘lift [y]our eyes from the page’, and to go out and find, to engage with the Bogong High Plains yourself, or with other similar places with which your own life may be entwined.

And that is the point of Rigby’s argument. The text is not the Earth, but it can call us to pay attention to what Earth is. In bringing into view its own limits, by acknowledging what is beyond its own communicative capacities, the text gestures towards the materiality of Earth itself. In other words, it is the very inadequacy of the word, of the work of art, its partiality and noncorrespondence that becomes ‘the site of the manifestation of what it responds to’ (Chrétien 1987 in Rigby 2004a, p. 437).

But there remains a dilemma. This position would seem to replicate in another form the post-structuralist disjunction between text and world that feminist theorists, ecophilosophers, ecocritics and nature writers such as me have for so long been struggling to bridge. If the Earth is preserved finally in its ‘unsayability’ as Rigby—drawing once again on the work of Chrétien (2004a, p. 435) claims—is the text then reduced to mere ‘artifact’ (Rigby 2004a, p. 437), a wholly separate entity that may point to, perhaps even ‘[hum] along beside’ the world beyond the page, but which can never participate in that world? (Tredinnick 2005, p. 239). Mark Tredinnick thinks so. Mark Tredinnick thinks that Rigby ‘claims too little’ for the poetic word, missing what he describes as the ‘music’ of the text, the ‘aural nature of the poetic enterprise’ that enables a work of words to ‘express and participate in the nature of the place, ... [to] sing what is unsayable ...’ (2005, p. 239). While not wishing to reprise our earlier discussion of musical adequation, Tredinnick’s critique of Rigby’s position requires considered response.

Rigby’s claims for the ‘unsayability’ of the Earth (2004a, p. 435) do not, I would argue, mean that the poetic word must ‘slip back into silence’ as Tredinnick suggests (2005, p. 239). In fact, she urges us to ‘use our specifically human capacity for song in the widest sense—our capacity, that is, for artistic expression of all sorts—to join in the exuberant singing, dancing, shape-changing, many-hued self-disclosure of phusis’

(Rigby 2004a, p. 433). Furthermore, Rigby draws on the Heideggerian notion of the Earth entering into a work of art through the materiality or ‘thingliness’ of the work. In literary works this includes both the materiality of the text, and ‘the phonemes and the graphemes’—the physical ‘signifiers’—that shape the breath as a work is spoken aloud or that shape how a work is sounded in the mind of the reader as their eyes or fingers traverse the printed page. This dense ‘sonority’ enables a continuance of the sounding of the Earth, while preserving Earth in its ‘unsayability’ (Rigby 2004a, p. 435). Rigby moves closer here to Tredinnick’s position than Tredinnick himself acknowledges. In this configuration the poetic word does not in any sense sing the world into being, but is rather a mode of ‘singing along with’. It is a form of response—deficient and imperfect as it may be—but a response that, in Mary Oliver’s evocative phrase, ‘puts all its money on suggestion’ (2004, p. 53), enticing the reader to set aside the book, the poem, the work of art, and to seek out ‘the kinds of embodied experience of the living Earth that may strengthen us in our desire to defend Earth others, human and otherwise, against the forces of injustice and destruction’ (Rigby 2009, p. 2). In this Rigby holds that while it is beyond the capabilities of a text to reproduce in words, in a human voice, the voice of nonhuman others, the text has a powerful role in pointing us towards, in assisting our re-engagement with, the Earth in both its beauties and its travails. Rather than being sundered as it is in poststructuralism, or conflated as it is in various versions of mimesis, the relationship between word and the phenomenal world is here, in Rigby’s formulation of negative ecopoiesis, repositioned and re-instated. It is a relationship of absence though. The text is the site of Derridean *différance*, revealing what it is not and can never be—the world beyond the page—and it is this, just to come full circle, that is its ‘saving grace’ (Rigby 2008, p. 5).

So a work of nature writing such as *Shoulder to the Wind* finds both its purpose and its value, not in its mimetic capacity to deliver to the reader the frisson of a wild summer storm or the dust and detritus of a broken wetland. If the text could achieve this, if the text could stand in for the world, as it were, even partially, then we have less need of the world, of the lively, animate Earth itself. What the text can do is stand as a response to the world in one particular place, or in one of its manifestations. It can,

through its physical ‘signifiers’, through the shaping of breath and body as that work is spoken or sounded, suggest and ‘sing along with’ some aspects of what that place is (Rigby 2004a, p. 435). And it can create a space within which something of the world may be disclosed. It cannot replicate, cannot be what the Earth is, but it can remind us that embodied engagement with the Earth is still possible.

The essay ‘Winds of Homecoming’, for example, from the creative section of *Shoulder to the Wind* (p. 133), opens with a powerful evocation of the presence and force of wind on the High Plains. In this passage the wind is represented as ‘an irritated, troubled growl’ that initially rumbles ‘in and out of earshot’ before becoming a ‘low roar’ that builds and gathers and sweeps downhill in ‘thick and fast propulsions like the frantic wingbeat of a chopper descending’ (p.133). It ‘shoots past’ the protagonists, flips pages of books and magazines with a ‘frantic finger’, acts as ‘fist’ and ‘muscle’ and ‘hand’. It ‘explodes’ and ‘hurl[s]’ and ‘scatter[s]’; it ‘press[es]’ and swirls in a ‘cacophony of force and sound’ (p. 133-4). It causes branches to tear loose with a ‘shattering, like broken glass’; an edge of canvas to flap and buck ‘like a live thing’; the car boot to bang ‘back against its hinges’ (p. 133).

The particular pattern of breath and sound as these words and phrases are spoken aloud or sounded in the mind enact the ‘sonority’ Rigby refers to. The words themselves, their particular alliterative qualities, reference the sound and strength and pattern of the wind. They suggest the noise effects of wind on forest canopy, the syncopation of air moving at speed over land, the aural interaction of wind and tree branch, of wind and car boot, of wind and canvas. This dense ‘sonority’ is not, of course, the wind itself; it is not what the wind was that night on the High Plains, but it is, as Rigby suggests, a form of ‘singing along with’, both a response and an invitation to acknowledge and engage with what the Earth is in one of its most pervasive and powerful aspects (Rigby 2004a, p. 435). It is by implication an invitation to set aside the book and to seek out those engagements with the Earth that may require the reader to turn her own shoulder to the wind.

So the text can call us to join in the exuberant singing of the world, without claiming to sing that world into being. And it can call us to ‘lift our eyes from the page’, to be attentive to the Earth and open to embodied engagement with its multiple manifestations (Bonnefoy 1988, p. 796). And the text can also point us towards realities that impinge upon the Earth and that function on a planetary scale.

The Global

As I mentioned earlier, one of the realities that became increasingly pressing and compelling during the writing of *Shoulder to the Wind* was the interpenetration of local and global influences on the health and resilience of the High Plains. Even as I was immersed in the particularities of the place, deepening my knowledge by attending things like the Alpine Ecology Course and consulting field guides and historical and scientific texts, botanists such as Henrik Wahren and scientists such as Roger Good and Graeme Worboys were conducting extensive studies on the current ecological impacts of rising temperatures and altered hydrological regimes on high country ecosystems. They were making projections about the kinds of challenges those ecosystems are likely to face in the future and recommending actions that may support resilience within a significantly altered environmental context.¹⁰ And while a shifting and increasingly unpredictable climate is one of the most salient threats to the ecological health of the High Plains and of the whole Australian alpine region, there are other similarly significant global influences that became apparent as my research and creative work continued. Not the least of these is the way we understand our human connection to the natural world and to certain places in particular when so much in our culture militates against identification with and responsibility for what is local and immediate. How such connections to place are impacted, reconfigured or even dissolved in an increasingly globalised context became for me an increasingly central line of enquiry.

¹⁰ Botanist Henrik Wahren conducts the ITEX (International Tundra Experiment) Project on the Bogong High Plains as part of his research with La Trobe University’s Research Centre for Applied Alpine Ecology. ITEX is an ongoing international project that measures the response of cold climate plants and animals to rising temperatures. Roger Good and Graeme Worboys produced the previously mentioned report on Australian alpine catchments titled *Caring for our Australian Catchments* (2011).

My exploration of these themes led me to the work of theorists Ursula Heise and Timothy Morton, both of whom have made significant contributions within the ecocritical field to consideration of the increasingly complex web of global networks and planetary intersections within which local places—indeed all places and all individuals—are now positioned. Their examination of the impact of globalisation on discourses of place and space, of identity and belonging, has been particularly relevant to the creative work I was pursuing in *Shoulder to the Wind*—a collection of essays so intensely steeped in one local, though by no means bounded, place. Heise’s thesis in particular, became the launching pad not only for theoretical consideration of my own creative work, but also for an engagement with the work of two Australian ecological philosophers who, to my mind, negotiate the realities of global influences while avoiding the obliteration of the category of the local, of place. Let me outline briefly then, the trajectory of my investigations and the theoretical terrain in which I have subsequently chosen to ground the creative and place-based work that is *Shoulder to the Wind*.

The problem of place

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) Ursula Heise sets out a bold vision: to delineate a path by which ‘ecologically based advocacy’ may shift in premise from ‘ties to local places’, to ‘ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole’ (p. 10). She is particularly interested in new forms of literary, artistic and technological expression that both produce and respond to this ‘sense of planet’. Heise’s project represents an important shift in emphasis, a necessary, perhaps overdue, repositioning of the ecocritical endeavour within global contingencies. For, as Heise rightly points out, the ecological crisis functions on a global scale, as do an increasing range of socio/cultural and economic enterprises. But such a repositioning presents a major challenge to some of the fundamental premises of both ecocriticism and the broader environmental movement to which it is connected. It also calls into question the relevance of the literary genre of nature writing—and by association *Shoulder to the Wind*—with its accent on the local and the immediate.

Since its emergence in the 1960s the environmental movement has given primacy to localism, particularly to local place, believing that it is only through immersion in what is near that environmental damage can be reduced. This ‘sense of place’ has been variously configured over the years to include notions of ‘dwelling’, of ‘re-inhabitation’, of ‘bio-regionalism’ and ‘land ethic’, of ‘small is beautiful’ and ‘land erotic’ (Heise 2008, pp. 28-30). As Kentucky farmer, poet and essayist Wendell Berry states, ‘Without a complex knowledge of one’s place, and without the faithfulness to one’s place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed’ (1972 p. 69). At the same time philosophers such as Arne Naess developed what Heise refers to as an ‘ethic of proximity’, a view that ethical and affective allegiances and behaviours arise spontaneously at the local level as people experience at close range the impacts of their actions or omissions on the biotic community (Heise 2008, p. 33). It was this ferment, framed of course by the intensifying ecological crisis, that gave rise in the early 1990s to the field of ecocriticism with its initial concern to examine how literature could contribute to and foster this same sense of locality and place.

It is this underlying assumption—that ecological consciousness is necessarily grounded in sense of place and that reconnecting people with their local place/s will produce more sustainable behaviours—that forms the nub of Heise’s challenge to ecocriticism and to environmentalism more broadly. Heise’s critique of this assumption and its associated discourses of place is extensive, and to my mind, invaluable. Let me rehearse just a few of her central objections. In a ‘deterritorialized’ world, where mobility, communication technologies and the international flow of capital, of consumer goods, of ecological ‘risk’ factors all function on a planetary scale, there can be no simple return, says Heise, to what is local and bounded (2008, p. 50, 28). Furthermore, the ‘persistent utopian reinvestment in the local’ can be explained, she says, in a number of ways: in the first instance as a reaction and ambivalence to various forms of global connectedness dating back to the 1960s, including Cold War politics and nuclear threat, and secondly, as a peculiarly North American phenomenon where valorisation of the local functions as a corrective to notions of ‘rootlessness’ and

‘nomadism’ that are perceived as paradigmatic of American society (p. 28, 49). Heise also takes issue with the idea that ‘sociocultural, ethical, and affective allegiances arise spontaneously and ‘naturally’ at the local level’ (p. 34). Such a stance eliminates from view, she argues, the very real work that culture accomplishes in all forms of belonging and risks being associated with the Fascist idea of ‘blood and soil’(p. 9). Finally, she argues that for many people, particularly those in modern societies, the local is itself ‘thoroughly unfamiliar’. Indeed, she comments, it may be ‘epistemologically as unfathomable in its entirety as larger entities such as the nation or the globe’ (p. 41).¹¹

Citizens of the world

These are important correctives to, and complications of, the category of place within the ecocritical and environmental fields. What Heise ultimately concludes though, is more problematic. While she concedes that traditional forms of place attachment may be useful in some forms of environmental practice, as a ‘founding ideological principle or a principal didactic means of guiding individuals and communities back to nature’, sense of place discourses are, Heise argues, ‘a dead end’ (p. 21). It is this deliberation of redundancy, of anachronism, in terms of the category of place and its capacity to deepen and transform ecological consciousness that in my view, veers towards overstatement. But let me stick with Heise’s argument a little longer.

Heise calls for an ecologically inflected form of ‘cosmopolitanism’ in which environmentalist thinking shifts the core of it cultural imagination from a ‘sense of place … to a more systemic sense of planet’ (p. 56). A form of ‘world citizenship’ is what she proposes where individuals and groups understand themselves as ‘part of planetary “imagined communities” of both human and nonhuman kinds’ (p. 61). These terms—‘cosmopolitanism’, along with its ecological derivative ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’, and ‘world citizenship’ seek to map out a ‘field of reflection’ in which this ‘sense of planet’, these forms of global awareness and connectivities, are fostered and developed (p. 57). Furthermore, it is from this global perspective that all the pressing issues of

¹¹ In somewhat of a twist on the same theme Timothy Morton explores the notion of the ‘strange stranger’—the idea that the strangeness of a thing or place or person can actually be heightened by increased intimacy or familiarity (2010, p. 41).

modernity must now be considered. To this end ecocriticism should jettison place as its major critical category, argues Heise, and pursue a much needed examination of the means by which individuals and groups in specific cultural contexts have succeeded in envisioning themselves—concretely and affectively—‘as part of the global biosphere, or by what means they might be enabled to do so’ (2008, p. 62). This work could be extended, she says, to a critique of highly mediated kinds of knowledge and experience with the aim of determining their capacity to accomplish a form of biospheric connectedness that is equal to, or even greater than, direct physical experience and sensory perception.

While there is much in Heise’s thesis that is, as I have said, both timely and visionary, there are also aspects that are somewhat discomforting. In arguing for the subordination of sense of place to ‘sense of planet’, in so heavily privileging global identification over local belonging, Heise risks perpetuating a pattern of dualist thinking that has long been dominant in the Western rationalist tradition. Heise also, in my view, tends to underestimate the significance of the psychological dimension of place attachment and its role in ‘individual and collective identity-construction’, particularly in relation to place as the site of ‘memory’ (Goodbody 2011, p. 107). Furthermore, while the ‘world environmental citizenship’ she advocates is a vital component of an expanded ecological consciousness, it does not necessarily follow that place, either as a cultural phenomenon or as a site of renewed Earth/human relations, should be ignored or superseded. It is my view—and perhaps this is an attempt to salvage both ecocriticism and *Shoulder to the Wind* from the theoretical peninsula on which Heise’s analysis might be seen to have stranded them—that the category of place can be re-imagined as the site of *both* individual and communal identification and belonging, and as the vantage point from which global connectivities and global crises are responded to and examined.

A good entry point for this reimagining may be a return to the notion of ‘place’ itself. As Doreen Massey has shown, writing more than a decade before Heise, it is questionable whether ‘place’ has ever been as bounded or unmediated as various

environmentalisms, or Heise herself, have suggested. Massey's ground breaking analysis brings into sharp relief both the progressive and dynamic elements of place and shows how actual places presently, but also through time, act as nexus points of both local and global forces. Australian philosophers Val Plumwood and Freya Mathews build on Massey's insights, arguing for the ongoing relevance of 'place' as a contrapuntal and continually evolving category. It is to these theorists and their alternative positioning of 'place' that I would briefly like to turn.

A place called home?

In her seminal work *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994) Massey conducts a broad-ranging excavation of the gender relations embedded in notions of 'space' and 'place'. She argues that many of the more 'defensive' and bounded conceptions of place (conceptions which Heise attributes to various forms of environmentalism and 'sense of place discourses' (Heise 2008, pp. 28-30) arise from a 'counter-positional definition of identity' that is 'culturally masculine' and which both perpetuates notions of singularity and stasis and that requires sharp distinctions between inner and outer (Massey 1994, p. 7). What is required Massey suggests, is not a dismissal of the category of place, but its deconstruction. Massey demonstrates how places, when viewed within their space-time context, are actually more 'open and porous' than often perceived—a mixture of local and global forces and of shifting networks of 'social relations and understandings' (1994, p. 5).

Massey presents four key ways in which this more progressive and dynamic understanding of place may be incorporated into place-based discourses. The first step is to recognise that places are not static entities. Places, says Massey, can be conceptualised 'in terms of the social interactions which they tie together' (p. 155). They are formed by the 'juxtaposition and co-presence' of 'particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce' (p. 168). At least some of these interrelations will operate, as Massey points out, on a scale far more expansive than what is generally referred to as 'local'. Places locate these interactions, these vast interlocking and articulating network of connections, both '*in*

space ... and *across* space' (p. 168). It follows then that the qualities that pertain to social interactions also pertain to places. Just as social interactions are never 'motionless things, frozen in time' but are 'processes' that constantly shift, change and develop, it follows that places, as the loci of such interactions and processes, are also in constant motion, always changing and being re-made (1994, p. 155).

Secondly, the identity of places is 'inevitably unfixed' (p. 169). This is partly as a result of the social relations out of which they are constructed which are. But it is also due to the fact that both the identity and the physical boundaries of places have always been more fluid than is often allowed. In one sense or another, notes Massey, 'most places have been "meeting places"; even their "original inhabitants" usually came from somewhere else' (p. 171). There can be no recourse, therefore, to some 'essential, internalized moment' in relation to place, for, as Massey makes clear, '[t]he past' was no more static than the present' (p. 169).

This leads to Massey's third point, which is that the identity of any place, including the 'home place', is in one sense 'for ever open to contestation' (p. 169). Places do not have 'single, unique identities', but are 'full of internal conflicts'. These conflicts tend to cohere around the nature of a place's 'heritage' or its present development or its projected future (p. 155). While places may indeed have a character of their own, this character is 'absolutely not', says Massey, 'a seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place which everyone shares' (p. 153). She gives examples of Welsh mining towns where the sense of place experienced by male miners is very different from the sense of place experienced by the women in those same communities; or dockside in London's East End where the dock workers and their families conceive of the place very differently from recently arrived entrepreneurs and members of the middle class who seek the area's gentrification (p. 169).

Finally, Massey affirms the ongoing uniqueness of places, but importantly, this is a uniqueness based not on bounded forms of space or identity. The specificity of place is 'continually reproduced', she says, not through 'some long, internalized history' (p.

155) or from ‘simple counterposition to the outside’ (p. 168). The uniqueness of a place arises ‘precisely through the particularity of linkage *to* that “outside”’ (p. 168). In other words, what is distinctive about a place is the specific mixture of interactions, both local and far reaching, which occur at that location and nowhere else (p. 155, 168). As Massey concludes, the ‘very mixture’ of interactions which occur ‘together in one place’ may produce effects ‘which would not have happened otherwise’ (p. 156).

This particular analysis by Massey is clearly at odds with Heise’s claims for the redundancy of the category of ‘place’. The fluid and unfixed nature of places, their ongoing ‘production’, along with the conjunction of local and global influences they embody, suggests not only the ongoing relevance of place, but its efficacy as that context within which a ‘global sense of the local’ can be experienced and evaluated (Massey, p. 156). Massey’s perspective, however, prefigures some of the dynamic and contrapuntal characteristics understood to inhere in the category of ‘place’ by philosophers Freya Mathews and Val Plumwood, both of whom examine—albeit very differently—the complex and continually changing relationship between place and planet.

The heart of the matter

Both Mathews and Plumwood begin their analysis of global and deterritorializing forces from a position that is notably different from Heise’s, and to a lesser degree from Massey’s. While Heise examines the global nature of the ecological crisis and concludes that a ‘sense of planet’ is fundamental to any adequate response, Mathews and Plumwood consider the philosophical underpinnings and cultural assumptions that are at the heart of the ecological crisis itself. Drawing on non-Western, Indigenous Australian and in Mathews’ case, Chinese traditions, each considers the ecological crisis to be one symptom—both urgent and planetary—of a deeper crisis at the heart of Western civilisation. For Plumwood, the ecological crisis is effectively, a ‘crisis of reason’ (2002). For Mathews it is a ‘symptom of a deeper, metaphysical crisis in human consciousness and an accompanying crisis of culture’ (2005, p. 8). What this crisis calls for, they argue, is ‘a reorientation to materiality *per se*’, a project that

challenges dominant notions of reality while simultaneously reconfiguring our relation to the world, primarily through the ‘local modality’ of ‘place’ (Mathews 2005, p. 8). For Mathews, at the heart of this project is a form of ‘reinhabitation’—though a notably different version of this process than the one advocated by deep ecology. Plumwood opts for what she calls a form of ‘place-sensitivity’ (2002, p. 233). Each of these approaches utilises possibilities inherent in the category of place while holding the global context in view. In other words, like Massey, both Mathews and Plumwood, open up new possibilities for how we may think about and exist within our local places, even as we negotiate a society and a planetary context in which so much of what takes place, as philosopher Zygmunt Bauman observes, ‘is an action on distance’ (Bauman, 1993, p. 217).

Reinhabitation

Mathews’ project of reinhabitation is founded on a renovated form of panpsychism, a tradition of thought that has a long, if somewhat underground, history within Western philosophy and metaphysics. Central to the panpsychist premise is the underlying unity of mind and matter. Within this nondualist construct the universe is understood as a unity, as a ‘physical manifold’ that possesses ‘a subjectival dimension of its own’, but which also ‘self-differentiates into a Many, a manifold of individual subjects’ (Mathews 2005, p. 14). Consequently, a certain ‘inner impulse or physic principle’ is accorded not only the natural or biological order, but the order of matter itself, rendering it the arena ‘not merely for causality but for communication’ (Mathews 2005, p. 73, 14). The praxis that stems from this shift in metaphysical premise is essentially votary, a process of affirming and cherishing the world as it is given. For Mathews a first step in this process is to displace dualistic notions that set nature apart as a thing to be reified and protected. If a mentalistic dimension inheres in all of matter, she argues, then opposition between that which is naturally occurring and that which is humanly made dissolves. Cherishing the given, then, is not about reanimating nature by restoring ‘a set of lost things or attributes’, but rather allowing ‘a certain process to begin anew’ (2005, p. 31). Essentially, this means restraining the modernist impulse to make the world over in one’s own idealistic or even ecologically

considered image, allowing it instead, to ‘grow old’ (2005, p. 25). If we cherish the actual, she argues, allowing things to unfold towards their own ends, celebrating rather than interfering with those things and places that are given to us here and now, the modality of world that is local and given—no matter how degraded or pauperized by the excesses of modernity—becomes the site not only of our own reinhabitation, but also of the flourishing of more-than-human life.

Becoming native

Along with this apparently passive stance of ‘letting the world grow old’—a stance profoundly informed by Taosim—Mathews advances the more activist edge of her project of reinhabitation. This she refers to as ‘becoming native’ (2005, p. 49). It should be noted that Mathews’ use of this term—a term which is acknowledged by Mathews herself as being weighted with ‘colonial accretions’—is a deliberate attempt to evoke the ‘meaning of indigeneity, or the state of being native’ and to show how this is available to anyone prepared to ‘renegotiate their metaphysical relationship with place’ (2005, p. 58).¹² Notions of openness, of welcome to the stranger and connection with the distant, adhere, however, to Mathews’ conception of the term, clearly removing it from the fascistic deployment of the term in relation to the previously mentioned cult of ‘blood and soil’.

In ascribing an inner dimension to matter, panpsychism holds that all things participate in a larger presence and purpose and are emanations of a potentially communicative and responsive world.¹³ What is required of us, therefore, is not only that we step back and allow things to unfold in their own way, but that we actively engage with them, ‘invite them into relationship by committing to them and holding them dear’ (2005, p. 50). This kind of communicative engagement can only happen through the modality of world that is immediately accessible to us—the modality of place.

¹² Mathews also insists that in a settler society such as Australia, nativism must be premised on apology and compensation to Indigenous communities for past injustices and that any move towards co-custodianship of this land can only proceed at the invitation of Indigenous peoples themselves (2005, p. 58).

¹³ In Mathews’ schemata of panpsychism ‘world’ is understood as the realm of the given, of earth and sky, of seasons and weather, of diurnal rhythms; in other words, the whole of the physical reality which humans exist within and did not create and which, in Heideggerian terms, is the realm of ‘phusis’.

Practically, this means not only establishing a custodial relationship to those things that are in our care, but committing to a particular place as one's own lifeworld, coming to know not only its physical characteristics, but also its gifts and graces, its moods and stories, its limitations and capacities. The native will avoid imposing on her home-place radical initiatives or ill-fitting schemes that risk depleting its conative energies. Rather, she will trust both its 'material sufficiency' and its 'mythic inexhaustibility' (2005, p. 58), working with its synergies and finding within these parameters a 'guiding principle for living' (2005, p. 53). As the native becomes increasingly attentive and attuned to her place, she becomes 'interfused' with its inherent energies, finding herself responding to subtle communiqués that constitute an 'utterly engrossing poetic dialogue' (2005, p. 55).

To be native then, is not necessarily to be born in a particular place, but to come to belong there in an 'internal' way, to be imbued with its distinctive character, to engage with it communicatively and to become implicated in both its unfolding and its ends. Importantly, this accords with Heise's observation that connections with place are not naturally pre-given or arise spontaneously as some 'sense of place' discourses assume, but are culturally acquired, are a work of conscious accomplishment (2008, p. 33). Mathews' version of nativism however, considers possibilities for praxis and for shifts in ecological consciousness that Heise's 'sense of planet' elides. 'Singing the ground', says Mathews—a term she borrows from Australian Aboriginal peoples—is a form of poetics, of communicative exchange, that becomes for the native not only possible, but part of everyday engagement with a reawakened world (2005, p. 199). While the dynamics of this communicative relationship are dependent on local immersion—a topic I will pursue in the following chapter on Australian nature writing—they also invoke a relationship to matter that concedes agency to the material world in its local, planetary and universal modes.

Mathews accomplishes a number of important things here. Like Heise she takes account of the processes of 'disembedding' and displacement that 'come to' people and places in the modern context (Heise 2008, p. 52)—the processes by which the 'hitherto

sacred order of matter and place' are converted into 'commodities, cash, and property'—into the 'technologies, industries, litter and junk' that our modern, urban life has spawned (Mathews 2005, p. 73). But whereas Heise understands these processes as terminal in terms of place identification in mainstream communities, Mathews' great achievement is in showing how, even in the midst of the full modern/industrial catastrophe, the world in its local modality of place can be reawakened, the 'commodities and property converted back to the sacred order', and the channels of more-than-human communication be unblocked (Mathews 2005, p. 73). She opens a pathway to reinhabitation, not in some idealist sense as advocated by proponents of deep ecology, but in the context of our own dwelling, no matter how fractured or godforsaken that dwelling place may be.

It is from this position of 'reawakened world'—a world as vast as matter itself and as local and specific as the places with which our lives are entwined—that Mathews considers the global context. And as I have stated, for both Mathews—and for Plumwood as we shall soon see—the global context is far from antithetical to the local project. For Mathews, the multilateral communications enacted through global systems enables natives to keep in view the 'global array of places, peoples, and cultures' within which their homeplaces exist, and to remain mindful of the fact that their own local scenarios are but 'one manifestation of the variegated possibilities of the planet' (2005, p. 82). Global communication networks also allow for a clearer grasp of the true character of the native's homeplace and its role in 'the relational fabric of the planetary environment' (2005, p. 82). These perspectives avoid, to my mind, some of the homogenising characteristics inherent in Heise's 'eco-cosmopolitanism' where the rich nodes of diversity and uniqueness that pertain to different regions and cultures risk being negated or flattened. Mathews goes on to argue that global electronic mediation affords the exchange of knowledge, of arts, of moral and political lore, along with networked forms of resistance to hegemonic incursions into the local arena. What Mathews envisages is a form of local place attachment that functions in multilateral ways, that is not only open to but reliant on both global and local forms of knowledge, identification and communication. It is a form of attachment that is politically

efficacious and ecologically astute. As such it represents a viable alternative to the many Euclidean conceptualisations that seek to remake the ground beneath our feet.

Place-sensitive

While Plumwood shares Mathews' philosophical position in relation to the mentalistic dimension of matter and the agency inherent in the more-than-human world, she brings a different perspective to the consideration of the ongoing viability of the category of 'place'. In *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason* (2002), Plumwood is concerned not so much with individual place-attachment but with the structural obstacles to the development of a 'place-sensitive' society and culture, and the means by which those obstacles might be identified and challenged. Like Heise she nominates all the deterritorializing forces of modernity—excessive mobility, time poverty, the ongoing impacts of colonisation, the imperatives of the labour market, the envisaging of the earth in terms of private property, and the sense of self-enclosure that comes with a highly dualistic and urbanised society—as key factors in the increasing disjunction between culture and place. She proposes, however, ways in which the sharp distinctions between the global and the local may be ameliorated.

'Place sensitivity', Plumwood argues, need not dictate 'a place-bound, stationary lifestyle of monogamous relationship to just one place' (2002, p. 233). Taking account of the high level of mobility current in modern societies she proposes firstly, a new approach to travel that would see functional movement repositioned as an opportunity for encounter. Travel, she argues, could be reimaged as 'journeying', a project of 'multiple place-encounter' that would be dialogical rather than monological, a communicative exploration of 'the more-than-human as a source of wonder and wisdom in a revelatory framework of mutual discovery and disclosure' (2002, p. 233). Such an approach to travel would destabilise the more instrumental modes of encounter with the natural world and locate the human within the narrative of the earth's 'history and power', affirming places and ancestral elements in the land as 'sources of revelation' (2002, p. 233). This approach would also inform and inspire one's understanding of the home-place, revealing its continuance with other places and other

regions, along with its participation in this ‘encompassing context’ (2002, p. 233). If configured in these ways, travel and mobility would also foster caring relationships to multiple places and acknowledgement of the ways in which one’s “ecological footprint” extends far beyond the places to which one may be affectively connected.

Plumwood develops this final point in a later essay, examining both the dialogical and the ethical relationship between the local place and the global contingencies within which most people live. In ‘Shadow Places’ (2008) she argues for a greater consciousness of and ethical response to both one’s local place of attachment and the economic places that support one’s life. A form of ‘place honesty’ is what she advocates here, a bringing into view of ‘all those places that bear the ecological traces of one’s passage, or that carry the ecological impacts of supporting [one’s] life’ (2008, p. 6). These ‘shadow places’ need to be reconfigured as part of the homeplace and included in our systems of political care and trade justice. This radically reworks the local-global split that Heise proposes and allows for not only the more even distribution of ecological risks, but also for more efficacious forms of global cultural exchange.

Place and globalisation

The nuanced considerations of the category of place undertaken by Mathews and Plumwood challenge Heise’s sharp delineations between the local and the global, between ‘sense of place’ and ‘sense of planet’. Like Massey, they show how place and local belonging are not only viable within an increasingly globalised context, but how place itself may function contrapuntally, as a vital nexus point for the negotiation of both planetary and deeply local realities. Importantly, both Mathews and Plumwood manage to avoid exclusive reliance on the highly mediated and refracted forms of knowledge and communication advocated by Heise and show how a more embodied and immediate integration of global phenomena is possible. And they affirm the local modality of place as the arena from which both the ethical and practical realities of the ecological crisis may be addressed, along with some of the underlying causes and principles of that crisis.

Finally, in advocating a repositioning of the human in relation to the material world and in relation to matter itself, Mathews and Plumwood suggest possibilities for the cultural re-instatement of the agency and communicative powers of the more-than-human world, of that manifold within which all things and all beings exist.

There are a range of ways in which the creative component of *Shoulder to the Wind* re-imagines place in the ways described by Mathews and Plumwood. Many of the creative essays demonstrate not only the communicative aspects of place, but also its dual directionality—its incorporation of both local and global realities. The lyric essays also explore place as the locus of one's deepening sense of identification and advocacy.

In the essay 'Eagle', for example, an interaction is described between a cattleman and a wedge-tail eagle. The cattleman is 'halt[ed]' by the appearance of the eagle, by its 'spiralling upthrust', by its 'powerful breasts', its 'darkly painted wings' and its wingtips that splay 'like long black fingers' (p. 131-2). The eagle is described as 'straf[ing] with its gaze the pastoral scene below'; as 'wondering' about the 'memory of calves'; as 'smudging' the cattleman and his horse with its shadow. A certain agency or 'mentality' is suggested here. As the eagle flies for a second time towards the cattleman, the man's 'whole face and chest are open to the sky and to this bird, to its wide wings and its fierce gaze and its majestic presence that looms over [him] like a dark angel'. The man 'know[s] that this eagle knows [he] is there'. As the eagle fixes the man with his eye and drops its head towards him the man feels 'known', 'seen for who [he] is and how [he] factors in the scheme of things'.

This is an example of the kind of 'communicative exchange' between self and some aspect of world that Mathews refers to within her panpsychist project of 'becoming native'. Here the man is sufficiently steeped in the nuances of a familiar and loved place to open himself to the wonder of one of its communicative manifestations. Notwithstanding the more utilitarian meanings this man has ascribed to the High Plains, it is this moment of communicative exchange that becomes for him—at the end of the

essay and in the later years of his life—the emblematic high point of his long engagement with this place.

Similarly, there is a great variety of ways in which the creative component of *Shoulder to the Wind* points to the larger network of relationships within which the High Plains are positioned. The essay ‘Fire’ for example, begins by referencing a series of lightning strikes that ignited the devastating 2003 alpine fires but quickly moves to a more expansive examination of the long relationship of this continent, along with its specific ecologies, with fire (p. 147f). It also points to how this relationship is changing and intensifying in response to shifts in climate and global weather systems (p. 153). Importantly, this essay also acknowledges the ‘ecological footprint’ that Plumwood refers to (p. 201), the myriad ways in which the author’s own lifestyle and resource use—and by implication the lifestyle of all who use cars and burn electricity and contribute to excessive consumption—are implicated in the changes in climate and extreme weather events we are now experiencing.

Furthermore, there is a degree of ‘place honesty’ present in the creative essays, references for example, to the network of dams and aqueducts and pylons that form the hydro-electricity network on the High Plains that produces power for industry and regulates water flows for irrigation (pp. 9, 115, 275). These references point to the fact that the High Plains are not only part of a rare and valued preservation area, but are themselves one of the ‘shadow places’, one of those regions whose natural systems have been compromised in order to enhance the utility of developed areas in other parts of the country.

The important point of these inclusions in the creative essays is that they demonstrate Mathews’ and Plumwood’s point that the local place, and in this instance, the familiar and loved place, is not only the focus of individual identification with what is near and known, but is also the context within which regional, continental and global forces are both acknowledged and experienced. They affirm, as I have said, ‘the local modality of place as the arena from which both the ethical and practical realities of the ecological

crisis may be addressed, along with some of the underlying causes and principles of that crisis' (p. 201).

A conclusion of sorts

My deliberations on this chapter were happening around the time I visited Henrik Wahren in his home place at the foot of the Great Dividing Range near Mansfield. We continued the discussion we had begun on the High Plains regarding the 'pathological' elements of the Western philosophical tradition's understanding and treatment of the natural world. As I intimated in the essay that resulted from that visit, Henrik is perhaps more conscious than most of how shifts in climate are particularly threatening to alpine ecologies. He showed me book after chart after graph after article on current knowledge and projected outcomes for alpine regions both nationally and internationally. And we talked at length about the importance of investing in what is local—in the land and all its many forms of life, and in the local human community. We talked of living simply, in alignment with what the land can bear, and we talked of the energies and inner presences that sometimes glint and show themselves when you live deeply in a place. And we talked about travel too, although this part of the conversation didn't make it into the essay. We talked of the need to forgo air travel, to opt for various forms of slow travel. We talked of going to fewer places, either for work or leisure, and staying longer, of investing in and coming to know more deeply the places we encountered.

It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now that the content of that conversation and of the essay that followed elucidates many of the themes of this chapter. And it seems to me that Henrik himself—not perfectly of course, but nevertheless powerfully and practically—embodies both the global consciousness and activism championed by Heise, and the ethical accountability and material re-enchantment advocated by Mathews and Plumwood. He is trying to step out some path towards becoming 'native' as he negotiates multiple place attachments, as he holds in tension both local and global realities and searches in a number of philosophical and cultural traditions for ways of honouring and enlivening the agency he knows to be present in the more-than-human

world. Although Henrik himself understands his choices and commitments as resting firmly in the bioregionalist frame, to my mind his life and work are resonant with the alternative and more nuanced project adopted by both Mathews and Plumwood. It is a project not unlike the one that nature writers have long since attempted. It is to this endeavour and the particularities of the nature writing genre—contextualised as it now is by the above ecocritical excursion—that I now turn.

2.

Writing Nature

When I first contemplated a writing project centred on the Bogong High Plains—a project that eventuated in this collection of nature essays that is the creative component of *Shoulder to the Wind*—the question of literary form or genre was a critical factor in my deliberations. While I considered a number of genres—and all of them have their advantages, their unique ways of stirring human imagination—nature writing, in its ecological perspective and in its multidisciplinary stance, seemed particularly suited to the kind of endeavour I had in mind. And that was as it should have been, for as I soon discovered, nature writing’s roots are in both the phenomenological encounter between person and place, and in the scientific, philosophical and cultural reflections that both contextualise and flow from such an encounter. Nature writing emerges, in other words, from personal experience of the physical world somewhere, and it speaks of that experience—of that ongoing relationship—through ‘data’ and ‘metaphor’, in ‘the language of scientists’ and in ‘the language of the poets’ (Cranston 2001, p. 60).

But there is more to nature writing than that, both in terms of the inner dynamism of the genre and in terms of those aspects that have both informed and are evident in the earlier essays on the High Plains. My intention in the following two exegetical chapters is to provide an overview of the origins and distinctive characteristics of the genre, and then to focus on those specific aspects of nature writing that in my view hold significant potential for shifts in what Lawrence Buell calls our ‘environmental imagination’ (1995). Some of these aspects—ecological perception for example—are general to the genre. Others—such as the concept of ‘country’—flow from a specifically Australian Aboriginal experience and sensibility, and speak to the additional project nature writing carries in settler societies. As Thomas Lyon remarks, in places such as Australia and North America nature writing assists towards a ‘psychic

'at-homeness' for settlers and may even be part of the process by which the settler mindset moves closer to that of Indigenous inhabitants in terms of ecological apprehension and affective/spiritual links with the land (Lyon 1989, p. iv). In Australia such a process is sometimes referred to as the development of a 'whitefella Dreaming' (Stanner 1979).

It is important to bear in mind though, that such shifts in consciousness are not only about human 'at home-ness' or sense of belonging. The essential feature of nature writing is its capacity to awaken our perception to a way of seeing that is 'ecological' rather than primarily or exclusively centred on human society and human concerns (Lyon 1989, p. 11). In this sense nature writing is biocentric, it endeavours to set aside the idea of human primacy and turn our gaze outward to a consideration of all manner of things from the Earth's, from nature's point of view —at least as far as this is possible. Implicit in this posture is a re-situating of the natural world within both the aesthetic and ethical purview of humankind. Implicit also, is a re-situating of the human within the natural order. Nature writing bears witness then, to the fact that we both shape and are shaped by those places that support our lives and it understands its role, especially within the current ecological context, as one means by which the human community may consider that single and perennial question: how shall we live?

So, to a brief overview of nature writing and then to a more detailed examination of two aspects of the genre that have been especially vital as this project has unfolded.

Origins

Most cultures have a tradition of land focused literature. In the west this literature is commonly referred to as nature writing, a 'distinct tradition in English prose' that has been recognised for more than two hundred years (Elder & Finch 1990, p. 19). Over that time nature writing has engaged the talents of major literary figures, principally from Britain and North America. Some literary scholars have suggested that nature writers are the 'children of Linnaeus', the natural historian who in the mid-eighteenth century introduced a framework within which all living things could be identified and

classified (Elder & Finch 1990, p. 19). Perhaps this is so, although the process engaged in by Linnaeus of collecting and naming could be seen as a manifestation of the western colonialist mindset of domination and control. The inclusion in the canon of nature writing of one of Linnaeus' early disciples, however, is much less contested. Gilbert White's *A Natural History of Selborne*, first published in 1789, has 'exerted a profound and lasting influence on nature writers' (Elder & Finch 1990, p. 19). As Donald Worster has shown, White's *Selborne* not only advanced the 'rise of the natural history essay in the latter half of the nineteenth century', it restored to 'cold science' a degree of 'warmth, breadth and piety' in its literary rendering of a beloved landscape (Worster 1985). In his detailed observations of the natural surroundings of the village where he was born and where he served as priest, White 'drew attention to patterns in nature which no one before him had discerned so sharply' (Finch & Elder 1990, p. 31). It was one of the books that accompanied Charles Darwin on his voyages on the *HMS Beagle* and it also occupied shelf space in Thoreau's cottage at Walden. Indeed, it is with Thoreau that we first see the emergence of the nature essay as a recognised literary genre.

Though deeply influenced by the transcendental philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau progressed from Emerson's human-centred approach to construct a new template for works of literature dealing with the natural world. In his seminal work, *Walden*, published in 1854, and with his journals and essays which were not written for publication but which have been profoundly influential since his death, he demonstrated the 'possibilities of the nature essay as a modern literary form' (Lyon 1989, p. 52). Thoreau sought 'a pure and direct experience' of the natural world, an experience which would 'transcend the usual distance between subject and object and grant participation in the wholeness of nature' (Lyon 1989, p. 53). And he sought words that would honour the truth of what he had found. As he says in his *Journals*, he was after:

Sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new impression;

sentences which suggest as many things and are a durable as a Roman aqueduct; to frame these, that is the *art* of writing. Sentences which are expensive, towards which so many volumes, so much life, went; which lie like boulders on the page, up and down or across; which contain the seed of other sentences, not mere repetition, but creation; which a man might sell his grounds and castles to build (1927, p. 80).

Thoreau's work sets the tone, both stylistically and philosophically, for those who were to follow in the genre. While this is certainly the case in the American context, it also applies, at least to some degree, in the Australian context, where, as John Ryan argues, Thoreavian influence can be seen in the works of a range of early Australian nature writers, despite the fact that the land itself was about as far removed in character and seasonality as it was possible to be from the conditions that gave rise to literary nature writing in the northern hemisphere (2011).

What we see in the work of Thoreau and in a precursory way in White's literary exploration of Selbourne, is the influence of Romanticism¹⁴ and its alternative and often oppositional stance to Enlightenment values and precepts. While Romanticism itself—or certain strains of it—has come under much suspicion for its valorisation of a past, pre-industrial 'Golden Age' and its conflation of 'nature worship' with 'nationalism', it also, at least according to some theorists, contains prototypical forms of ecological imagination (Hay 2002, p. 7). While Kate Rigby has remarked that the ecocritical revaluation of Romanticism represents a vital 'return to the path not taken' (2004b, p. 1)—a view with which I concur—my interest here is in the fact that from its emergence as a distinctive literary form, nature writing in the western tradition has been influenced by a Romantic worldview that emphasises 'interdependence and relatedness in nature' (Worster 1985, p. 82). The origins of the genre are positively entangled with the Romantic impetus to see the world 'anew' (Rigby 2004, p. 2), to assume that

¹⁴ The capitalised 'Romantic' will be used when referring to the Romantic Movement or to those writers commonly categorised as Romantic poets. The lower case 'romantic' will be retained when referring to broader, ongoing tendencies in various literatures that can be referenced back to the Romantic Movement.

‘nature might have its own internal logic’ and that ‘nature and the individual [are], in some primitive sense, indivisible’ (Robin 2008, p. 298).

With the appearance in the 1940s of Aldo Leopold’s *Sand Country Almanac* (1949) we see some of the biocentrism prefigured in the Romantic period brought to powerful fruition in an ecologically focused work that, according to poet and theorist Pete Hay, remains ‘the benchmark for modern nature writing’ (2002, p. 15). ‘No writer of the present-day’, comments Hay, ‘... has expressed the great tragedy of imminent and massive species extermination more evocatively than Leopold did in the 1940s’ (2002, p. 15). Leopold was the first to argue for a widening of the sphere of ethics to include the natural world, and his legacy—ethical, scientific and literary, often summarised as his ‘land ethic’—is evident in later works by such luminaries as Rachel Carson, Barry Lopez and Terry Tempest Williams.

These dimensions of biocentrism and the according of moral standing to the natural world are also vital features of the work of arguably Australia’s most influential poet, writer and activist, Judith Wright. As Libby Robin has observed, Wright’s influence on the Australian literary scene has been immense and her advocacy of a literature that is truly ‘of’ this land rather than ‘about’ it, continues to influence a great deal of the literary work that is produced here. Understandably, this is particularly true for the nature poets and writers who take the places of the Australian continent as their subject. In a telling observation, Robin comments that in *The Littoral Zone* (Cranston and Zeller 2007)—billed as Australia’s ‘first collection of ecocritical essays devoted to Australian contexts and their writers’—Wright’s work is referenced ‘in more than half the chapters’, and Wright herself is ‘the only ecocritical writer and poet to be accorded her own chapter’ (Robin 2008, p. 300). Wright, while perhaps most revered for her poetry and her activism, both practical and literary, on behalf of Indigenous rights and the environment, produced a substantial body of work across a range of genres, including a number of works in the nature writing mode. Her ‘exceptional leadership in writing Australian nature’ (Robin 2008, p. 300) advances those aspects of the Romantic project that affirm nature as ‘a living and creative force, capable of arousing, not merely

passively receiving, the human imagination' (Wright 1975, p. 71) while advocating for forms of writing that 'are truly local in sound and spirit' (Wright 1961, p. 334).

So nature writing emerges from and advances in its contemporary expressions an understanding of nature as a dynamic force that both shapes, and is shaped by, human thought and behaviour. It explores the 'spiritual, psychological and ethical implications' of human existence within an 'unfolding and signifying universe', and it awakens us to the particularities of those places to which it responds (Rigby 2004b, p. 5). While embodying a number of identifiable characteristics and finding expression in a range of forms and styles as discussed below, nature writing also has a political edge. Not only does it widen our notion of compassion to include the more than human world, but it is well placed to contribute to processes of change and adaptability. As Elizabeth Ammons demonstrates in *Brave New Words* (2010), literary works, no matter what the genre, have played a significant role in social change down the centuries. She cites Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Simon Ortiz's more recent *Men on the Moon* (1999) as influential works in both the abolition movement and in the push for human/land rights for Native Americans. Nature writing in my view is part of this same literary tradition of challenge and of change. Its focus however, is not only the exigencies of the human condition—although that is certainly part of its purview—but the whole suite of relationships that are sustained or suppressed within a place, and the kinds of changes that may be necessary to enhance or safeguard the well-being of all.

Characteristics

What then are the characteristics of nature writing that might enable carriage of such an endeavour? Perhaps the first thing to note is the stance nature writing tends to take in relation to the phenomenal world. It endeavours to turn our attention outward to the world in which we are immersed, to the Earth as it manifests in the particular places, people and felt presences with which our lives are entwined (Lyon 1989, p 7). To this extent nature writing is ecocentric in terms of orientation. It seeks to view things from a lens wider than the merely human, considering events, issues, dreams, plans, and

concerns from multiple points of view. It understands that every life, human and otherwise, is imbricated in every other life and that sentience and agency are conditions of existence rather than aspects of human rationality alone. In this sense nature writing is quite subversive, offering a counter-point to the dualistic subject-object dichotomy so prominent in western thought (Lyon in Taylor 1987, p. 1253).

Either overtly or subliminally, nature writing texts tend to engage with and challenge the mode of thinking that has led to some of the ecological depredations of the current era. Rather than perpetuating an anthropocentrism that posits the idea that nature exists for human use and that other species have no, or grossly inferior, rights to ours, this literature seeks to restore wonder, respect and a sense of familial connection to all our practices and engagements with the natural world. Central to this is the ethical dimension mentioned above, whereby human moral obligations extend outward, in care and compassion, to both human others and the broader community of life. This ‘land ethic’ has a radical edge to it. It calls for recognition of the sacredness and dignity of all living things and a foregoing of a secular, materialist attitude to life. In this sense nature writing is a deeply spiritual, while not necessarily religious, literature (Lopez 2004, p. 117). It seeks to re-enchant, to fan to flame the ‘residue of awe’ for the natural world that ‘the modern world has not yet erased’ (Lopez 2004, p. 117). In looking beyond the human to the broader Earth community of which the human is but one manifestation, this literature engages in witness and in wonder.

The other thing to say about nature writing, at least in this broad sweep of its dominant characteristics, is that it takes the long view when it comes to its consideration of places. That is to say, it sees the movement, the order with which the world has unfolded—in its infinitesimal increments and in its violent, thunderous eruptions and subsidences—as part of the inherent character of a place, part of its voice and narrative. It recognises that the planet as a whole, and certain places in particular, evolve within a process of constant transformation, that even the most static and enduring landscape is the manifestation in time of previous creative events, and is contemporaneously on its way to dissolution and reconfiguration in another geological age. And it sees the

human as being subject to the same evolutionary and transformative processes. Nature writing sees places as unfinished, as dynamic, shape-shifting entities, and endeavours to perceive and to write them through time.

These are some of the key elements you will find in most works in the nature writing genre and they apply just as surely to broader works of environmental or ecological concern. Lawrence Buell has condensed these major elements to four statements that work well as a succinct definition of the genre.

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 a given is at least implicit in the text.*

While these statements are valuable signifiers of works that fall within the nature writing or broader environmental genre, it is important to bear in mind the addendum that Buell makes to his earlier analysis of what constitutes an environmental text. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a decade after identifying these elements as being characteristic of ecologically focused works, Buell suggests that all texts, whether or not they engage with overtly environmental themes, can be analysed in relation to their ‘environmentality’ (Buell 2005, p. 33).

Mapping the genre

Another way of tackling the question, ‘what is nature writing?’ is the employment of the taxonomical approach. Rather than offering a definition the taxonomy provides a map of the various forms of writing involved, making the diversity and range within a

genre easily identifiable and allowing for the comparison of texts, both within a single category and between categories.

Numerous taxonomies of nature writing have appeared over the years. Perhaps the most seminal is Thomas J. Lyon's taxonomy of American nature writing which appeared in 1989 and which has been widely commented on and modified by subsequent scholars. Lyon nominates 'three main dimensions' within the nature writing genre: 'natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature' (1989, p 3). These dimensions often 'intergrade', he says, within actual texts and so the categories are not immutable. But then, as he goes on to show, nature writing itself 'is not in truth a neat and orderly field' (Lyon 1989, p. 3). The relative weight of each of these aspects within a text will determine its categorisation. If a text's aim is predominantly to convey information and 'instruction in the facts of nature', even though it may contain segments of personal or literary reflection, it will rest within the natural history category. If the role of the author 'loom[s] a bit larger' and the text has more of an observant-participant flavour then it clearly equates with personal responses to nature. Works where points regarding humanity's relationship to and immersion in nature are presented in a more abstract and scholarly mode fall into the category of philosophical interpretation (Lyon 1989, p. 5).

Lyon suggests that these three dimensions can be further broken down into a range of sub-types such as field guides, natural history essays, rambles, travel and adventure, personal experience essays, farm life and 'man's' role in nature (Lyon 1989, p. 4). He cautions, however, that such attempts at classification are meant simply to 'show the breadth of the spectrum' of nature writing and 'to help indicate some of the special powers each type within the genre may possess'. As he reminds us texts often blur and merge across boundaries. He summarises the collective intention of all these variations within the genre as an attempt to 'turn our attention outward to the activity of nature' on the one hand, and to enable the 'lifting and clarifying of perception' on the other (Lyon 1989, p. 7).

Lyon's taxonomy has the advantage of logic and simplicity, but it also contains inevitable gaps and limitations. Mark Tredinnick for example suggests that Lyon's taxonomy overlooks a critical dimension of nature writing that makes this literature 'worth reading' (2003, p. 36). It is through the 'poetic or lyric aspect', he argues, through the 'literary dimension', that nature writing 'attempts the hardest of its work, which is its listening, its singing with, its witnessing of places' (Tredinnick 2003, p. 36). Although Tredinnick, as I noted in the previous chapter, tends to claim too much for the poetic word, his discussion here of the 'literary dimension' of nature writing is nevertheless worthy of consideration, raising as it does the question of whether purely factual texts such as field guides have a place within the genre (2003, p. 36).

Similarly, Patrick D. Murphy identifies some important omissions in Lyon's classification and offers his own taxonomy in response. Concerned to include poetry and fiction—two genres absent in Lyon's schema—along with wilderness defence, environmental ethics, sustainability and critiques of environmental degradation, Murphy expands the categories of his taxonomy to include four modes of writing: 'nature-oriented literature', 'nature literature', 'environmental writing' and 'environmental literature' (Murphy 2000, p. 5).

An interesting variation to the taxonomical approach has appeared recently and it affords, to my mind, a model of classification that accords more closely with the internal structures and dynamics of nature writing as it is currently practiced. In David Landis Barnhill's 'ecosystem' approach as he calls it, each piece of nature writing is understood as a multifaceted work 'in which various *elements* of nature writing are developed and integrated in a unique way' (2010, p. 279). Rather than fitting a work of nature into a single abstract category as occurs in a taxonomy, Barnhill suggests that each work be regarded as an 'ecosystem' in itself, in which various elements are differentiated yet also integrated. He nominates ten distinctive elements that represent the 'major components of the ecosystem of a nature writing text' (2010, p. 283). They are: accounts of nature; personal experience in nature; social experience of nature;

philosophy of nature; ecological consciousness; philosophy of language; philosophy of the human; ecosocial politics; praxis and politics; spirituality (2010, p. 279-82).

Barnhill's ecosystem approach to nature writing has a lot going for it, proceeding as it does from the nature-based texts themselves, rather than from the abstraction of a taxonomical grid. Furthermore, it accommodates the often mosaic structure and progression of nature writing texts that tend to merge a variety of forms and elements in responding to the complex and nuanced aspects of the phenomenal world. I will return to this idea of the mosaic structure of nature writing texts in the following section on the lyric essay, but for now, Barnhill's ecosystem approach achieves a number of things. It both identifies the internal complexity of texts while providing a way of 'comparing texts that emphasizes both similarities and differences' (2010, p. 289). It also sharpens the cultural significance of nature writing by attending to the psychological, social, political and spiritual dimensions of the genre. Indeed, he says, 'one piece of nature writing may do all these things', even as greater weight or priority is given to some elements more than others. This is why, he comments, nature writing itself, and particularly many of the great works within the genre, is 'so personally compelling and socially significant' (2010, p. 284).

As these scholars show, nature writing comes in a wide variety of styles and literary modes and it tends towards certain characteristics in terms of content and perspective. Before going on to explore in more depth two of nature writing's significant functions or dimensions though, let me make a few brief remarks about the nature essay. The essay, as I have said, is one of the genre's most pronounced forms, but it tends to take on something of a quixotic or idiosyncratic shape within the nature writing arena; so much so that it has been identified as a sub-genre by literary critic John D'Agata.

The Lyric Essay

Shoulder to the Wind is structured as a series of place-based, personal essays. It need not have been, as the above reflections on the diversity of the nature writing genre makes clear, but it is the form in which a great deal of nature-oriented writing comes to

us. There are good reasons for this. As distinct from fiction and other forms of narrative, the essay generally deals with and illuminates aspects of the world that exist beyond the page. Either in response to that world, or as a form of evocation or exploration, the essay centres on places, on events, people, and other-than-human beings that actually exist, that the reader can, if so motivated, go out and find. As Lawrence Buell comments, the essay, particularly the nature or environmental essay, is a form of nonfiction, that ‘makes discourse accountable to the object-world’ (1995, p. 91).

The essay then is ‘premised on the existence of a world’ (Tredinnick 2005, p. 35). It bears witness to some aspect of the material world encountered, reflected upon and interpreted by the writer. It holds to the ground of that engaged encounter, forming a bridge of sorts between ‘author and solid earth’ (Tredinnick 2005, p. 36). And it acknowledges that the world, the place that gave rise to the essay in the first instance, continues to be about its own business quite apart from whatever the essay may say of it.

Commonly, the nature or place-based essay is artful and highly flexible in its structure and textual dynamics. It forgoes the argumentative line, instead making its case via suggestion and intimation, via lyrical description and fragmentary excursions. This particular form of the essay aligns with what John D’Agata calls the ‘lyric essay’. In 1997 D’Agata, then the Associate Editor of the *Seneca Review*, identified the lyric essay as a new sub-genre within the field of creative nonfiction and the personal essay. Straddling both the essay and the lyric poem, the lyric essay, he argued, ‘give[s] primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information. [It] forsakes narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation’ (1997, p. 7). While engaging with facts, the lyric essay preserves a certain shapeliness of form and musicality of language that is more akin to the poem. It makes use of gaps and silences in its prose, often forsaking the linear narrative line for a more meandering disclosure of its subject. The lyric essay, says D’Agata, ‘often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically—its import visible only when one stands back and sees it

whole' (1997, p. 7). Because of its 'malleability, ingenuity, immediacy, complexity, and use of poetic language', the lyric essay, he claims, provides us with 'a fresh way to make music of the world' (1997, p. 8).

It is the lyric essay, then, with its poetic, fragmentary and flexible form, with its personal voice and its adherence—albeit creatively—to fact, to the phenomenal world, that suits it well to the writing of place, and to this particular attempt at 'singing up' something of the life and character of the Bogong High Plains. The voice you hear in these essays is mine, or mine mostly, but if this work is good, if the words and the way they are placed, are poised and artful, if they have followed truly the life and suggestions of the land and not simply, or not only, the abstract promptings of this writer's cognition, then something of the Plains may rise up within the fragments, and perhaps more likely, in the gaps and spaces between the fragments. Perhaps in these jumbled, broken lines of prose, in these scatterings of ideas and impressions and half-heard rhythms, perhaps in this collection of lyric essays, some impression of the Plains is to be found.

Two sides of the coin

One of the things that has been particularly noticeable in my long engagement with the Bogong High Plains, and in the writing to which that engagement has given rise, is my own shifting and deepening awareness, both of the place itself in its diverse moods, aspects and dimensions, and of the broader issues of national and planetary concern with which the place, and my being within it, is entangled.¹⁵ Added to this are questions regarding my own 'ecological self'¹⁶—to borrow a phrase from deep ecology—which the Plains, in their ever-deepening inscription in my life, have brought

¹⁵ The diverse moods of the High Plains appear throughout the lyric essays, but my own education in relation to those moods is on full display in 'Storm' (p. 49) where the way I interpret the interaction between the Plains and specific weather patterns, and the decisions I make based on that interpretation, is consistently off the mark. Instances where my own presence within the High Country intersects with a growing understanding of how the Plains are positioned within regional and global contingencies are found in a number of the lyric essays. In 'The Art of Breadmaking' I am confronted by a bulldozed slope behind Falls Creek that is now the site of a ski lift. With Henrik and a group of others I stop, staring 'at the edge of this devastation', this recent sacrifice to the tourist trade (p. 114). In 'Fire' there is a slow escalation and compounding of knowledge and awareness—from a direct and visceral experience during the 2003 fires to a clear linking of the 2009 fires with global warming. 'You might just be able to believe ... that this is some antipodean form of normal, if it weren't for all the oil that's been extracted and all the coal that's been dug to keep your lounge room light burning and your fridge running and your car on the road ...' (p. 151).

into view. These two aspects of awareness contextualise the following extended examination of what for me are two vital dimensions of nature focused works.

The first concerns the positioning of nature writing as an exploration of human consciousness. Scott Slovic broke new ground in the early 1990s when he published a book, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992) and a scholarly essay ‘Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology’ (1996) exploring nature writing as a form of human environmental awareness. Slovic’s thesis—that nature writing explores not so much nature itself as the nature of human awareness—was taken up more than a decade later by Mark Cladis (2008) who both progressed and deepened Slovic’s original insights concerning the ‘interiority of outdoor experience’ (Slovic 1992, p. 7). If nature writing deals with this interface between the human and the physical world; if it positions the human as one being within a whole community of life that exists and interacts within the exigencies of place, then the mechanism of awareness, its operation and its expansion to include more than simply human concerns, is a central issue within nature writing. It is one I consider at some length below.

The other side of the nature writing coin concerns the ‘exteriority of the very indoor experience of writing authentic witness of place’ (Tredinnick 2005, p. 25). This inversion of the previous position continues to hold the relationship of human beings with the Earth as its central tenet, but it directs our gaze outwards, to a consideration of the impact of the Earth, and of particular places within it, on culture and on the very cultural activity of writing. As Libby Robin has noted, the Australian continent, its particular character and genius, has triggered forms of nature writing that are significantly different from the British or North American traditions. Furthermore, in both its physical and seasonal idiosyncrasies this continent has a critical role not only in inducing new forms of nature writing but in suggesting the kinds of cultural adaptations

¹⁶ An example of my awareness of my ‘ecological self’ is found in the essay ‘Shoulder to the Wind: An Introduction’ where I comment: ‘Something about releasing our bodies back into some larger order. Not that they’ve ever left it, but you know what I mean. The viscera of it all. We sigh as we lean back against a rock and feel its residual heat warming our spine. We sigh as we lie on the snow grass, wriggling between the tussocks until we are held snug by those great hairy hands. We hear the voice of the wind in all its different timbres moving unencumbered over the Plains. The way it plays percussion on our eardrums, and plays some larger tune with the trees’ (p. 4).

that will be necessary across both hemispheres in an increasingly disrupted and unpredictable ecological milieu. I will explore Robin's important and locally inflected view of nature writing below, but first, to Slovic and Cladis and the critical link between nature writing and awareness.

A Way of Seeing

Scott Slovic and Mark Cladis have made an important contribution to the conceptualization of nature writing by identifying the psychological and consciousness shifting dimension of the genre. Nature writers, they argue, are our environmental shock jocks, our agents of wakefulness, our chanticleers. They startle us to attention. They shake literary gourds at us, imploring us to 'wake up', to pay attention, to rouse ourselves for the show. 'Stone-throwers', Cladis calls them, mentors and coaches in the virtue of paying attention (Cladis 2008, p. 81). Slovic's terminology is more muted; 'students of the human mind' he calls them, 'literary psychologists' (Slovic 1992, p. 3). Either way, their aim is to heighten our awareness of our place in the natural world, to ignite our environmental imaginations. They are preoccupied, Slovic says, with 'the psychological phenomenon of awareness' (Slovic 1996, p. 351).

This dimension of nature writing has an impressive pedigree—indeed, in his seminal work *Walden* (1854) Thoreau himself writes, 'We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake' (p. 90), and in his *Journal* (1881-92) we witness his prolonged efforts to track the 'correspondence' between his inner self and his exterior environment, or, as Slovic comments, between 'the mind and nature' (Slovic 1996, p. 354). Of the many nature writers who are currently exploring this 'correspondence', this 'wakefulness', Annie Dillard is arguably one of its most eminent practitioners. She uses the tool of writing to prod herself, to prod us, her readers, into consciousness. Unexpected turns of phrase, surprising metaphors, a delight in the shocking and the grotesque, all act as flashy little bombs of disruption, progressively detonating our preconceptions and forcing us to see and to hear differently. As Slovic observes, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974)—a text that has been read almost exclusively as a religious or mystical text—Dillard actually tracks the gradations of consciousness, 'from not seeing, to

seeing, to Seeing' (Slovic 1992, p. 79). Waking up, moving from a state of inattention to attention, is the first step in this trajectory, and is followed by two identifiably different states of awareness. Dillard refers to these as different ways of seeing. The first is active and purposeful. 'When I see this way', Dillard writes, 'I analyze and pry. I hurl over logs and roll away stones; I study the bank a square foot at a time, probing and tilting my head.' The second way of seeing entails 'letting go'. 'When I see this way', she writes, 'I sway transfixed and emptied' (Dillard 1974, p. 31).

This entry into the 'psychological present', as Dillard herself calls it, is always fleeting. It is not, agrees Slovic, 'a prolonged nor a complete mode of apprehending the world' but a momentary state of illumination (Slovic 1992, p. 80). Paying attention prepares the ground for such experiences, as does solitude, and respect for the tension between the self and the 'other', between the attuned observer and the fragment of nature that is being revealed. In her roller coaster exploration of the various levels and types of consciousness Dillard is reminding us that awareness is not purely the 'rarefied domain of the mystic, or even that of the amateur naturalist', but is contiguous with the awakening to the world that began for all of us in childhood. In fact, says Slovic, Dillard's more recent work suggests that the reader 'participates in the writer's quest for awareness—or, rather, performs in the very act of reading a separate but similarly passionate prompting of awareness' (Slovic 1992, p. 92). So, in Dillard's sure hands, nature writing prods and surprises us into paying attention, into seeing 'what passes before [our] eyes' (Dillard 1974, p. 30). Nature writing wakens us, attunes our senses and sharpens our consciousness to more fully attend to the Earth as it manifests here, and to our existence within it.

Edward Abbey wields the shock-tactic tool in similar and similarly effective ways to Dillard, his approach being filled with perhaps even more authorial unpredictability and ratbaggery than Dillard's. In his most celebrated work of nonfiction, *Desert Solitaire* (1968), he refuses to provide his readers with the security of a steady narrative voice. Just when readers think they have him pinned he manages to slip through their mental grasp. With little textual warning he describes, for example, his own exultant reaction

to stoning to death a wild rabbit, for no better reason than to test his own limits. This scene, says Slovic, comes straight after a ‘tranquil encounter with a doe and her fawn’ and is ‘calculatedly repellent’ (Slovic 1992, p. 99). The uneasiness of the narrative voice, along with unexpected behavioural turns, mirrors in many respects, the unpredictability of the desert landscape. Abbey wants to remind us of the surprise and terror lurking quietly and ominously beneath vistas of serene and breathtaking beauty. He aims ‘to discredit the very idea of anyone ever feeling calm and comfortable in the desert’ (Slovic 1992, p. 99).

Shoulder to the Wind certainly strives for this kind of wakefulness, for a deepening of consciousness, an attentiveness to, a noticing of, the deeper patterns of life and connection in a singular and loved place. Its approach, however, is somewhat less full-frontal than either Dillard’s or Abbey’s, a little less prone to disjunction and unpredictability. While certain associations—human physical degeneration and geological erosion for example—are, on first glance, odd or surprising pairings, the deeper points being made in the collection tend to unfold gradually, dawn on the reader slowly, somewhat in keeping with the erosional processes being discussed. In style and tone *Shoulder to the Wind* is perhaps closer to the lyrical and rear-guard approach of a writer such as Barry Lopez. In Lopez’s work, lines of resistance are dismantled from behind; there is a picking away at the veil of the familiar and predictable, a more subtle awakening to the deeper pattern of existence. This more restrained approach seems more in keeping with both the temperament of this writer, and with the temperament—unpredictable at times, yet also meditative and somewhat apophatic—of the High Plains themselves.

Shoulder to the Wind assumes, as does Lopez, that in both writer and reader there is ‘ignorance or limited awareness to begin with’ (Slovic 1992, p. 12). Both works then proceed to enact ‘a gradual … progression toward deepening awareness’ (Slovic 1992, p. 12). Or at least, that’s what Lopez achieves, and that’s what *Shoulder to the Wind* attempts. For the moment though, a few more comments on the artistry of Lopez’s approach to attentiveness. In Lopez’s work there is an emphasis on the process of

continued mental growth, a persistent movement toward the world. This gradual and deepening awareness in the reader is achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, Lopez weaves extensive academic research around a number of key personal experiences that highlight the uniqueness of a particular place, its separate, more-than-human reality. He also uses a stream of ‘eye-opening metaphors’ and ‘alternative modes of perception/conception’ to prompt and engage the interest of readers. Finally, he overcomes the limitations of a static authorial perspective by interweaving various disciplines, cultures, and physical vantage points into the text. These strategies are part of a learning process that alternates between immediate sensory experiences and abstract reflection, both of which are paths to intimacy and awareness. The goal is not to startle and unnerve us, as is the case with Abbey and Dillard, but simply to ‘make the reader aware of the different ways in which our minds work’ (Slovic 1992, p. 152).

There is one other mode of awareness that is central to Lopez’s work. In *Arctic Dreams* (1986) we see him adopting the physical practice of reverently bowing to those places through which he moves in a solemn act of ‘prayerful attentiveness’ (Cladis 2008, p. 94). Inherent in this action is an acknowledgement of the land’s transcendence, of its autonomy and agency. What Lopez becomes aware of, and what he invites us to see too, is that no matter how sophisticated or thorough our understanding of the land, no matter how ingenious our mechanisms of control, the land will always slip from our grasp. ‘Whatever evaluation we finally make of a stretch of land, no matter how profound or accurate, we will find it inadequate’, he says. ‘The land retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we can know’ (Lopez 1986, p. 228). It is this careful attentiveness to the autonomy of the natural world that shifts whatever perceptions we may have of ourselves and our world. Gradually, under Lopez’s tutelage, we learn the language, gestures and genius of a place. We learn to approach it, and by extension, places more familiar to us, with an attitude of regard, intending from the beginning to ‘preserve some of the mystery within [them] as a kind of wisdom to be experienced, not questioned’. We become alert for the place’s ‘openings’, as Lopez calls them, ‘for that moment when something sacred reveals itself within the mundane’ (Lopez 1986, p. 228). It is here that Lopez

calls on us to ‘suspend on occasion our utilitarian vision’, to acknowledge elements in the land that will always slip our conceptual webs, to give witness to the autonomy of the natural world (Cladis 2008, p. 95). In being attentive to these moments of grace and revelation we may be nourished and educated, suggests Lopez, in ways that are entirely unpredictable and which effect forms of communion rather than control.

A similar sensibility weaves its way through this collection of essays on the High Plains. At the end of a long, somewhat discursive investigation of the scientific work and achievements of Maisie Fawcett for example, the reader is taken back through Maisie’s first botanical enclosure near Rocky Valley Dam. As the essay reaches its denouement its tone shifts. The final scene describes this writer, along with two other researchers, kneeling by the bog pools which shine like mirrors under a darkening sky. The researchers are conducting their measurements. This writer is gazing at the bright head of an alpine buttercup. But we kneel, of all us, at the closing of the day, ‘three humans and this golden burst of buttercup, drinking for a moment at these shining pools’ (Kelly 2012, p. 38).

What’s it for?

What then, is paying attention really about? For what purpose and to what end do these nature writers issue their eloquent exhortations to wake up and look lively? And more broadly, what is the value of nature writing as a genre if part of its modus operandi is investigation of ‘the psychological phenomenon of awareness’? (Slovic 1996, p. 351). Well, it’s partly about keeping us all on the move, open to change and transformation, open to the transcendent aspect of reality. The nature writers help us ‘envision the world in its actual complexity’ (Cladis 2008, p. 104). They remind us of the real ways in which our lives are dependent on the biotic community, on the soils, waters, plants and animals. And they direct our gaze to a moral consideration of ‘the least’ among us. In a beautiful meditation on the gospel exhortation to recognise divine presence in ‘the least of these’, Mark Cladis invites us into a familial consideration not only of ‘the least’ within the human community, but also those regularly reviled and overlooked

beings in the other-than-human realm—‘the underground shrews’, the ‘slow-moving sloths’, the alpine earth worms, the ubiquitous bush flies (2008, p. 106).

To direct our attention to such things, to respond with justice and compassion to the most vulnerable among us, and to penetrate the fantasy that we humans live outside nature, we can do a number of things: we can quit our four walls, walk around the neighbourhood, we can ‘keep an eye on things’, as Annie Dillard would say.

Alternatively, ventures Cladis, we can ‘put ourselves in the path of the stone-throwers’ who remind us that we live in a more-than-human world and who communicate to us ‘the appropriate virtues and emotions’ as we consider our more-than-human neighbours (2008, p. 104). Once we have been awakened, suggests Cladis, we both see more and care more. We become more able to imagine the broad community of life as it stretches from the Arctic, to the deserts, to Tinker Creek, to the broad sweep of continents, and to those places we call home.

An important corollary to this, mentioned by both Cladis and Slovic, is the way in which increased attentiveness impacts across all lines and levels of connection. For Cladis, paying attention is an essential ingredient in the realm of engaged citizenry where the most disenfranchised within our human communities are ‘seen’ and supported. Within this construct the rights of future generations to engage with an earth where at least some biological integrity remains intact also comes into view. For Slovic, ‘seeing’ privileges indigenous modes of dwelling within the land and encourages the broader community to adopt a form of engagement that in some sense parallels that of indigenous cultures and their daily, respectful proximity to the Earth. So, being educated in the art of increased awareness has important ramifications for the human as well as the broader community of life.

Still, while it may be true that a more comprehensive awareness of both who we are and where we are is fundamental to more enlightened behaviour in our human relationships and in our relationship with the natural world, it is important not to claim too much for nature writing as a tool of ecological activism or political engagement. Even Rachel

Carson's celebrated *Silent Spring* (1962) has had only limited influence on the widespread use of pesticides and chemicals within the agricultural industry (Slovic 1992, p. 147). How likely is it then, for more obliquely ideological works as the ones mentioned here, and indeed for *Shoulder to the Wind*, to exert any substantial influence on the public at large? The most we can hope for is that the work of nature writers will create, in Barry Lopez's words, 'an environment in which thinking and reaction and wonder and awe and speculation can take place' (Lopez in Slovic 1992, p. 171). And we can only hope, continues Slovic, that having been stirred to such responses by the nature writers, action on behalf of the Earth will follow (1992, p. 171).

Australian perspectives

Nature writing then, has a significant role to play in sharpening perception, in deepening ecological awareness and in shifting consciousness from one of assumed control to forms of communion and care. In an essay that acknowledges these aspects of nature writing but which considers their implication in both an Australian and a broader global context, Libby Robin argues for new forms of writing that emerge from and accent the increasing instability and unpredictability of a changing ecological context.

In her essay 'The Eco-humanities as Literature: A New Genre?' (2008) Robin affirms firstly the efficacy of place as the arena where '*meaning* as well as universality' are located and become accessible.¹⁷ Place is the context in which 'global issues' are experienced as both 'immediate and personal' (2008, p. 293). Writing about local places however, especially in ways that are both fully 'literary' and which achieve broader, more universal significance, is a complex task. While this blending of 'universal and local qualities' has been a feature of literary nature writing in North America stretching from Thoreau's *Walden* to the present day, writing about nature in the Australian context has developed along quite different lines. I will explore certain

¹⁷ In an earlier, related work—*How a Continent created a Nation* (2007)—Robin examines the ways in which the Australian national identity has been both shaped by, and failed to fully adjust to, the unique ecological realities of this land. Robin also tracks the dominance of the scientific perspective in shaping a national vision and argues for the inclusion of other voices, other forms of knowledge, in conversations about ways of dwelling in this land, especially in this time of global change.

aspects of Australian nature writing—both its historical trajectory and its quite distinctive characteristics in the next chapter—but Robin is right in saying that ‘abstracted nature’, nature as wilderness and nature as sublime, are tropes that are largely absent from the genre in its Australian incarnation (2008, p. 293). What it does have though, is a sense of ‘otherness’, a sense of the land, the creatures, the climate as being far removed from European sensibilities and expectations. And it carries, as writer Nicolas Rothwell has noted, a ‘mood of nostalgia, a yearning’, a distinctive sense of loss (Rothwell 2007, p. 20). Rothwell attributes this to the lack of predictable seasonality here—something, he says, that non-indigenous Australians miss and yearn for, even those of us who were born here and wish to live nowhere else—and the cultural absences that cling to landscapes and to places from which Aboriginal presence has been removed. In Australia argues Robin, the strangeness of the land and the absence of Aboriginal people, particularly in more urban regions, combine in unusual ways to remind settler Australians that they are not ‘the original people of the place’ (Robin 2008, p. 295).

In a somewhat unexpected turn, Robin argues that it is precisely this history and this ambiguous and complex relationship to the land that makes Australian literature of the environment ‘important to the rest of the world’ (2008, p. 301). Australian environmental literature has the potential, she says, to assume universal relevance even as it remains locally focused. What she envisions is ‘a new space for writing about nature’ that emerges from both the realities of the ecological regimes on this continent and the experience of disappointment, of bafflement and dismay that have—at least to a significant degree—accompanied settler perceptions of this land and which have set the tone for much of the writing that has been produced here (2008, p. 302). While in the following chapter I will seek to complicate this view somewhat by proposing a more nuanced understanding of settler apprehension of this continent, the trope of strangeness and otherness in our literature is nevertheless pronounced.

What Robin notices in Australian writing about the environment is a prolonged effort to come to terms with a land whose ‘boom and bust’ cycles, whose ‘pulse and response’

rhythms spring from an inherent variability and unpredictability (2008, p. 295). In such a place, where so much that greeted the settler was unfamiliar and unexpected, where aridity and tonal reduplication produced a sense of difficulty, of having to battle against extremes and eccentricities in the land and in its creatures, issues of adaptation and belonging have been especially poignant. Furthermore, the continent itself has undergone two major transitions, both of human instigation. As George Seddon notes, Australia has had ‘a radically new technology imposed upon it, suddenly, twice’ (1983, p. 10). The first was ushered in by Aboriginal arrival on the continent some 60,000 years ago. The second transition began in 1788 with the advent of the First Fleet and the simultaneous arrival of both agriculture and the industrial revolution, both of which have had disastrous ecological consequences.

It is out of these elements—the variability and unpredictability of the land itself; the alteration and degradation of the land’s natural systems through human intervention; and the ‘disappointment that has marked [settler] relations, both literary and literal, with the environment’—that Robin offers clues to a new form of writing the environment that has universal relevance and application (2008, p. 302). What we see in the Australian context, she ventures, is the kind of variability and extremes of weather that are becoming increasingly common on a global scale and that are now central to ‘climate change discourse’ (2008, p. 302). As Robin comments, the strangeness of the Australian continent ‘is no longer just a local phenomenon: climate change makes Australia’s experience with strange weather salutary for the rest of the world’ (2008, p. 302). Adaptation, ‘flexibilities of scale’, and inventing new responses to disturbance characterise both this land and its people. It is from the complexity of this history and this experience, suggests Robin, that ‘Australia has the potential to become a “literary entity” for the rest of the world’. Whether or not this potential is fulfilled though, depends to a large extent on ‘our capacity to write Nature as a subject and to understand the Human as a physical force in the Earth’s ecosystems’ (2008, p. 302).

Writing ‘Nature’

In explicitly linking ecologically attuned writing to both shifting climatic patterns and to an acknowledgement of the subjective, agential dimension of ‘Nature’, Robin alludes to some of the differing conceptions of nature that are extant in the western philosophical tradition. In truth, the term ‘nature’ or ‘Nature’—depending on which meanings and attributes of the term are being referenced and called into operation—is a difficult and multi-valent word. Space precludes an extensive exploration of the traditions of thought that surround the concept of nature, but I would like to devote the final section of this chapter to a consideration of nomenclature, and to the proposition that ‘place writing’ or ‘the writing of country’ may in fact be more appropriate terms of identification for what is currently known as ‘nature writing’. But firstly, just a few brief words about ‘nature’ and some of the meanings and associations that surround the word and which compromise its appropriateness as a title for forms of writing explicitly endeavouring to bridge the Earth/human dualist divide.

The nature of ‘Nature’

As Raymond Williams famously states, ‘nature’ is ‘perhaps the most complex word in the language’ (1983, p. 219). As such, many theorists across many disciplines have identified a variety of meanings that attach to the term. I will rehearse a few of them here, but my offerings are far from exhaustive.

The Marxist understanding of nature, not dissimilar to the later postmodernist position, is that ‘first nature’—unmediated nature or nature prior to human modification—has virtually ceased to exist since the advent of industrial society. Human labour, Marx contends, has worked to produce a ‘second nature’ which is the ‘basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists’. Marx’s view, even back in the nineteenth century, was that ‘nature, the nature that preceded human history … today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral islands of recent origins)’ (Marx and Engels 1965, p. 58).

In a related argument, postmodernism holds that there is ‘no standpoint beyond human cultures’, that reality, at least as we experience it, is nothing more than an endless variety of separate perceptions reached through the prism of different cultural lenses (Sessions 1996, p. 33). In this sense the postmodernist view is synchronous with—or at least sympathetic to—the environmentalist endeavour. It holds that in our relationship to and behaviour towards the Earth, multiple perspectives must be brought into view, not simply the most culturally dominant and not exclusively the human. In its more essentialist formulations though, postmodernism is more problematic. Here, the thinking goes, if there is a separate realm called ‘nature’, it can never be reached, it remains eternally inaccessible, hidden by endlessly fragmenting social and cultural constructs. As one social construct among many, ‘nature’ has ‘no greater meaning, no overriding claim upon our care, reverence, delight, awe, respect’ than any other form of construct. Any sense that there may be a planetary or even a human interest in the ‘maintenance of the integrity of biological systems that transcends the vagary of cultural perception’ is rejected as a totalising claim, a ‘grand narrative’, the validity of which—at least within certain postmodern parameters—is denied (Hay 2002, p. 21).

Ecofeminist scholars offer another perspective again. ‘Nature’ in the dualistic western mindset, they argue, is consistently positioned in oppositional terms to ‘culture’, as are other binaries such as man/woman, mind/body, civilisation/savagery and so on. In fact, as Deborah Bird Rose notes, ‘these dualities are more properly described as a series of singularities because the pole labelled ‘other’ (woman, Nature, savage etc) is effectively an absence’ (2004, p. 19). In other words, the defining feature of woman in dualistic thought is that she is not a man. Similarly, the defining feature of ‘Nature’ is that it exists outside the realm of culture, understood here as predominantly the realm of the rational. Philosopher Val Plumwood has excavated this dimension of western thought, revealing how the same structure of domination controls not only women and Nature, but all other living beings and systems that are held to be ‘other’. This ‘story of control’, ventures Plumwood, is ‘the master story of Western culture’. It is the story of how the ‘other’, often represented as the ‘chaotic and deficient realm of “Nature”’ has been brought under the control of ‘mastering and ordering “reason”’ (1994, p. 74). A

central tenet of this project of mastery has been the stripping of any agential or interior dimension from that which is deemed ‘other’—whether that other be ‘woman’ or ‘Nature’ or Indigenous inhabitants. Once objectified the ‘other’ becomes pure resource, ‘standing reserve’ as Heidegger would say, perpetually available for use and positioned outside the arena in which certain rights must be accorded.

Ecocritic Timothy Morton has recently added some valuable insights into how the concept of nature has functioned in the West and the kinds of meanings and significances it has accrued. In something of a reprise of the postmodern position but with a strong critique of some of the excesses of romanticism thrown in, Morton defines ‘Nature’ as a conglomerate term that includes qualities such as ‘hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery’ (2010, p. 3). Nature he says, is assumed to be a ‘reified thing in the distance’, something ‘over yonder’ that includes the ‘picturesque’ and the ‘primordial’, the ‘ideal image’ that lies ‘shimmering and naked behind glass like an expensive painting’. It invokes the idea of ‘pristine wilderness’ and ultimately, a ‘special kind of private property without an owner, exhibited in a specially constructed art gallery’—a gallery that is ‘Nature itself’ (2010, p. 5-6). But in actual fact, he argues, this conception of Nature is pure construct. ‘[T]here never was an authentic world’, he argues, there is ‘no static background’ called ‘Nature’ that holds and contextualises human existence (2010, p. 57). Anything that perpetuates this constructed understanding of Nature—and nature writing comes in for particular criticism in Morton’s schema—operates as an obstacle, a form of obfuscation to what he calls ‘the ecological thought’ (2010). What we call ‘Nature’ he says, is in fact, very far removed from such idealised notions. ‘Nature’s’ true nature in a sense is ‘monstrous’; it is ‘mutating’ and ‘strangely strange all the way down and all the way through’ (2010, p. 61). This dark face, this ‘dark ecology’ as Morton calls it, is removed from view in the common conception of Nature.

In a case of high irony it is, says Morton, the ecological crisis itself that has sharpened our awareness of ‘the ecological thought’, the awareness of the degree of interconnection in which everything is enmeshed. In fact, ‘the mesh’ is one of the key

metaphors Morton uses to describe and envision this interdependence in which everything and everyone is ‘entangled’. Within the mesh there is ‘no definite background and therefore no definite foreground’ (2010, p. 28). ‘All life forms are the mesh’, says Morton, ‘and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of live and nonliving beings’. Every point of the mesh ‘is both center and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute center or edge’ (2010, p. 29). The idea of Nature then, at least as Morton construes it—as an idealised Other that humanity, through its will to power has somehow damaged and lost and must now work to recover—is ‘an ideological barrier to realising how everything is interconnected’. Indeed, he argues, ‘part of assuming direct responsibility for global warming will be abandoning the idea of Nature’ (2010, p. 99).

So the term ‘nature’, and more particularly ‘Nature’, comes with a fair degree of conceptual baggage. Its meanings are diverse and not always reflective of the intentions or endeavours that underscore the nature writing project. To some degree this could be an advantage, drawing attention to the problematic and contested nuances of the word and the work still needed to be done in overcoming a system of thought that continues to cast Nature as an objectified realm that exists for human use. In other ways, these dualist notions associated with ‘Nature’ remain problematic. They infer meanings and connections in direct opposition to the kind of re-imagining of Earth/human relations being attempted within the genre. To this extent, the category of ‘place’ may more accurately represent the broad intention of the nature writing endeavour.

Place Writing

Given my comments in the previous chapter regarding the importance and potential of the category of ‘place’ it might be reasonable to expect that I would opt for a shift in terminology from ‘nature writing’ to ‘place writing’, or perhaps to the ‘literature of place’ which incorporates not only nonfiction place-focused writing but also poetry and fiction writing. While in many respects ‘place writing’ avoids some of the complications and biases associated with the term ‘Nature’, ‘place’ as we have seen is

itself is a contested and often quite fluid term. As Dolores Hayden has commented, like ‘Nature’, ‘place’ is ‘one of the trickiest words in the English language: a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid’ (1995, p. 103-4). But while accruing a certain density, ‘place’, as I will show, is less encumbered than the term ‘Nature’ and closer in meaning and intention to the kind of writing ‘nature writers’ write.

In its least complex aspect ‘place’ is understood as ‘space to which meaning has been ascribed’ (Carter, Donald and Squires 1993, p. xii). Places are those centres of ‘felt value’ where personal and broader social identifications are made (Tuan 1977, p. 4). They are the site of memory, of affective attachment, of individual commitment and communal investment. And each place, as Edward Casey observes, is also ‘inseparable from the concrete region in which it is found’ (1996, p. 31). Physiographic factors then, are a crucial element of place-making. This is true not only for various strains of the bioregionalist project which hold that ‘culture should be symbiotic with the conditions of its environmental setting’ but also for Indigenous peoples and for those marginalised communities worldwide who are dependent on local subsistence economies (Buell 2006, p. 18).

But as I have said, ‘place’ as a category is at least as multivalent as ‘Nature’. Without wishing to reprise the extended discussion related to global and local conceptions of place contained in the previous chapter, it is perhaps worthwhile to articulate here some of the various scales at which ‘place’ functions. The category of place incorporates a degree of bi-directionality which includes both local and global dimensions. Its nested nature means that place as district or state can be broken down to suburb or neighbourhood. Similarly, place can be broadened to include region, nation and transnational forms of connection and identification.

Place also incorporates multiple allegiances. As Buell notes, ‘place-conscious people and population groups often feel passionate allegiance to multiple places’, while every modern place is itself ‘shaped by the multiple places that inhabitants of a particular place bring with them from a migratory or diasporic past’ (2006, p. 18). Place is also the site of both preservation and restoration efforts and as such has an inherently

conservative aspect. But place is simultaneously the arena in which flux and change—and often degradation—are most keenly observed and directly experienced.

Furthermore, in the context of modern mobility, serial place attachment is an increasingly familiar phenomenon, as is the production of what Marc Augé calls ‘non-places’ (1995, p. 78)—those realms of regulated space such as hospitals, airports, shopping malls, that are both ‘comforting and carceral’ (Buell 2006, p. 21). Within this plethora of meanings and ever broadening perspectives, the challenge for progressive place study and place making—and in the context of this project, place writing—is to ‘generate more robust models of what place is or might be without succumbing to fantasies of either retrospective nostalgia or futuristic fatalism’ (Buell 2006, p. 21). It is also important to hold in view the fact that there are often gaps, different modes of existence, that cohere between place as a lived experience and the various ways in which place may be theorised or envisioned.

In many respects, these multiple meanings and multiple scales that pertain to ‘place’ fit well with both the intention and the complexity of form that writing customarily gathered under the rubric of ‘nature writing’ exhibits. With its anchor in the physiographic realities of the Earth and its embrace of the various means by which and degrees by which human individuals and communities identify and connect with both discrete and large-scale dimensions of the Earth, ‘place’ would seem to be a more resonant and less encumbered nomenclature for the kind of writing most ‘nature writers’ engage in. ‘Place writing’—as distinct from ‘nature writing’—also seems closer to the kind of writing I have attempted here in *Shoulder to the Wind*.

In the essay ‘Rocks’, for example, many of the physiographic and geological aspects of the High Plains are referred to directly. For instance, there is reference to the rocks ‘strewn everywhere around the valley’ as being ‘granitic’ (p. 61), and ‘[s]ome of the oldest rocks in the Victorian Alps’ being ‘greenstones’ (p. 61). Part of the larger geological story of the Plains also appears in this essay where the reader is told that ‘... the opening of the Tasman Sea along the eastern seaboard which began about 80 million years ago, and the rifting of Antarctica from the southern coast considerably later, have been the major crustal disturbances that have given rise to the eastern

highlands' (p. 68). In other essays there are references to periods of continent building when 'sand and silt kilometres thick were laid down ('Geomorphology', p. 18), and to snow plains so badly damaged by cattle grazing that 'the amount of bare ground not only persisted but was slowly increasing' ('Maisie Fawcett', p. 34). So the creative essays are anchored in the physical realities of the High Plains. They also, however, exhibit other characteristics so indicative of notions of 'place'.

Many of the essays acknowledge that multiple allegiances and multiple meanings often adhere to a place. In 'The Issue of Love', for example, 'cattlemen', 'skiers', 'long distance runners', 'scientists', 'artists', 'bushwalkers', 'ski-lift operators' and 'Indigenous peoples [who are] daring to dream again of their "country"', are all acknowledged as having ascribed a range of meanings to the High Plains, along with various forms and degrees of affective and political allegiance (p. 81).

In the same way, many of the essays acknowledge the multiple scales at which the category of 'place' functions. In 'Consummatum Est' for example, various scales of time and of signification appear throughout the essay. Towards the end of the essay the reader is told; 'You can sit on the lichen spattered rocks at the summit of Mount Cope and listen for the land's deep names' (p. 50). Later we are told that the rocks have been exposed by 'the soft brush of time', and that it is here, in the spaces between the rocks that 'the old ones came'. It is suggested that 'you might ... catch the echo of their voices rising from those dark places' and perhaps 'catch the cadence of how this place was known'.

A number of time scales are operative here: the post-colonial present in which one may sit on rocks and imagine the past lives that have been played out here; the long eons of 'deep time' that have denuded and exposed the rocks and the sheltered places between them; the pre-colonial presence of Indigenous peoples to whom this place was known and by whom it was originally named. Towards the end of the passage the reader is returned to the present, but it is a denuded present, where the original names, 'if not the descendants of those peoples, are lost to us now, the Dreamings long retreated into the

land, the totemic ancestors mostly fallen silent under a weight of foreign tongues'. The reader is invited to consider how these losses have pauperised our reading of, our relationship with, the land, with this place. The essay concludes: 'Cope, Nelse, McKay, Hotham, Fainter, Loch, Jim, Marum, Eskdale, Holland, Langford, Howman—these are what we are left with, the faint and feral wake of another kind of passing' (p. 50). Such perspectives complicate, to my mind, the various levels of meaning and signification by which a place such as the Bogong High Plains can be 'read' or understood. It invites the reader into multiple time scales and multiple perspectives. It locates settler presence on the Plains as both a diminished presence and as simply the most recent phase in this place's long existence.

So, *Shoulder to the Wind* embodies many of the characteristics most commonly associated with discourses around the category of 'place'. For that reason, while I acknowledge 'nature writing' as the more universally recognisable term for the kind of writing I and others of my ilk engage in, 'place writing' is, I would suggest, a more accurate and appropriate term.

That being said, I want to propose for consideration an alternative title for forms of writing that position the places of the Earth and human presence within them as their central focus—an alternative that incorporates some of the features of 'place', that avoids some of the abstractions of 'Nature', but speaks to the possibility of deeply engaged and mutual relationship with the Earth in the context of specific local modalities. Such an alternative originates in the deeply symbiotic engagement of humans over long eons with the powers of this Australian continent. If Libby Robin is right, and Australian environmental literature has the potential to assume universal significance, then the concept of 'country'—that distinctly Aboriginal Australian category—has potential for widespread incorporation into systems of thought and practice that attempt the bridging of the nature/culture divide.

Writing 'Country'

So what is 'country' and how could a concept with such deeply Aboriginal roots be applicable to a literary genre widely known as 'nature writing'? Anthropologist

Deborah Bird Rose explains that within the Aboriginal worldview ‘country’ is both geographical area and a nourishing life system in which place and living things attend to one another in relationships of mutuality and care. In Aboriginal English, she says,

the word ‘country’ is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action and will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning country is home and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart’s ease (Rose et al 2002, p. 14).

Rose goes on to explain that country includes people, animals, plants, Dreamings, all that exists beneath the ground along with that which is on its surface and in the air above. People are made for their particular country and part of their sacred responsibility is to ‘care for country’, to protect and enhance the ‘nourishing terrain’ that forms the matrix of their lives (Rose 1996, p. 9). Within country the interests of one cannot be disengaged from the interests of others ‘*in the long term*’ (Rose 1996, p. 10). All components work for the good of all, for the deepest lesson of country is that ‘those who destroy their country ultimately destroy themselves’ (Rose 1996, p. 10).

This mode of thought in which balance and interdependence are associated with the realm of Dreaming and are accorded sacred value, actively links people to their country in a symbiotic relationship of care and responsibility. Knowing the relationships that cohere within country is vital to this practice of care and as Rose remarks, Aboriginal knowledge of country is profoundly ecological in its depth of detail and its attention to the interconnections that adhere between species. In fact, this domain of highly specific ecological knowledge is one area where Rose affirms opportunities for both Indigenous and western knowledge systems to work together and to ‘share in the work of life’ on this continent (Rose 1996, p. 63).

We see here in Rose's analysis something of the multidimensionality of the term 'country': how in this profoundly non-western category the old binaries that separate mind from matter, humanity from nature, subject from object are dissolved. Materiality is reinstated as a locus of 'sentience, agency and intentionality' (Mathews 2002, p. 3). In the concept of 'country' mind and matter are inextricable and humanity is 'intricately constituted by rich conversation with its community of life' (Mathews 2002, p. 3).

One wonders though , to what degree 'country'—however rich or effective in assisting a reimagining our relationship with place—is actually accessible and transferable to the non-Aboriginal population of Australia, especially given the contested and unstable nature of settler belonging on this continent. And how could such a culturally specific concept be resonant in cultures and in places very far removed from Aboriginal Australia? Australian poet Martin Harrison and philosopher Freya Mathews have both explored just this question of the operation of 'country' in the settler and broader global context. From different perspectives they each open up possibilities for how 'country' may become—and in some instances already is—an active ingredient in the renegotiation of settler relationship with the places and the regions they inhabit. They also offer some clues—indirect ones to be sure—to why the replacement of 'nature writing' with 'writing of country' may be worthy of consideration.

While 'country' in the deeply symbiotic sense as it is understood and practised in Aboriginal Australia may unavailable to settler Australians, it has nevertheless seeped into our psyches, into our connections with at least some places or elements in the land, and in some ways, into our literature. As Martin Harrison has commented,

One thing indeed that sets Australian work apart is a prevalent sense that 'country' (definitely not countryside, nearly yet not quite what Americans and Europeans call land and landscape) is something you are part of, something which changes your senses of self and placement and which requires a change

in envisioning if you are to see it and understand it. Land, in other words, is active and malleable; it can also be oneiric and ancestral (2004, p. 54).

Harrison goes on to raise critical questions regarding the possibility of belonging to a place, to achieving a sense of ‘country’ in a context of Aboriginal dispossession and pervasive ecological damage. I address some of these questions in the following chapter on Australian nature writing, but for now I agree with Harrison that a degree of caution, a certain subjunctive note should adhere to settler writing of place in deference to the conflicted nature of our belonging here. But this is not to say that ‘coming into country’ is an impossibility for settler Australians or that the complexity and violence of our past should silence us in seeking deeper, more authentic ways of being present here (Mathews 2002, p. 3).

Lest such a desire, such a project be seen as either appropriative or exploitative, it is well to remember Deborah Bird Rose’s conviction that ‘country is Aboriginal Australia’s greatest gift to the world’ (Rose in Mathews 2002, p. 3). Furthermore, ‘caring for country’ has the potential, she says, ‘to become an ethos of the settlers as well as the Aboriginal inhabitants of this continent’ (Rose 1999, p. 84). Mathews gives flesh to both these points in her essay ‘CERES: Singing Up The City’¹⁸ (2000). Here she describes the ‘re-enchantment’ of a degraded ten acre site in an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. Formerly a quarry and more recently a tip, CERES—Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies—has been reclaimed as an environmental park in which organic vegetable gardens, alternative energy projects, traditional breeds of chooks, pigs and goats, grey water systems, worm farms and native permaculture, along with performance spaces, cafes and art and music centres, have sung the place back to life.

Emblematic of this renewal is the annual Kingfisher Festival in which the return of a small, exquisitely blue bird—the sacred kingfisher—to its once degraded home within

¹⁸ ‘Singing up’ is an Aboriginal term that has specific resonances within the category of ‘country’. Its meaning and efficacy is qualitatively different when applied to the settler Australian community. I take up these issues in the following chapter on Australian nature writing.

the CERES site and along the nearby Merri Creek, is celebrated in forms of public ritual that incorporate mythic elements of Aboriginal culture. Through the many activities that take place within CERES itself, and through festivals and events like the one just mentioned, people and place, suggests Mathews, are shaping one another. As the place heals through its own recuperative powers and through human effort and commitment, so are animals and plants native to the area returning and systems of life re-establishing. But importantly, CERES has also become a site where non-indigenous Australians are also ‘initiated’ into ‘ancient local rituals of place’. With the co-operation and leadership of Aboriginal custodians themselves, ‘a more custodial consciousness’ is being induced in ‘the new peoples’ and all are invited, ‘indigenous and non-indigenous alike, to become “reconciled” as one people through our common commitment to place’ (Mathews 2000, p. 7). In Mathews estimation this is surely an instance of ‘coming into country’, not in the ancestral sense that is available to Aboriginal people, but in a way that positions ‘care of country’ as the central concern of all.

In a settler culture such as ours, and indeed in a globalised world where displacement is a growing phenomenon, ‘country’ in its local, ground beneath our feet aspect, and in its mythopoetic and mutually enhancing dimensions, suggests forms of belonging, of responsibility and re-enchantment that touch all forms and levels of community while simultaneously ‘singing up’ our own lives. And it is in this sense, as a renegotiation of ‘the meaning of “home”’, as an experience of the ‘power of sites which have been “sung” into a new kind of being and a new – dialogical – relation with its inhabitants’, that I am proposing ‘country’ as a ‘gift’ for all, and as a worthy replacement to the category of ‘Nature’ in all forms of literature that are currently gathered under the rubric of ‘nature writing’ (Mathews 2000, p. 7-8).

A settler form of ‘singing’

So the question arises whether from here on in, both in this thesis and beyond, I will shift my own nomenclature from ‘nature writing’ to the ‘writing of country’. Well frankly, no, at least not as far as this thesis is concerned. I propose ‘country’ for

consideration, as an imagining of increased possibilities for the nature writing genre and for alternative ways of thinking about places, about the ‘countries’ of the Earth, and of our imbrication and responses within them. For the purposes of consistency I will continue to use the more globally identifiable ‘nature writing’ to describe the tradition of nature focused writing to which *Shoulder to the Wind* contributes. What I intend though, in relation to the following chapter, is an exploration of nature writing as a form of ‘singing up’ of the land—an activity that in Aboriginal culture is central to human ‘care of country’ and which enjoins all components of country to participate in forms of sacred activity that bring life to all.

3.

‘Singing Up’ the Silences

One of the things that came into view in the course of this project, particularly as I began researching in a more concerted way Australian works that were explicitly environmental or land-focused, was the pronounced view that there is no real tradition of nature writing in this country. Robert Zeller first made this claim at the ASAL¹⁹ conference in 1998, suggesting that nature writing, at least in its *belle lettristic*, or ‘high art’ form, is virtually absent in Australia. Perhaps some latitude can be afforded Zeller, given his North American heritage, but, as I subsequently discovered, there are a range of writers and scholars in this country who hold similar views. Pete Hay, for example, along with Mark Tredinnick—themselves poets and nature writers—have both produced scholarly works on the topic, broadly agreeing with Zeller that nature writing is a genre that is largely unknown in this country. The land itself, they suggest, its strangeness and its so-called ‘silence’ somehow silenced our writers (Hay 2003; Tredinnick 2003, 2005, 2007).

My own excursion into Australian expressions of the nature writing genre led me to many of the works Tredinnick himself canvassed in reaching his conclusion regarding the dearth of the genre on this continent. My conclusions, however, are somewhat different, as I discuss below. I was gratified then, to discover an essay by Australian ecocritic CA Cranston who strongly refutes Zeller’s original claim and makes a convincing case for a continuous and sophisticated tradition of nature writing in the Tasmanian, if not the broader Australian, literary context (2001). It is interesting to note that Zeller himself has since rescinded his original comments and has published on the ASLE²⁰ website the titles of a range of Australian nature writing works (2002).

¹⁹ ASAL is the acronym for ‘Association for the Study of Australian Literature’.

²⁰ Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment.

It is not my intention here to concentrate on the literary pedigree of Australian nature-focused works, but it is interesting to note that nature writing, in the matter of its very existence in Australia, conjures a note of disjunction, a chord of instability—a type of disruption if you like. And disruption is one of the elements that I have come to believe is vital to the genre in its Australian expression. The other is invocation. Both aspects are required, in my view, if works of Australian nature writing are to interact with the inner life of this land and with its particular cultural and historical dimensions. In this chapter then, I consider Australian nature writing as both disruption and invocation. I draw on a range of theorists, many of them Australian, to explore these themes, and on place-based texts by two contemporary Australian writers—Nicolas Rothwell and—somewhat ironically perhaps, given my remarks regarding his theoretical views—Mark Tredinnick.

Disruption

A Silent, Empty Land

One of the legacies, both literary and cultural, which Australian nature writing might usefully disrupt, is the pronounced pejorative note that is frequently attributed to early settler apprehensions of this continent. Admittedly, a great deal of early literature can be read as negative, casting the land as ‘empty’, particularly of Indigenous presence, but also of sound, of speech, of agency. Tropes of age, of barrenness and foreboding, of timelessness and aridity are common, and carry through to contemporary cultural representations. We are used to terms such as ‘dead’, ‘empty’, ‘silent’, to describe the land here; familiar with the notion that there is something fundamentally amiss in the very nature of the place. Marcus Clarke’s *Preface* to the collected verse of Adam Lindsay Gordon is often quoted in this regard. ‘In Australia alone’, he writes, ‘is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write’ (1909, p. iii). As writer and academic Peter Conrad has noted, so strange and unfamiliar did the continent appear to both early settlers and their compatriots in Britain that it was openly wondered whether ‘Australia could be the handiwork of God’s

enemy, the mad demiurge described by Gnosticism,’ or perhaps ‘God’s fumbling rehearsal’, his ‘trial run’, the ‘botched job’ that was a precursor to the creation of a perfected northern hemisphere (2004, p. 2-3). A similar sense of European alienation from the Australian landscape is iterated by D.H. Lawrence in his novel *Kangaroo* (1923):

You feel you can’t *see*—as if your eyes hadn’t the vision in them to correspond with the outside landscape. For the landscape is so unimpressive, like a face with little or no feature, a dark face. It is so aboriginal, out of our ken, and it hangs back so aloof (p. 87).

So this particular apprehension of the continent has played forcefully in the cultural imaginary and has had vast and detrimental consequences for Australian ecologies and peoples (Seddon 2006). It is important to note, however, that there have been other voices. In Van Diemen’s Land particularly, the dominant national narrative of settlers struggling to accommodate a ‘harsh and forbidding land’ needs to be substantially qualified (Boyce 2010, p. 3). As James Boyce has noted, in Van Diemen’s Land (later the island state of Tasmania) settlers encountered ‘an abundance of fresh water, a temperate climate, reliable rainfall, density of game ...’ (2010, p. 8). Even on the mainland responses to the continent were more diverse than scholars such as Conrad may suggest. Consider for example this reflection from the Victorian State Botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller in 1871:

I regard the forests as a gift, intrusted to any of us only for transient care during a short space of time, to be surrendered to posterity again as an unimpaired property, with increased riches and augmented blessings, to pass as a sacred patrimony from generation to generation (p. 27).

These disparate apprehensions of the land, along with the environmental havoc colonial invaders are understood to have wreaked on Australia’s fragile ecosystems, is historicised by Tim Bonyhady in his seminal work, *Colonial Earth* (2000). Advancing

an important corrective to the view that the overwhelming response of settlers to this land was negative, Bonyhady observes that ‘While many colonists were alienated by their new environment, others delighted in it’ (p. 3). The painter John Glover for example, reckoned the eucalypt a ‘painter’s delight’. The towering mountain ash forests of Victoria were lauded as a ‘wonder of the world’, while the Tasmanian blue gum was acclaimed internationally as a ‘tree of the future’. By the 1880s Port Jackson was commonly referred to as ‘Our Beautiful Harbour’, while early settler correspondence referred to the ‘astonishing variety’ of bird life, with its ‘uncommonly beautiful’ plumage and ‘melodious’ song (Bonhyhady 2000, pp. 4, 15). In 1788 Elizabeth Macarthur famously declared ‘the greater part of the country is like an English Park’—in clear ignorance of the land management practices of Aboriginal peoples that had made it so—but marvelling nonetheless at the health and obvious integrity of the land she was observing (cited in Bonyhady 2000, p. 77).

In addition, Bonyhady notes the early discourses around environmental protection and, even from the earliest days of settlement, laws and directives enacted to safeguard waterways and particular species. While much of this was motivated by a utilitarian need to protect those resources necessary for survival, admonitions against waste and, more interestingly, movements to protect animals from cruelty were in evidence as early as the 1830s (Bonyhady 2000, p. 30).

Early nature writers were a significant part of the advancement of this more positive view. Consider for example, Georgina Molloy’s fascination with the ‘brilliancy of colour’ and diminutive pose of Western Australian wildflowers (in Chisholm 1964, p. 46). Or E. J. Banfield’s eloquent rendering and fierce defence of his Dunk Island home (1908, 1911, 1918). Or this from social activist and writer Mary Gilmore:

‘It was a land of flowers!’ said my grandmother. ‘At sea we smelt the rich scent of the country, different from anything we had known. We noticed the perfume long before we came to it. Those who had come home from Australia told us of

it, and all who went out to Australia looked for it' (1963, p. 185; first published 1934).

Early nature writers were a significant part of the advancement of this more positive view. As Tom Griffiths has noted, early nature essayists such as Donald Macdonald and Charles Barrett played a crucial role in 'finding, or creating, local symbols of sentiment' whereby immigrants could begin to forge a degree of identification and intimacy with their local places (1996, p. 122). Some of them, such as Macdonald and later, Mary Gilmore and Marjorie Barnard among others, brought to public consciousness not only the 'delights of indigenous nature' by valorising indigenous plants, animals and land forms, but also some of the darker and more difficult aspects of settlement—aspects that many local communities were working hard to obscure and to silence (Griffiths 1996, p. 124). Macdonald observed, for example, that '[t]he reason we know so little about these aborigines is that instead of studying we shot them' (1905, p. 15). While it is true that for many early nature writers such concerns interacted with, and to a certain extent contradicted, 'concepts of race and empire' that also underpinned their writing, they nonetheless advanced an agenda of 'direct, watchful, sensuous engagement with nature' and inspired in their readers a sense of wonder and purposefulness in coming to know their local ecologies (Griffiths 1996, p. 124, 127). Furthermore, at a time when the principles of evolutionary biology were beginning to destabilise previous notions of the scientist as 'collector', it was the nature writers who advanced a new way of being in relationship to the world—one where observation rather than collection was primary, and where 'a human vision of the land' was promoted against the 'detached professionalism of the new scientist' (Griffiths 1996, p. 134).

As mentioned above, this is not to suggest that the continent was not experienced as difficult and strangely unfamiliar by many or even most of the settlers who came here. Bonyhady himself, along with scholars such as Paul Carter, William Lines, Tom Griffiths, Kay Schaefer and Libby Robin, all attest to the sense of displacement and alienation many settlers felt in their new environment. Indeed, Jay Arthur in her

‘lexical cartography’, has mapped how this displacement, this ‘unsettling’, found its way into the language, and particularly into the literature, of settler Australians and persists powerfully in contemporary Australian culture (2003, p. 3).

But the importance of Bonyhady’s thesis lies in its evidence for and affirmation of the existence of a *range* of narratives dealing with early apprehensions of this land. It is these alternative narratives that provide the ground from which nature writing and other forms of environmental writing might launch into the imaginative cultural space, disruptions of more instrumentalising approaches to land. It is also these alternative narratives that might entice contemporary nature writers and ecocritics to reconsider the possibilities resident within this literary inheritance.

Pastoral

It is against this background that Mark Tredinnick argues that while a great deal of early Australian literature is focused on the land, much of it carries a distinct pastoral note (2003, 2007). Assuming a fairly narrow definition of pastoral, Tredinnick is referring here to a form of writing that is essentially escapist and sentimental. It makes of nature either an idyllic respite from the woes of city life, or renders it a ‘foreign place’ of recalcitrance and danger, particularly in those regions that fail to conform to the paradisal—and dominantly English—rural ideal (2003, p. 43). Consequently, such writing rarely achieves, in his view, an intimacy with Australian places that is synchronous with their edgy, untamed nature. Tredinnick argues that Australia still waits for a fully land-focused form of literature, corroborating William Lines’ view that our literary canon is currently devoid of ‘histories of the sun-soaked, heat struck canyons of the Hamersley Ranges, of odes to the Yilgarn reds of the Western Desert, liturgies to the sharp light and brilliant space of the Nullarbor, chronicles of the thump and roll of the ocean in the Great Australian Bight, testimonies to the flux and clarity of light, its tint, harmony, and hue on the gibber plains, epics to the Holocene desiccation of the Willandra Lakes …’ (Lines 2001, p. 62).

While there is compelling evidence to support this view, it is important to register the quiet thread of more complex forms of pastoral that runs through some early evocations of the Australian landscape. I will say more about this presently, but perhaps it might be timely to point out that in Australia the term ‘pastoral’ has a particular set of associations. In general usage, it is a term associated with the work of raising cattle and sheep, of clearing scrub and bushland to create cattle runs, of droving cattle across the vast pastoral leases of inland Australia, of running sheep on small selector allotments and on the prime lands claimed in the early days of settlement by the ‘squattocracy’. Pastoralism is the industry on whose back Australia rode to economic prosperity and it continues to inform our sense of who and what we are in this land. So pastoral, ‘outside literary circles at least’, has as Tredinnick comments, ‘a certain swagger in Australia’ (2007, p. 126). It has to do with carving a living out of tough, marginal lands, of being proud of ‘dirt under the nails’, and achieving a certain sense of wry independence (Robin 2007b, p. 5).

Informing and animating this practical and particularly Australian aspect of pastoral is a suite of attitudes and images that could loosely be termed ‘Arcadian’ and which reference, as George Seddon notes, ‘the great estates of the eighteenth century built up during the enclosures in Britain’ (2006, p. 65). Some of the more affluent early colonists brought such attitudes with them as part of their cultural baggage, perceiving the open grass lands of eastern Australia—lands prepared for them by the Aborigines—as their personal Arcady, stocking them with sheep or cattle, building grand homesteads and establishing rural retreats designed with classical principles of beauty, order and harmony in mind. The degree of disjunction between such Arcadian visions and the actual nature of Australian range lands cannot be overstated. As George Seddon has commented, in Australia hooved animals, particularly sheep, act as ‘mobile jackhammers, pounding to dust the thin skin of an old land’, decimating the vegetative cover and exposing precious topsoil to erosion (2006, p. 63). Over time this has led to the desertification of large tracts of land and significant decline in wildlife populations

due to habitat loss and competition with and predation by introduced species.²¹ So while many early colonists were directly and deeply engaged with the physical realities of the continent, they approached the land with a sensibility heavily influenced by the pastoral idyll—an impulse that endures in the existence and composition of urban parks, gardens and backyards which are designed to do green in a dry continent, and which perpetuates landscapes that are much admired but ‘essentially rather sterile from an ecological point of view’ (Seddon 2006, p. 63).

The translation of such values into our literature was, in a sense, inevitable, and Seddon identifies the Arcadian overlay in many early literary works. It is there, Seddon suggests, in early accounts of Aboriginal land-use, where Indigenous hunter-gatherer culture is rendered as a ‘primitive affluence’—a phrase heavy with a pre-Fall sensibility. It is there in the iconic verse of Banjo Paterson who wrote of riding with the ‘western drovers’, of sharing the ‘pleasures the townsfolk never know’ while remaining happily ensconced in his lawyer’s office in Sydney (Semmler 1993, p. 24). And significantly for this project, it is there in memoirs of High Country cattlemen who employ the ‘whole range of patriarchal rhetoric of pastoralism’ to cast their invasion of the High Country in biblical terms (Seddon 2006, p. 69). Finally, it is there in a range of early literary works that perceive the resistance of Australian ecologies to impoverishing makeovers as a form of wilful recalcitrance. As Tredinnick notes, and rightly I think, these dual impulses of pastoral—to construe non-urban places as either idyllic forms of retreat and renewal, or as Boetian locales of darkness and melancholy, of nonconformity and even horror—have been the prisms through which Australian places have been viewed, experienced and written (2003, p. 43). But once again, this is not the only story.

As British Marxist critic Raymond Williams has pointed out, some of the neo-pastoral literature that emerged during the Romantic period was actually a form of resistance to the increasing commodification and degradation of English lands and waterways—a

²¹ As Debbie Rose notes in *Wild Country* (2004), since European settlement Australia has recorded the world’s highest rate of mammalian extinctions (p. 35).

destructive phenomenon that was current at that time, and which is now worldwide. In the works of poets such as Wordsworth and John Clare, Williams identifies a counter tradition of human/Earth relationship, where the ‘song of the land, the song of rural labour, the song of delight in the many forms of life with which we all share our physical world’ is the dominant note. This alternative pastoral is, in Williams’ estimation, ‘too important and too moving to be tamely given up, in an embittered betrayal, to the confident enemies of all significant and actual independence and renewal’ (1985, p. 271). It is interesting to note that this alternative pastoral tradition is contemporaneous with the early phase of Australian colonisation. It is reasonable to expect then, that just as Arcadian notions played strongly in the mindset of some early colonists, a distinctly Romantic sensibility played strongly in the approach of others. The respectful and embodied appreciation of nature cited above in the works of Macdonald, Gilmore and others are obvious examples. So too is the journal writing of Quaker William Wells whose detailed observation and evocation of Tasmanian flora and fauna, his advocacy of sustainable harvesting and hunting, his acknowledgement of the justice claims of Aboriginal peoples, and his situating of the human economy within the economy of nature, all speak of a form of pastoral full of ‘complexity and permanency’ (Cranston 2001, p. 60). While more narrow and instrumentalising forms of pastoral may be dominant then, in colonial literary constructions of Australian places, it is important to note the existence of alternative tendencies and to effect some revaluation of these within our literary tradition.

Furthermore, as Lawrence Buell has argued in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), ‘some form of pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without’ (p. 32). Buell’s view, which stands in direct opposition to George Meeker’s earlier and influential approbation of pastoral as an escapist fantasy (1972), holds that pastoral is part of the process by which a culture, particularly through its literature, progressively deepens its relationship with nature as it manifests within the local and continental context. While this view is open to contestation, it does connect with later considerations by Greg Garrard and Terry Gifford who point to some of the more positive and generative aspects of pastoral. As

Garrard has observed, the pastoral mode carries elements of a biocentric consciousness within which the human is enfolded in the larger matrix of natural systems. As such, it is an important forerunner to ecocritical theory (2004, p. 44). Furthermore, Gifford argues that pastoral need not be simply a literary mode of rural escape. It has the capacity, he says, to explore from a distance—from the position of retreat and reflection—the present ecological situation and its inherent difficulties and complexities (Gifford 1999, p. 46). Within this configuration of pastoral, the writer will take the reader on a journey, ‘to be changed and charged upon return for more informed action in the present’ (Gifford 1999, p. 79). This kind of literature, that functions in acute cognisance of the ecological ravages of the current context but which also achieves a ‘vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human’ and which advocates action on behalf of the Earth is later nominated by Gifford as a form of ‘post-pastoral’ writing (1999, 148).

It is within this context that *Shoulder to the Wind* is situated. As a form of pastoral it is written within an urban sensibility, taking readers on a journey from the city to the country and back to the city somewhat renewed and yet also ‘changed and charged’ to act on behalf of the Earth. As a form of post-pastoral it acknowledges the ecology upon which all socio-economic reality relies and it leads readers to seek more consciously their bond with the land. This project is also positioned in continuity with those early Australian nature writers, naturalists, poets, journalists and songsters who sought to write from ‘within’ rather than ‘outside’ this land, even though their efforts, as Judith Wright portentously observed, may have fallen short of the ecologically integrated ideal (1961, pp. 30-34). And it seeks to contribute to a contemporary literary engagement with Australian ecologies that is both ‘immediate’ and ‘corporeal’ (Lines 2001, p. 62), that carries a ‘deep sense of the immanence in all natural things’, and that understands the fate of humanity to be inextricably linked to the fate of the Earth (Gifford 1999, p. 152).

So *Shoulder to the Wind*, like all contemporary Australian nature writing, is challenged to acknowledge and reclaim aspects of those works within our literary tradition which

have forged and embodied a ‘familiarity with life on this land’ (Lines 2001, p. 62). But contemporary nature writing is also compelled, not least by the current ecological crisis, to function as a disruptive force within those discourses that apply heavily anthropocentric and utilitarian modes of thought to the natural world—of which pastoral, in at least some of its central guises, is but one example. In the Australian context nature writing is also set to disrupt other forms of instrumentalising rationality such as the concept of *terra nullius* and the critical role it has played in settler apprehension of this land and of its original peoples.

Terra Nullius 1

A deeper apprehension of the Australian landscape is fundamentally linked, of course, to recognition of the complexity and longevity of Indigenous history and place-making. One of the critical tasks of nature writing then, is the disruption of the lingering assumptions, contradictions and injustices that stem from the concept of *terra nullius*: a legal term which at settlement denoted the continent of Australia as ‘common land’ available for ‘shared use’ (Boyce 2010, p. 7), but which was later interpreted as ‘land belonging to no-one’ (Reynolds 1987, p. 12). For settler Australians, representing the land from a position of knowledge and intimacy in the way that nature writing requires, is clearly problematised when that same land is the site of Indigenous dispossession and ongoing regimes of violence, social marginalisation and economic disadvantage.

As Peter Read asks in the opening line of his book *Belonging* (2000), ‘How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged?’ (p. 1). A corollary question from the perspective of nature writing is, how can settler Australians write about lands and places they love, knowing that those lands and places were previously lost to others?

At least part of the answer lies in textual acknowledgement of prior Aboriginal occupation and of the mutual and symbiotic relationship that existed, or presently exists, between Indigenous communities and their country. An example of such

acknowledgement being accomplished quite deftly and within the natural flow of a place-based work is found in the opening section of Mark Tredinnick's landscape memoir, *The Blue Plateau* (2009).

The people who were too smart to winter here named the place how it sounded. *Katoomba* is what they called it, and that is how they carried the place on their tongues for so many thousands of years we may as well call it forever (p. 13).

In the lyric essays in *Shoulder to the Wind* such an acknowledgement is accomplished in phrases like:

On summer evenings when the sun burns low on the lip of Mount Hotham and the world is conjured for a time in rust and gold, you may glimpse Bogong moths, summer food of the Minjabuta and the Jaithmathang, coming in on the wind. You may remember then that this high place, these rocks and secret aestivation sites, hold the memory of other lives, of other times and weathers' (p. 8).

So acknowledging that this continent is known and named, is the 'country' of, Aboriginal peoples, is one of the first tasks of Australian nature writing.

Acknowledgement though, is but one element within a much broader set of issues that nature writing must negotiate. As Judith Wright observed many years ago, settler presence on this continent will remain ethically ambiguous until some form of legal negotiation—in the form of a treaty for example—is entered into with the Indigenous peoples (1985).

While the High Court's Mabo (1992) and Wik (1997) decisions significantly advanced the possibility of resolution within this complex arena, rights to land in the case of Indigenous peoples, and legitimacy of place attachment in the case of settlers, remain highly contested and deeply painful issues in this country. While works in the nature writing genre cannot and need not address such complex issues directly or in every

circumstance, some stance towards settler relationship to land and to its Aboriginal custodians needs to be present, at least implicitly, within the text. Kierkegaards's notion of 'conscious despair' is instructive in this regard. As Linn Miller describes it, this concept involves 'awakening to the truth of one's condition', of being clear-eyed, in other words, about the past, about where we settlers have come from, about the historical realities we have inherited (2006, p. 221). In the present context this means seeing into the shadows of settler presence in this land in order to effect both change and reintegration. This 'transparency', Miller argues, is a 'fundamental prerequisite for belonging', for it is only by knowing the finite aspects of oneself and of one's history that 'authenticity, and by extension, belonging, becomes a possibility' (2006, p. 220).

There is much in this view to recommend it, both as a philosophical approach and also as another way of articulating the purpose and point of nature writing. Squaring up to the past; taking stock of our worldly inheritance and how it has come to be; realistically evaluating what we have made of this inheritance and how our presence has impacted both the ecological coherence of the land, and its original peoples, is at least part of what nature writing in Australia must consider; it is part of the context out of which such writing emerges.

So nature writing can contribute to forms of cultural and historical honesty that prepare the ground for deepening degrees of settler identification with this land. But the question of belonging, of negotiating an ethical stance in a colonised land remains a conflicted and complex one for settlers. For Peter Read and for political scientist and nature writer Pete Hay, this dilemma is negotiated by recognising that settler Australians must forge their own paths to intimacy, or as Hay says, forge their own 'crossing places' (Hay 2003, p. 279). For Hay this is necessitated by the reality that the 'educative text' of Indigenous knowledge is so thin in places—through dispossession and genocide—that there is little option for settlers, other than to find their own centres of significance and power in the land (Hay 2003, p. 279). For Read settler attempts to belong through apprehension of Aboriginal creation ancestors and life-forces in the land may be possible, but such a quest always runs the risk of veering into the

exploitative, of expropriating the ‘Indigenous spirits’ (2000, p. 203). While he considers at some length various modes of ‘belonging-in-parallel’, that is, a revised history that tells both the black and the white story of this continent and that is represented in such things as public signage and interpretive story boards at significant sites, Read ultimately arrives at the same conclusion as Hay.

Leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them. Let the rest of us find the confidence in our own physical and spiritual belonging in this land, respectful of Aboriginality but not necessarily close to it. Let’s intuit our own attachments to country independently of Aboriginals. We can belong in the landscape, on the landscape, or irrelevantly to the landscape. We don’t all have to belong to each other. To understand that is a step to belonging

(Read 2000, p. 204).

Cutting across these views, however, are the claims of Val Plumwood that non-Aboriginal attempts to forge an independent spiritual relationship with the land

... ignore all the more interesting options of interaction, including dialogue, learning, convergence and hybridization, dynamically evolving and adaptive forms that are quite distinct from static cultural imitation

(Plumwood 2000, p. 93).

A case in point is cited by Debbie Rose in her reflections on joint Aboriginal and settler-descended efforts to protect the sacred mountain Gulaga on the south coast of New South Wales. Here both the Yuin community and settler-descended locals worked side by side in a form of ‘reverential labour’ to save the mountain from ongoing regimes of violence and exploitation. What has emerged from this process observes Rose, is a form of reconciliation that both acknowledges and transcends past settler practices of eradication and destruction. Also observable is the intrinsic power of the mountain to both endure and to recuperate from the onslaught of industrial utilisation,

while simultaneously pulling Aboriginal and settler peoples alike into a relationship that ‘looks a lot like love’ (2004, p. 211).

It is this kind of love, for place, for its peoples, and for Earth in all its wounded, defiled and yet often resilient reality, that nature writing attempts, that it witnesses to, that it ‘sings up’. From a settler perspective nature writing affirms the possibility that previous and even current regimes of violence, of disconnection and refusal of moral accountability can be unmade, can be ‘decolonised’, and that a ‘regrounding’ of accountability ‘in time and place’ is possible and achievable (Rose 2004, p. 210).

Aspects of this understanding are found in *Shoulder to the Wind* in both explicit and implied references to the relationship of Aboriginal communities to the Plains. In ‘Still Country’ practical and ceremonial expressions of belonging and reconnection are explored, along with subtle allusions to some of the historical abuses that the Dhudhuroa and other Aboriginal communities have endured. Alongside this is the endurance of the land itself, its capacity to withstand not only successive waves of sheep and cattle grazing, but the ongoing challenges of increasing resort development, water harvesting, tourism and leisure pursuits. Equally crucial is the welcome offered by Gary Murray and other Aboriginal elders to those settlers who feel some connection to the high country and are prepared to work and advocate on its behalf. These alliances will be critical, I suggest, in the years ahead as the fragile ecosystems of the Plains are exposed to the growing stressors of increased commercial development and the fluctuations of an unstable climate.

Terra Nullius 2

Lest such notions of human identification with and accountability to the land appear overly optimistic however, nature writing in the Australian context must also deal with, and in certain ways disrupt, complex discourses around the issue of wilderness preservation. As Marcia Langton has observed, the concept of wilderness that equates ‘natural’ with the absence of human trace or culture is a highly westernised and relatively recent construct. Furthermore, reserving areas of the national estate as

people-free zones perpetuates, she argues, another insidious form of *terra nullius* (1996).

There is a tension here though, for while settler Australian writers of place are exposed to an Aboriginal cosmology where land is experienced as ‘sacred geography’, as ‘nourishing terrain’ (Rose 1996, p. 9), they are also in receipt of a nature writing tradition, and indeed an environmental movement, heavily influenced by North American notions of the sublime (Hay 2002; Cranston & Zeller 2007). As Leo Marx (1967) and William Cronon (1995) have observed, the wilderness trope has played strongly in American literature, where it is fused with the idea of American exceptionalism and social and religious regeneration.

Against this background, writing the human into the landscape is both subversive of accepted notions of wilderness, and expressive of the actual Earth-human relationship that has existed on this continent for millennia. In fact, as I suggested in the previous chapter, it could be argued that the very essence of nature writing praxis, the heart of its curriculum, is much closer to the Indigenous notion of ‘country’ than it is to constructions of nature as ‘transcendental wilderness’ or the idyllic Arcadia that underwrites the ‘pastoral romantic’ (Robin 2007, p. 5). For, as Mark Tredinnick makes clear, nature writing ‘serves the land’ by folding human concerns, human relationships, human presence, back into the broader matrix of the earth (2003, p. 37).

The following passage by journalist and author Nicolas Rothwell, evokes a landscape within which Aboriginal presence is everywhere encoded.

In the front Toyota, the men were singing ancestral chants. Their voices would rise, then gradually fall away towards each verse-end, only to rise again, the cycle repeating, so that one was lifted up on a surge of sound, then cast down in wave-like fashion. Gradually, in our troop-carrier, the desert people gathered round me began singing too, the low, deep songs of the Tingari cycle – tales of the creation beings, wandering heroes whose travels shape the sand-dune landscape, and whose movements can be traced, like so many pulses, or

shimmers of light, upon the elusive surface of Western Desert paintings. That afternoon, though, the Tingari were not beside us, marching in the groves of trees, in rock formations on ridge-lines; their leader was calling up his armies as their long march from the north-west coastline drew closer to its goal – and all around me, as they pressed close beside us, the faces were taut, the eyes gazing out were clear (2007, pp. 277-8).

That this is Aboriginal country, intimately known and sung by its people who are, in this instance, performing some of the sacred duties of country, goes without saying. Rothwell is present with them as witness and as student, and this is how we, as readers, are also positioned within the text, awakened to the possibilities of a sacred, dialogical relationship with the land.

In Mark Tredinnick's *The Blue Plateau* (2009) representation of the dialogical relationship between person and place comes from the perspective of the settler.

Every morning, as another man might dress, Les puts on the valley again. So this particular morning, Norm is not surprised to see Les in overalls and gumboots walking in the predawn like some condemned man across the paddock, making for the sheoaks on Waterfall Creek. A dozen roos and some Bennett's wallabies closer to the crossing have their heads down grazing, and when Les walks through, none of them raises its head. None of them shifts or shoots him a glance, and Les passes among them like a ghost, like an understanding they share, an aspect of the morning's ritual. (pp. 9-10).

What Tredinnick presents here is a man so steeped in a place, so familiar with its ways that he has become, in a sense, one of its expressions. While none of the sacred/spiritual identifications with country are present here as they are in the previous passage, the overriding message is that Les belongs here, in the way the roos and the wallabies belong. In fact, it is the non-response of the roos and wallabies that confirms Les' status as part of the place. There is the suggestion here, the implication that the land

will open itself, at least to some degree, to those settlers who, with patience and attentiveness, are prepared to endure.

A similar notion is observable in *Shoulder to the Wind*, particularly in the story of Gary Murray and his enduring claims on country, but also in those settler identifications with the land that we see, for example, in Henrik Wahren, in his knowledge and love of—and his advocacy on behalf of—the Bogong High Plains. In fact, the conjunction of people and place, of Henrik and Neville Rosengren and Maisie Fawcett and the exploration of my own deepening knowledge and sense of belonging, is a pronounced aspect of the essay collection.

So nature writing emerges from the convergence of person and place. In this it challenges notions of wilderness that construe as idyllic or sublime those places devoid of cultural trace. It affirms, particularly in Australia where Indigenous presence is both long and strong, that human involvement and practices of care are vital to the health of both people and country (Rose 1996, 2004). In other words, nature writing assumes that the fate of nature and of humanity is inseparable.

Caution needs to be exercised in this regard, however. For those who would universalise the Indigenous model of human integration in the landscape, claiming that it is only by eliminating our desire to set land aside as ‘wilderness’ that we can begin to regard all landscapes with respect and dignity, I would say this. There may come a time when settler Australians will have such compassion for life in all its forms, will come to see the larger community as embracing all species, that the preservation or protection of specific lands will not be necessary. To be sure, nature writers are themselves working towards this ideal. But that time has not yet arrived. In the meantime, it may be wise to err on the side of caution. In the meantime, whatever can be protected of Australia’s unique lands and waters should be protected. In the meantime, nature writing can function as one tool by which we imagine a more seamless connection between our human lives and the domestic and wild places in which those lives unfold.

Terra Nullius 3

Within the Australian context then, the disruption of various forms of *terra nullius* is an essential element in the nature writing project. Acknowledgement of Aboriginal history, place-making and current justice claims, along with a certain honesty and transparency regarding the historical realities of settler dealings with Aboriginal peoples and with the land, are part of the ground from which nature writing on this continent emerges. There are, however, other forms of *terra nullius* that are equally pervasive and which nature writing should also seek to destabilise. The ‘prior vacancy’ which instrumental culture makes of the objects of its attention is one such form (Plumwood 2007, p. 1). As Plumwood has argued, this reductionist view of matter as ‘dead’ and ‘silent’, as devoid of speech and agency, is a foundational pillar of the scientific/rationalist framework and is highly resistant to alternative, more wholistic ontologies. The ecological result of this conflation of the material world with the ‘empire of mere things’ is obvious and compelling. The project therefore, of challenging spirit/matter dualism— of ‘re-inspiriting matter’ while simultaneously ‘re-materialising spirit’ is, as Plumwood suggests, an urgent one (2007, p. 3). It is also, above all a task for writing.

Consider for example, the following passage, another from Nicolas Rothwell:

It was close, by then, to sunset. Smoke plumes hung low in the sky. The sun's beams picked out the marks on the rock. They shimmered and abruptly there was movement everywhere. Fear held me, fear so deep I feel it still if I bring those moments back in thought to life. I retreated. Time passed, and gradually once that journey into these events formed themselves into a shape inside my head, I came to realise what that fear was. Not just fear of the unknown, the strange, the sacred, no. It was an awareness of the landscape's depth and the presences that rest within it. And as I look back it seems clear to me that

whenever I came close to such places in the inland, I could feel those presences nearby (2010, pp. xiv-xv).

Here, even the rocks themselves are shimmering and alive with psychic indwelling. Nature writing in this instance serves the broader project of subverting oppositional binaries, of bridging the matter/spirit divide. More broadly, in listening to the land, in writing place from multiple perspectives and across multiple time-frames, nature writing holds the larger story of the land in view. It reconfigures as animate and intentionalising those aspects of world that have long been objectified and silenced within the constructs of reductive materialism. In the process, and this is a point well made by Plumwood, nature writing points to the possibility that in reconsidering an animate and agential world, humans themselves are re-made, become ‘multiply enriched’ and necessarily ‘constrained members of an ecological community’ (Plumwood 2009, p. 7). This more expansive notion of world as both powerful and creative, and this re-positioning of the human within a network of interdependent and dialogic relationships, is critical to whatever efforts we might make to address the ecological crisis that is everywhere upon us.

Invocation

Singing the land

So, Australian nature writing functions as a form of disruption within a number of discourses. What then can be said of nature writing’s capacity to invoke, to ‘sing up’ the world in various ways and contexts, and particularly within familiar places—those local modalities we all inhabit? In the previous chapter I spoke briefly about this deeply Aboriginal concept of ‘singing up’ and described a process whereby non-Indigenous Australians participated in the ‘singing up’ of a degraded urban site at the

invitation of Aboriginal custodians.²² It might be timely to include here a more detailed explanation of this concept as it functions within Aboriginal cultures and then to explore how settlers, specifically through what Freya Mathews calls ‘ontopoetics’, and also through certain aspects of nature writing itself, may participate in this process of ‘singing up’ the land (Mathews 2009, p. 2).

In Aboriginal cultures ‘singing up’ has quite specific resonances. As anthropologist John Bradley reveals, ‘songs’ or ‘songlines’ are embedded in country itself. Songs are not associated with aesthetic concerns; they are not about appreciating or celebrating the beauty of a place. Aboriginal songs associated with country are all about Law and knowledge. They involve communicative exchange with the sacred and powerful energies and presences within the land. They contain sacred knowledge about how a place or features in the landscape came to be. They contain ecological knowledge regarding the complexities of relationship within a place, and they are instructional; they reveal how humans should comport themselves within a place. Human song and dance attunes itself to the song that country itself sings. Human ‘singing up’ raises, amplifies, the songs that are present within country, increasing the vitality of all that is incorporated into the land. ‘Singing’ then drives the songs of country back down into the Earth where they are held securely. ‘Singing up’ then, is a sharing in the deepest aspects of country (Bradley 2010, p. 18, 242, 223).

Self-evidently, this kind of communicative exchange really does require a certain kind of ‘dwelling’, a kind that is not available to settler Australians. So ‘singing up’ in its application to settler modes of being within a place is qualitatively different from Aboriginal notions of human participation in the life of ‘country’. Nevertheless, as both Rose (1996, 2004) and Mathews (2000, 2011) show, certain aspects and degrees of this deeply Aboriginal category of ‘singing up’ the land are translatable and transferable to the non-indigenous community, especially in the context of ‘caring for

²² Freya Mathews describes the ‘singing up’ of the CERES site in inner-city Melbourne in ‘CERES: Singing Up the City’ in *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 2000, pp. 1-8. It is discussed in the previous chapter *Writing Nature*, in the section ‘Writing Country’.

country', of fostering a custodial relationship to place. Mathews examines one aspect of this in her notion of *ontopoetics*.

Mathews uses the term *ontopoetics* to describe the communicative engagement between people and place. *Ontopoetics* rests on the premise that an inner, psycho-active aspect of reality not only exists but can be accessed and engaged with. Furthermore, Mathews argues that this inner dimension of world, this 'poetic order', can be 'invoked' (2007, p. 11), can be called forth on an expressive plane that is meaningful and not merely causal (2009, p. 2). In other words, Mathews holds that the inner life of a place, of material reality itself, can be 'sung up' and can be engaged with in various forms of communicative exchange.

One of the ways in which this communicative engagement may be accessed or at least brought to consciousness is, I would argue, through nature writing, and particularly through two of its major dimensions—narrative, and what Kate Rigby calls its 'ecological aesthetics' (1998, p. 175). Both these dimensions—story and embodied, highly sensory language—are vital and purposeful ingredients in the creative essays of place that comprise the first section of *Shoulder to the Wind*.

Narrative

Nature writing understands landscapes as storied realities, composed of geomorphic strands—of grand tectonic narratives as well as the slow tales of wind and water. There are other aspects too; elevation and temperature, the play of light, force of wind, texture of air, and the distinctive way these elements pattern themselves within a place. And, as Barry Lopez notes, there are also human stories; Indigenous histories firstly, that are both personal and tribal, that confer a 'temporal' and 'moral dimension' to an otherwise spatial landscape (1997, p. 3). This is particularly so in Australia. But nature writing also works to enfold second wave peoples into the narrative of the land, into its meaning and its ends.

By noticing, by responding to the way all these elements are arranged within a place—the distinctive compositions of mood and sound and song that cohere there—nature writing affirms not only the ‘inner aspect of reality’, but also the tendency of world to ‘seek to story itself’ (Mathews 2007, p. 11). As Mathews explains it, story is an intrinsic structure of ‘self’, and self is understood here not only as the human self, but ‘any *self-realizing system* – any system that maintains itself in existence by its own intentional efforts’ (2007, p. 10). Arguing from a *panpsychist* (neo-Spinozan) perspective, Mathews claims that each self participates in an arc of existence that follows a consistent trajectory—a beginning, a middle and an end, within which the will to survive, to thrive, to endure difficulties and dangers, ‘to postpone death as long as possible’, constitutes its point and purpose (2007, p. 10). It is readily noticeable that this existential trajectory, in all its urgency and suspense, represents the essential elements of story. As Mathews comments ‘[i]t is self in fact which furnishes the template for story’ (2007, p. 10). If ‘*world*’ is also ‘self’ in the sense that Mathews posits here, then it follows that its ‘inner structure’ will respond to and resonate with the structure of story (2007, p. 11). For this reason, narrative address not only elicits a response from world, but is ‘efficacious in activating the poetic order’ (2007, p. 11).

Story then is one means by which the world may be called forth, engaged with, encountered. It is a form of invocation that ‘sings up’ the psycho-active dimension of reality and enables communicative engagement between self and world. In so doing it both challenges and provides an alternative to literal and instrumental forms of language that tend towards commodification and domination of the natural world. Furthermore, the language of story is ‘sensitive to relationship’ as Veronica Brady puts it; it understands the self as embedded in the world, as part of its flux and dynamism—as part of its broader narrative if you like (2009, p. 61). Rather than seeking to bend the natural world to human will and desire, narrative address seeks to engage with, to communicate and commune with, that world which both incorporates and exceeds human existence. As such the ‘poetic order’ resonates with Heideggarian notions of ‘dwelling’ and also with aspects of the western poetic tradition, especially with the

work of the Romantic poets. Wordsworth's poem *Tintern Abbey* for example, acknowledges and celebrates:

...a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things

(Wordsworth 1798, in Bloom & Trilling 1973, p. 146).

This inner dimension of reality that 'rolls through all things' is, as Brady observes, not only at the heart of certain poetic traditions, but increasingly the object of scientific study and reflection (2009, p. 62). Furthermore, it is an understanding of world that has for eons been the informing principle of countless so-called 'primitive' peoples and cultures. Certainly, it is an understanding that is still potent and active in contemporary Australian Aboriginal cultures, where land, people and story are fused as part of one living, numinous reality.

For settler Australians, this represents both opportunity and challenge. As Brady observes, living in close proximity to more traditional cosmologies may assist 'us newcomers' in learning to '*dwell* in and with the land instead of merely *building* on it, and thus to live wisely in it, to develop an "ontopoetic" sense of reality instead of a merely utilitarian one' (2009, p. 63). This is no easy task, however, as Brady is quick to point out, especially given the cultural weight and longevity of such concepts as *terra nullius* in all its many and varied aspects, as outlined above. What can help us here is the language of invocation, that linguistic form that employs song and a narrative frame of reference, that employs story, to address the world and to elicit its poetic response. Such language is not only the province of poetry as cited above, but also, as Mathews notes, it is the province of ritual—Indigenous sacred ceremony in the

first instance—but more latterly bio-regional rituals that tend to emerge somewhat organically as communities begin to re-inhabit their local places. It is also the province of pilgrimage where particular landforms respond to the intentional traveller with ‘poetic gifts and graces in abundance’ (Mathews 2010, p. 8). It is also, I would argue, the province of nonfiction nature writing, a lyrical form of language that endeavours, through well-limned, land-focused stories, to remain true to the mood and tone of a place, to sense something of its inner life and integrity, to call up and engage with its distinctive energies and meanings. As Rothwell comments in his preface to *Wings of a Kite-Hawk*:

There are patterns and connections in our lives that elude us: resonances, fields of force, which go unknown until we tune our minds to the world beyond ourselves. Often it seems to me that life’s surface and the links of cause and effect we imagine ruling us are deceptive, and that deeper systems and symmetries lurk just out of sight: patterns that yearn for us to find them, and align ourselves with them. I believe it is the task of the writer not only to trace the hidden links between places, and between people, but to live in such a way that those links become clearer, and the hidden geometries around us confess themselves (2003, p. xxi).

In this estimation nature writing not only acknowledges the *ontopoetic* aspect of reality but affirms the task of the writer in making ‘the hidden links’ between people and the inner life of a place clearer, in calling those ‘deeper systems and symmetries’ forward so that they become, like story and ritual and pilgrimage, a means by which the human may once again ‘slip beneath the skin of the world’ (Mathews 2009, p. 8).

In the textual body of *Wings of a Kite-Hawk* (2003), for example, Rothwell concludes his account of his journey into the Simpson Desert in the footsteps of explorer Charles Sturt—a pilgrimage of sorts—by recounting a moment of grace and serendipity. It is a passage laden, I would suggest, with intimations that the whole journey has been a form of invocation. Rothwell writes:

Before the dawn I woke from these dreams of him, refreshed for the first time in that journey, and almost free from cares. After some while watching the stars fade and light steal into the sky, I climbed from my canvas cocoon, went quietly down to the water's edge and looked out across Eyre Creek to the shadows opposite, where a few wading birds and pelicans had just begun to stir. The sun's rays touched the coolabahs. The light was soft. I swam out, and for what seemed like a lengthy interval floated there, drifting mid-way between the two banks, scarcely conscious of a single thought, until I became aware of a cloud, or trail of smoke, far away from me, almost at a bend in the waterhole. The light shone through it, its colours changed, it seemed somehow to twist and whirl, and as it came closer, I realised I was staring at a flight of dazzling pale-green, yellow-breasted birds – hundreds, thousands of them, budgerigars, swooping, darting near the water's surface. They split in two, they joined together, they danced in my direction – all this in a space of seconds as they hovered, coiling, close above me, their rush of wings came circling, scattering, like a breeze, a murmur – and at that moment, as they swept beyond me, a green wing-tip, in summons, grazed my cheek. (2003, p. 195).

Similar passages appear in the lyric essays in *Shoulder to the Wind* where in 'The Issue of Love we read:

... places are not merely passive. They swell and slip from and exceed our perceptual nets. They are restless and dynamic, forever about their own business. Stories are enfolded there, heredities to which we are blind. Occasionally, if places are not too damaged by what has been done to them, and if we stay with those places long enough or are graced with some soft serendipity, some awareness may flash to the surface from the deep and we realise that we are moving in an arc of reality that can never be entirely fathomed (p. 77).

So the narrative aspect of nature writing, its capacity to story the land, to comprehend and find lyrical expression for a landscape's inner coherence and patterning, reminds us, calls to consciousness, the possibility that the world—that 'larger scheme of things'—is predisposed to communicative exchange and will respond to our invocations, will 'manifest its self-meaning to us', in the context of poetic address (Mathews 2010, p. 5). But nature writing, while affirming and invoking this inner dimension of world, also functions phenomenologically; that is to say, it holds that reality is also apprehended sensuously, through the visceral, embodied encounter between self and world.

Ecological Aesthetics

Along with poetic or narrative address, nature writing invokes the world through its mobilisation of the human senses. Through the use of heavily sensory forms of language it both calls forward and responds to those aspects of reality that are both outer and phenomenal. While the delicate patterns and interfusions of place are sundered somewhat in the dominantly visual, abstracted gaze of western epistemologies, nature writing works to counter this tendency. In what ecocritic Kate Rigby calls 'ecological aesthetics'—a term she borrows from Gernot Böhme—the visual apprehension of landscape is superseded by an attunement to place that is multisensory, multidimensional, and responsive (2003, p. 113). This approach is described by David Abram as a way of writing that opens 'the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin'. It releases the body from 'the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking', and thereby renews and rejuvenates 'one's felt awareness of the world' (1996, p. 265). In other words, such writing is one means by which the human understands her own life in continuity with the 'flesh of the world' (Rigby 1998, p. 180). It is in this bodily poetics then, that we are reminded that place is encountered phenomenologically, in and through the senses.

In the following passage this deeply sensorial aspect is woven seamlessly into the narrative of the text. In this excerpt from the creative section of *Shoulder to the Wind* I recount a live presentation by writer and philosopher David Abram as he reflects on the association between language, breath and *ruach*—the Judaic sacred or holy wind.

It is remarkable, he says, that the most holy of God's names, the four letter Tetragrammaton, "Y-H-W-H", is composed of the most breath-like consonants in ancient Hebrew. The most sacred of God's names is an utterance spoken, in a sense, by the wind. He places his open palm on his chest now and begins a slow, dull, beat. The forgotten pronunciation, he says, may be shaped by forming the first syllable, "Y-H," on the whispered in breath, and the second syllable, "W-H," on the whispered out breath. His palm is beating on his heart and his lips are forming the syllables and the air is making low sounds in his throat as he pulls it in and releases it rhythmically, and something is rising on this single cycle of breath, some other presence is moving here, some voice is pressing up through the alchemy of air and lungs, pressing through the breath and the sounds and the sounding of the divine name and reaching back , pressing into our bestial memory, carrying all of us, for a moment, deep into the flesh we share with all the world, and we fill our lungs with it and it seems as if we share a single breath and the air that enters us tastes of soil and of seaweed, and it rolls on our animal tongues like the rich and budded breath of the earth itself. I look away, to Pat who is crying, lost in the air and the water. And I glimpse Tina, who is sitting just beside and to the back of us. Her eyes are soft and full of tears too, and her mouth is open and the air is gliding in

(Kelly 2012, p. 137).

This 'multivalent evocation' of continuity between self and world (Lynch 2009, p. 179) eschews the temptation to, in Rigby's words, '[construct] a view' (2004b, p.77). There is immersion here, physical and psychic attunement to the natural element of air. What matters in this passage, and what matters for Rigby, '... is not verisimilitude but ambience: the intimation of what happens when the boundaries of subject and object

become blurred and the self is radically opened to a circumambient natural world' (2004, p. 226). If as Tom Lynch suggests, nature writing along with other forms of environmental literature can, through its use of ecological aesthetics achieve a sense of the 'permeability of the self... the mutual interpenetration of the body and the surrounding ecosystem', it may well function as an access point, not only to the deeper dimensions of the 'ecological self' as advanced by deep ecology, but to the self-disclosure of world as it manifests in time and space (Lynch 2009, p. 180).

In the Australian context then, nature writing has the potential to deepen settler identification with, and belonging in, the land. By making manifest the porous boundary or membrane that exists between 'organisms and their environment' and indeed between people and their place, nature writing affirms connections which are both substantive and somatic. It contributes to what Lynch calls a 'sensuous semiotics in which the full range of human senses engage in the experience of place' (2009, p. 184). On a continent where the inner life of the land has for millennia been 'sung up' through story, dance, song and ceremony, nature writing, in its ecological aesthetic, reminds us that embodied engagement with place is not only possible, but central to processes of place identification and forms of 'reverential labour'—central in other words, to the experience of belonging (Rose 2004, p. 211).

So may it be

The tasks and potentials of nature writing in the Australian context are varied and complex. In giving witness to this land, in listening for the depth of its music and the delicacy of its song, nature writing is challenged to hold multiple perspectives in view. It is challenged to write place from a stance that is both experiential and poetic, that is lyric and ecological, that is spatial, temporal and deeply relational. In eschewing the highly visualist bias of western approaches to place, nature writing affirms the reality that as humans 'we never exist in the singular' as Levinas puts it, that as members of the community of life we are embedded in the world, are part of its dynamic movement and implicated in its ends (1985, p. 158). But in doing this, there are particular things in the Australian context that nature writing must negotiate, must incorporate and

consider. Revisiting, referencing and reclaiming those early land-focused texts that prefigure such a stance is one obvious starting point for contemporary writers of place. Noticing via the historical and literary record the resonance some of our settler forebears had for this continent affirms and strengthens current efforts towards identification and belonging.

Disrupting discourses that subtly perpetuate the concept of *terra nullius* is critical to all forms of ‘place honesty’ in this country (Plumwood 2008, p. 2). By writing Aboriginal place-making into the text, and by acknowledging the agential and psychic dimensions of matter itself, nature writing has the potential to challenge oppositional binaries and to help reposition the human within a network of interdependent relationships. These relationships are, as Mathews argues, potentially communicative. Given that this land has for millennia been invoked through poetic address, been known and communed with through visceral and embodied interaction, nature writing is potentially one access point for settlers seeking a similar communicative exchange. As Mathews comments, and in the context of the ecological crisis one can only hope that it is true, once settlers have experienced for themselves this communicativeness of world, of being ‘graced, even loved, by world’, they may begin to feel towards this Australian earth ‘the way Aboriginal people feel towards their Dreamings’ (2010, p. 8). Nature writing, in its capacity for disruption and invocation, is positioned to help make it so.

Return to Love

A conclusion

*I believe curiosity about good relations
with a particular stretch of land
now is directly related to speculation
that it may be more important to human survival
to be in love than to be in a position of power.*

(Lopez 1997, p.28)

A number of years ago Australian philosopher Val Plumwood gave an address at the Melbourne Writers Festival.²³ She talked about stone and she talked about writing. The relegation of stone to a position of insignificance and anonymity is emblematic, she suggested, of faulty forms of rationalism in the West. The failure to acknowledge, to wonder at, the ‘amazing conjunction of earth forces’ represented in even the smallest stone is typical, she argued, of the instrumental stance to the material world Western cultures have adopted. We have forgotten how to ‘reverence stones as teachers and travellers from worlds beyond our time’, she said. We have let slip from our cultural memory the idea that stones are ‘ancestral creators who made the character of their place’. She observed that the culture that refuses honour to stones ‘refuses honour also to the great earth forces that have shaped and placed them’. Her blistering assessment that ‘the eviction of spirit and honour from stones and from the earth’s body is one of the great crimes of modernity’ was tempered only by her conviction that the Western worldview responsible for this ‘crime’ could be righted or at least effectively disrupted. And writing, she ventured, especially certain forms of ‘eco-writing’, is one of the major sites where such disruption may be accomplished (Plumwood 2007, pp.17-18).

²³ This address was published in 2007 under the title ‘Journey to the Heart of Stone’ in T. Gifford and F. Beck (eds), *Culture, Creativity and the Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism*, Rodopi Press, Amsterdam-New York.

In many respects, these dual impulses, to honour and bear witness to the material world—particularly in one of its local expressions, the Bogong High Plains—and to challenge and disrupt those discourses that perpetuate the nature/culture divide, are at the heart of this thesis, at the heart of *Shoulder to the Wind*. The creative component of this work particularly, in its lyrical evocation of the High Plains, in its respect for the forces that are at work there, in its celebration of the florescence that patterns the surface of the Plains and forms their distinctive face, is—in the first instance—a response to my experience of that place. The creative essays bear witness to the fact that embodied engagement with the world, with those places with which our lives are entwined, is possible, is integral to any renegotiation of human relations with the natural world. But, as I have stated previously, the creative essays are also highly situated cultural artefacts. They engage with a range of discourses that seek to challenge, to test and to destabilise cultural assumptions and political standpoints that impact human behaviour in relation to the material world.

These discourses, for the most part, came into view as the creative essays took shape, as I grappled with a range of concerns—how to negotiate the writing of place when the place in question is the site of Aboriginal belonging and dispossession, for example, or the implications for place-attachment when a place is radically altered by external forces—by shifts in climate for instance—or how a nature essay may address the insidious legacy of political constructs like *terra nullius*, or the capacity of nature writing to effect some shift in consciousness, to offer clues to, pathways to, the hidden presences in the land. These are some of the issues and concerns I followed into the exegesis, that I pursued in a more scholarly and abstract way through a range of disciplines and fields of knowledge.

Taken as a whole then, this collection of nature essays and the exegetical reflection that accompanies it performs the kind of disruption to instrumentalising forms of thought and culture that Plumwood advocates. By acknowledging Aboriginal presence and Aboriginal perspectives within the lyric essays—in ‘Still Country’ (p. 99) for example,

or in ‘Winds of Homecoming’ (p. 133)—along with an extended discussion in the exegesis of the impact and amelioration of ‘terra nullius’ (p. 252-61), and inclusion of Aboriginal concepts such as ‘country’ (p. 237) and ‘singing up’ the land (p. 261), this thesis considers multiple pathways by which Aboriginal perspectives may be incorporated into place-based texts.

Aspects of the Western mindset are further disrupted by the inclusion of other-than-human perspectives. In the lyric essay ‘Geormorphology’ for example, some of the ancient geology of the continent is imagined from an avian perspective (p. 20), while degrees of agency and mentality are afforded the Earth in a variety of its local manifestations. An example of this appears in the essay ‘Rocks’ where the rivers of the High Plains ‘have made themselves large and fast on a diet of shale and mudstone and sedimentary rock’; where they are ‘taking with them into the valleys the loose bits of flesh and bone of these peaks and plains’, where ‘they are carrying to lower elevations a cargo of another time, the depositions of a former sea’ (p. 72). There are many similar examples throughout the creative work, all of which contribute to the destabilisation of the Western tendency to perceive the natural world from an exclusively human perspective and to locate agency within the human community alone. These disruptions are theorised within the exegetical component of the thesis in sections such as ‘Reinhabitation’ and ‘Becoming Native’ (p. 196f), ‘A Way of Seeing’ (p. 220f), and ‘Invocation’ (p. 261f).

Similarly, the question of ongoing place-attachment in the face of the radical alteration or diminishment is dealt with directly in the essay ‘Still Country’ (p. 99f). It is further incorporated into the theoretical discussion of the relationship between local places and global contingencies in the section ‘The Global’ (pp. 188-203) in the exegetical chapter ‘The Text and the World’ (p.171f).

Disruption is also a marked feature of the essay ‘The Art of Breadmaking’ where an instrumental approach to the Earth—in this case the decision to build a walking track

through one of the most remote sections of the Bogong High Plains—comes into direct conflict with a more custodial and celebratory mindset (p. 108f).

In both subtle and direct ways then, and by means of both creative and discursive forms of writing, *Shoulder to the Wind* contributes to that growing body of literature that Plumwood calls ‘eco-writing’ and it plays its part—humble as it may be—in returning both ‘spirit and honour’ to ‘earth’s body’ (Plumwood 2007, pp. 17-18).

Perhaps here it is timely to mention the emergence, in the course of this project, of issues and lines of inquiry that suggest rich potential for further research but which exceed the parameters of this thesis and must be left for others to pursue. These include a more fulsome analysis of the history and tradition of ecological writing in this country, including works in the nature writing mode. The degree to which Aboriginal cosmogonies impact settler imaginative constructions of this land and of their embodied experience within it, also emerged as a potentially rich field of inquiry. A related inquiry might take up Debbie Rose’s view that the concept of ‘country’ is Aboriginal Australia’s ‘greatest gift to the world’ and consider postcolonial forms of belonging that cross both nature/culture and Aboriginal/settler divides (Rose cited in Mathews 2002, p. 3). Finally, it is my view that writing, including the writing of place, will play an increasingly vital role in human adaptation to a diminished and increasingly unpredictable world in the context of global warming. As Robin has noted, the idiosyncratic and peripatetic rhythms of the Australian landscape provide salutary modelling of what is becoming a planet-wide phenomenon. Writing that emerges from long engagement with such unpredictability could be fruitfully examined for its insight into the kinds of cultural adaptations needed to maintain affective and practical connections with places undergoing change. Such an inquiry would be deeply enriched by the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge about staying with and in damaged or radically altered places and the kinds of cross-cultural projects of land-protection or recuperation such knowledge may occasion.

So these matters emerged in the course of writing *Shoulder to the Wind*. What is also noticeable throughout the thesis is the repetition of a structure that could loosely be called mosaic. It is there, firstly in the land, in its colours and textures, in its brindled surface of grasses and heaths, of snow patch and bog, of sun and cloud-shadow. It is there strongly in the creative essays, both in their overall placement and patterning, but also internally, within many of the individual essays as they evolved. I was conscious of this mosaic tendency; at least as far as the nature essays were concerned. They often proceeded by patchwork, via loops and switchbacks, via disparate pieces of writing and creative insights that gradually began to connect and cluster around one or two key experiences or ideas. It did not occur to me though, that a similar pattern would emerge in the exegetical work. What I find there, as I peruse the whole, is the expected and stated scholarly examination of a range of issues with which nature writing generally, and this thesis in particular, is concerned. But in addition, moving circuitously through the exegesis, running beneath the lines of argument as it were, is a thematic continuity that gradually coheres around ideas of agency and mentality in the land, around kinship between all beings, around communicative exchange with country. This emerging perspective is taken up in concepts such as ‘letting the world grow old’, in ‘becoming native’ and ‘pilgrimage’. It finds resonances in Aboriginal concepts such as ‘country’ and ‘singing up’, and it echoes in discussion of the deeply embodied language of ‘eco-aesthetics’ and the efficacy of ‘story’ and ‘narrative address’. It seems to me now that these themes, having emerged in a more nuanced way in the creative essays, reduplicate in the exegesis, that they glance off one another, enlarge and enrich one another, building, finally, and perhaps inevitably, to the question of love.

I cannot recall whether Plumwood spoke of love during her address at the Writers Festival, but elsewhere she has stated that one should approach the world, approach places, ‘with the aspirations and expectations of a lover’, anticipating exchange ‘of mutual nourishment with a lively and responsive partner’ (2007, p. 17). This recognition of the relational dimension of Earth is clearly a long way from the dead and inert status that some Western epistemologies have traditionally consigned to the material world. Relationality assumes forms of intentionality and agency that ‘go all

the way down' to the very heart of matter itself (Plumwood 2007, p. 18). As I have intimated throughout the thesis, this has profound implications for human behaviour towards the Earth. At this moment in human and planetary history, when the ecological ravages already in train are set to intensify, recognition of the agency of the material world occasions unprecedented degrees of protection and activism, of change and ingenuity, of generosity and sacrifice, particularly from those of us in highly developed Western nations. It also occasions forms of grief—grief for the protracted, often piecemeal, diminishment of places, creatures, species, with whom we share our lives and whom we may have come to rely on, care for, love.

But as Plumwood makes clear and as this thesis concludes, mutuality is an inherent aspect of love. Love for world, particularly in its local and immediate manifestations, may indeed be critical now to human survival, and, one might add, to the survival of many other beings with whom we share this planet. But love *by* world is also being claimed here, and it is with this assertion of Earth's agency and tendency towards exchange that an array of complexities comes into view. For as this thesis has shown, agency in the material world is sometimes expressed in sudden events of cataclysmic proportions, even if the forces that produce such events arc towards the generative and the creative in the long term. It is also true that all weather-borne phenomena are now likely to be anthropogenic in at least some of their aspects. Such realities are now endemic to our times. But, equally true, is the way the Earth reaches for and responds to our small and human lives. In the end, it may be the experience of being held by the Earth, of being enfolded in a relationship of 'grace' and 'love' that may re-open paths to wonder, to interspecies exchange, to an honouring of the stones of which this world is made.

* * *

On the slopes slow-moving runoff has frozen in wide sheets and become window panes to the mossy, tangled world below. Water dripping from a rocky precipice has

solidified into long shards of ice. They hang from the rocks like crystal daggers. Low cloud clusters on the northern horizon. Mt Kosciuszko and the Main Range appear to float on those clouds, their peaks, already snow-covered, glowing pink in this twilight tinged air. Above me though, the sky is clear.

It is early winter. The land is preparing itself for snow. I have walked all day and seen no one except for the occasional pipit startled from the heath by my footfall, and a skink on a rock around midday. Now it is evening. I am walking on a treeless plain high above Falls Creek village. The only thing higher than me is the sharp rise of Mt Mackay. Beyond is the dark gash of the Kiewa Valley.

In the twilight the surrounding peaks and plains have softened to mauves and blues. Everything is pulling back, retreating. The rocks have drawn residual heat deep into their core. The birds have gone, back to their nests or down to lower ground. All is silent. Even the wind has stilled and fallen into the valley. And I too am silent, quietened by the day, by the evidence of powers that reside here, by the seeping signs of diminishment. Ski runs and roads fan out from here. Earthmoving machines have smoothed a slope. A chain gang of stiff-legged electricity pylons marches north. The continual snip and incision of civilisation. In nearby rock screes remnant pygmy possums are entering their winter torpor. They are cornered now, those possums. The climate, if not the foxes, is coming after them. I glance away, beyond the dam to where the Plains fold and fall towards the coast, down to where the filaments of this high place are being carried on wind and water, down to where they are reassembling as forest, as coastal plain, where they are gliding as pond and white water estuary.

I am nudged into movement by the chilled air. The sun in its descent stretches long hands of light across the plains. The golden beams rest on the heaths and grasses for a time, like a blessing. Fog rolls in. Sound deadens. Iron-cold stones clack under my boots. The track moves into shadow on the lee side of the slope. The world slips into grey. I wander blind, through the rising breath of the Plains. When the track emerges into the light, the sun has entered its final, brilliant burn before dropping below the bulk

of the Fainters. Its rays hit the fog and refract through the fine mist, and I am dazzled momentarily by a thousand forms of light. It is early winter, and the land is preparing itself for snow.

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