

Reflection Statement

My triptych, *Dream Again*, exposes the extreme degradation of the natural environment in Australia due to human impact. This includes land clearing, shrinking habitats, invasive species, climate change, drought, dried up watercourses, and wildfires. The first person presentation of these issues, revealed through the eyes of native creatures, highlights the stress inflicted by these burgeoning threats. My intention is to explore an animal-centred perspective through the use of pathos in individual characters to sensitise modern audiences to the unparalleled challenges facing these creatures. My concept developed from an ardent desire to appeal to environmentally aware Australians, as well as to reach people yet to be convinced of existential threats to the New England region's biodiversity.

Once I had determined the focus of this Major Work to be Australia's faunal extinction crisis, the concept had to be refined through an extensive investigation, to effectively communicate my conservationist intent. Early on, I was deeply affected by the notion of endlings; the last individual of a species one step from extinction. However, the depressing saga of endlings such as "Benjamin", the last thylacine, would provide readers with little motivation for environmental advocacy. It is important to offer hope when faced with species extinction. Hence the eagle concludes with a potent symbolic image of the sapling, promoting optimism that humanity can change course and work with nature.

The Bell's river turtle, the brush-tailed rock wallaby and the wedge-tailed eagle were selected as narrators due to their vulnerability and common habitat. My proximity, and frequent visits to the gorge, meant that I was intimately familiar with this unique landscape. To establish a persuasive narrative voice, it was necessary to gain detailed knowledge of these species: lifestyle, behavioural patterns and human encroachment on their ecosystem. Choosing animals in my local area meant that specialised academics could be interviewed. Local experts include Louise Streeting, a PhD student at the University of New England, and Paul Bayne, a national parks researcher who studied the brush-tailed rock wallabies for ten years. Stephen Debus, a world-renowned scholar on Australian raptors, imparted his knowledge of eagles. I also explored the terrain at Dangar Falls, recording sounds, smells and landscape to infuse my narrative with authenticity.

The unprecedented impact humans have had on nature led to a term being coined to describe this era: the Anthropocene. A million species are at risk of extinction worldwide, that is, 25 percent of known flora and fauna species (IPBES report 2019). Nowhere is this crisis more apparent than in Australia which is currently experiencing the worst drought in recorded history. Australia has the worst mammalian extinction rate in the world for the past 200 years due to clearing natural forests, introducing invasive species, and diverting water from rivers and wetlands (The Guardian, 15 May 2019). In 2017, NSW weakened legislation to protect native vegetation (The Guardian, 4 Aug 2018). Deforestation has left only pockets of natural habitat and I alluded to this through the metaphor of an “island itself in an empty sea.”

The animals in this fictional triptych face similar challenges. Ninety percent of Bell’s turtle nests are raided by foxes (Louise Streeting, personal communication, 2019). The only thing saving this endangered species from extinction is a local conservation program run by Louise Streeting. Their ecosystem is imperilled by the ravages of drought, as represented in the shrinking, fetid, pool in my story. The brush-tailed rock wallaby, listed as ‘vulnerable’, has a tenuous refuge in the Oxley Wild Rivers national park. But feral goats roam the gorge in huge numbers, competing for food with rock wallabies and destroying their habitat (Paul Bayne, personal communication, 2019). The dingo fence acts as an impenetrable barrier for the free movement of other mammals. The wedge tailed eagle’s prey have been greatly reduced by land clearing, feral animals, drought and bushfire. Despite the species being legally protected, rogue farmers target them as they harbour a misconception that eagles kill livestock. A Victorian farmer poisoned 406 eagles but received only 14 days jail as penalty (The Guardian, 25 Sep 2018). This brutal treatment of our wildlife is a travesty.

Short stories have the ability to connect with, and simultaneously challenge, an audience’s perspective, enriching the viewer’s and composer’s understanding of social issues. I decided that three stories would be optimal: providing sufficient space in each for development, while offering contrasting perspectives on environmental change, its consequences and prospects for the future. The triptych was also influenced by the classical elements as the turtle, wallaby and eagle, developed from water, earth and air respectively. Fire, literally and figuratively, is present in all three stories as a destructive force.

Opting for short story form led to extensive reading of fiction and nonfiction. Each animal required a distinct narrative voice, achieved through, not only changes in context,

observations, values and concerns, but also idiosyncrasies in tone, style, grammar and mastery of expression. A significant inspiration for style was George Saunders. His strange, evocative description in *Fox 8* influenced the development of the turtle's voice in my composition. The unique language of the fox is expressed in words such as "quizmicall", and flaws in his spelling of "Yuman houses". This singular style shaped the turtle's voice: "Unprotected from stick what jab and eel what bite". The erroneous use of syntax replicates a childish way of speaking. When designing this voice, I also ensured the consistency of errors to create a realistic narrator. The decision to omit articles and mix up verb conjugations was risky, but it did enhance the narration by establishing naivety and adding humour to the otherwise melancholy mood. This makes the character more likeable and relatable to the audience, while her vulnerability emphasises the acute imbalance of power between the native fauna and human interlopers.

Intertextual influences were critical, especially *The Tempest*. My work was shaped by timeless themes of imprisonment and isolation explored by Shakespeare. The turtle echoes the innocence of Miranda. Caliban and the turtle share an inability to articulate, however in no way does this incapacitate their ability to feel. The parsimony of her voice allows for a candid presentation of what she "sees". This dry, unadorned language starkly contrasts to, and complements, the other narratives. The wallaby is Caliban, living on an island of bush in the midst of farmland, believing himself to be formed from stone. The wedge tailed eagle represents Ariel as the harpy; a vision of anger speaking out against men "unfit to live". The eagle's story begins in captivity, just as Ariel is imprisoned in the cloven pine and, later, in servitude to Prospero. Finally, humans are akin to Prospero as they seek to control and imprison others, such as Ariel and Caliban.

Contrary to most fiction, the protagonists in my triptych are intended to be passive. The change inflicted upon them by humans represents the alteration of the natural world. The animals are profoundly disrupted by forces out of their control. This contradicts popular wisdom that good stories require active characters. Stylistically, the defencelessness of my protagonists was amplified by their passivity.

The dreams at the opening of the three narratives were underpinned by notions of creation, mythology, and history; heavily influenced by my study of *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's theme of dreams, as in Caliban's soliloquy "I cried to dream again", unified my concept

through an allegory of dreams representing lost nature. Hence, my title was drawn from this speech. *Watership Down* by Richard Adams also influenced my animals having their own mythology. The opening lines of the turtle and the wallaby mirror Genesis in the Bible: “in the beginning...”. This anthropomorphism aligns the animals with human belief systems and storytelling.

While the final draft was well advanced I came across the poetry of esteemed Australian author Judith Wright, who was also born and raised near the gorge country of the New England. My approach was affirmed as her ideas and descriptions matched my own. Wright’s concept of “the world’s four elements” paralleled mine, highlighting the destructive nature of fire as it consumed “all that is burnable” (Wright, “*Bid Me Strike A Match And Blow*”, 1971).

Wright’s poetry enhanced my understanding of how a writer can depict a changing landscape. I was struck by her poems *Drought* and *Dust*, and their resonance with current conditions in New South Wales “This sick dust...has eclipsed the small sun” (Wright, *Dust* 1971). My work highlights the impact of drought on native species rather than the usual focus on farmers. The sense of desperation induced by drought is keenly felt by animals and humans alike.

The process of independent investigation and composition has been a gratifying experience, albeit demanding. My knowledge and appreciation of short fiction featuring animals has developed exponentially. In my quest to explore pressing environmental issues I developed a painful awareness of the tragic biodiversity loss in Australia; past, present, and with worse to come in the imminent future. These stories exemplify the mindless destructiveness of human nature through a faunal insider view of the Anthropocene extinction crisis. My major work is intended to cast a searing light on the devastation being wrought on Australian flora and fauna. My hope is that this may challenge audiences to consider their role, be it active or passive, in the environmental calamity.

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