

Swimming in the Dark

Jennifer Coralie¹

In the early summer of 2014, during a record breaking period of heat and suffocating winds in Melbourne, Australia, I lay on a couch on one of those hot nights after swimming in the shared pool of the inner city gated community where I was renting.

It was still 40 degrees centigrade outside at 11.30pm, a sultry night even by Melbourne standards. I was lying on the leather couch wrapped in a wet cotton sarong. I had been watching Maria Sharapova playing tennis in the Australian Open in Melbourne on the TV; she was also dripping wet but composed and concentrated. Winning. From the pool, the almost full moon had appeared through mounded clouds, and Grey-headed Flying-foxes swerved across the night sky, with horizontal lines of brass coloured lightning slashing across the horizon behind them. Lying half-awake on the couch after midnight in my damp sarong with the television on mute, a silent documentary unfolded about the lives of fishes. Marvellous silver fish flashed through deep cobalt Hawaiian waters. Then, unbelievably, there were tiny fish crawling up a steep slippery rock face behind a waterfall. Their big eyes seemed to be full of feeling, as some slipped back, unable to hold on, failures in the race for survival and propagation. The skill of the film maker managed to evoke empathy for these tiny struggling goby fish. Each fish seemed distinct, unique, with its own way of reacting to immanent death or survival.

The next morning, after a near sleepless night in the relentless heat, I felt disorientated. Time had ceased to have much meaning; the old clock downstairs was set one hour behind, but the long hand is never right on the stroke and so I always doubt what I am looking at. The house was now layered with different kinds of air; cool on the ground floor, stifling on the second floor where the bedrooms are, and full of fierce heat on the third floor above where my studio is. Entering that room in summer, I have to remind myself that hot air rises; the window in the roof is open and it's difficult to breathe, but if I close the window, everything in the room will bake. I imagine my oil paints melting, the wax paintings sliding off their supports. Outside, plants have had their leaves scorched or keeled over in their pots. Trees have lost leaves prematurely; the leaves skitter across the pavements of Kew as if it is autumn. Shards of bark are scattered across the lawns. Branches or whole trees lie where they have fallen.

After my morning swim I picked up a Don De Lillo novel, *The Body Artist*. This book demonstrates that, as I recall Marguerite Duras writing years ago, you can and should include everything in a novel – the past and the present, the gaps in consciousness, things thought, heard, said and unsaid – in short, ordinary life as it is lived. There's an amazingly simple concept here, of the novel as repository or, some would say, as garbage bin, for random thoughts and descriptions. Not every writer can, or would want to, write like this of course. I had never thought of De Lillo as a poetic writer, but this novel is poetic. In *The Body Artist*, people brush past each other, stare at newspapers without

reading them, stop listening to the conversations of loved ones, speak random thoughts, sit idly in untidy rooms. This is writing from the inside out, done by a master.

I recalled the previous night, the way the people had looked and behaved in the pool, all of us separate entities submerging our bodies in the cool water. It started to rain, and everyone stood up, their torsos out of the water, looking up at the dark sky. Flashes came from the north, there was a rumble, and you could count the drops before the rain stopped. Later, in the living room, I looked across at my partner who was sprawling in an armchair, completely naked, but with his hands holding his iPad over his lower belly. He looked elegant with his short grey hair and long limbs. I remembered the things I liked about him, I forgot for a moment the paunch and grey chest hairs and the almost permanent air of worry that seems so much a part of him. I wonder how he sees me. How is it even possible to live with another human? Large animals, we stumble around each other, sometimes looking up at the moon, most often blindly moving around inside buildings, our ungainliness disguised in layers of fabric.

De Lillo interrogates in *The Body Artist* the precious moments when we – these human animals² – remember to look up or around or at something, paying full attention to what is there. Those moments of strange interpenetration, of wonderment. “When birds look into houses, what impossible houses they see. Think. What a shedding of every knowable surface and process. She wanted to believe the bird was seeing her, a woman with a teacup in her hand, and never mind the folding back of day and night, the apparition of a space set off from time. She looked and took a careful breath. She was alert to the clarity of the moment but knew it was ending already. She felt it in the blue jay. Or maybe not. She was making it happen herself because she could not look any longer. This must be what it means to see if you’ve been near blind all your life. She said something to Ray, who lifted his head slightly, chasing the jay but leaving the sparrows unstartled.”³ The two humans discuss it briefly, then settle back into their morning routine. But traces linger. “She drank her tea and read. Nearly everything she read sent her into reverie.”

A reverie can arise from a response to the call of the world, to the thingness of things, the worldliness of the world, this place that is not precisely ‘us.’ For a moment we become conscious of ourselves as sharing in being. We are part of what Martin Buber calls a streaming interaction with the world.⁴ There is no illusory world, he says, there is only the world: “...only the barrier of separation has to be destroyed.”⁵ The world, Freya Mathews writes, is “a field of meaning ... a communicative presence ... that may be ‘sung’ into responsiveness to us.”⁶ We may experience something like this whilst reading, or daydreaming, or through some action, but it almost always happens for us by accident. How can we learn to ‘sing’ the world into responsiveness as we go about our daily lives? How can we remember that each encounter contains meaning that is part of a communicative field? This is not an intellectual exercise. It requires from us an attitude of opening, an unfolding; it contains an implicit acceptance that the world will respond and unfold us.

We nest in our houses, flying-foxes nest in their treetops, birds wherever they can. When birds look into houses, they see moths dancing on the ceiling, spiders in their webs, the crouching cat, large shadowy forms sliding listlessly from one side of the room to the other. They see the crumb on the lip, the gooey matter in the corner of the eye, the silver drop falling from the tap, the dust in the air, and the shadows of other wings flitting behind them reflected in the glass. They see a cave of darkness on a hot day, and flying into it they stun themselves on the hard windowpane.

The moths in my house flutter in through the open door and cannot find their way to the open window on the third floor. They cling to the ceiling or the corners of the second floor bathroom, dark trembling shapes that move me, because they are lost. Sometimes they blunder into us as we move about, try to show them the open door. But

they are truly lost in these square boxes, and I find the dried out bodies days later and lay them on the flat tops of the staircase balustrades as if they will launch themselves for one last desperate flight. It's a natural process, my partner says; he means the inevitable death of the moths.

Outside, a little bird perched on the top of a young golden pencil-straight cypress pants through its open beak. It makes feeble sounds at regular intervals. I put a bowl of cool water on top of the iron outdoor table. The black cat melts into the shade and watches. The heatwave lasts for three more nights and two more days.

On the morning of the third day of the heatwave, my partner pauses in the doorway on his way out and murmurs, "inoculated volunteers on the Yarra."

"What? What does that mean?"

"Inoculated volunteers are rescuing dehydrated flying-foxes along the Yarra."

I imagine the flying-foxes, their fragile bodies encased in thin black membranes, wings wrapped around their hearts that shudder in the thick heat. Flying-foxes only drink in the evening as they skim along the surface of the water, before swooping up and journeying out to Melbourne's cool gardens. But there is no coolness. I hear, or imagined I hear, the plummeting of hundreds, thousands of bodies. Other animals creep into the shade, awaiting nightfall.

I read on the internet that flying-foxes start to suffer from the heat when temperatures reach around 38°C. They begin to fan themselves and move lower down the trees to escape direct sunlight. When the temperature reaches 40°C they move even lower down the trees into the understory foliage and to ground level. If the understory vegetation is classified as weeds and removed, it will have a severe impact on the number of flying-foxes that die during a heat stress event.

All over the city, the power grid falters and in some cases fails. People use their air conditioners so that they can go on working, but I resist turning ours on until late afternoon. I buy little food in case there is a power outage and my fridge becomes a warm box. Fruit sits softening on the bench tops. The bowl of water outside is nearly boiling, so I top it up again. My cat is hiding in the bookcase behind a row of travel books about Scandinavia.

Standing in the pool in the dark, I watch a straggling line of single flying foxes flap their way slowly across the sky. Lightning forks, the moon creeps out. In this shared watery space, my porous body is open to the frequencies of the world: to the creatures in the sky, the elements, and the large animals splashing and yelling around me. A group of young men and one woman dominate the centre of the pool so that nobody can swim laps unless they press close to the side of the pool. One man says, "Tomic wimped out because it was too hot for him." Another says, "I wonder if he was really hurt?" "It was the groin! He was hurt in the groin," cries another. They fall to talking about how good Sharapova is to look at, how she had played through the heat, grunting, but slogging on. Federer, brooding and masculine, declares in an interview that you just had to "get on with it," play like a professional and ignore the heat. Ignore dehydration, the straining heart, and just GET ON WITH IT!

Here on the east coast of Australia we get on with it, 'suffering' the heatwaves that are caused by air blowing off the Indian Ocean and moving across the hot desert slowly towards us. By the end of the fourth day of the heatwave in 2014, a cool change came quietly in without the forecast winds and hail. I opened our windows, stripped the beds of their tangled sheets, turned off the air conditioner and prepared to sleep for the first time without wet towels wrapped around me. Many hundreds of flying-foxes have died, along with possums and small birds.

Our Prime Minister Tony Abbott reassured us in 2014 that "...[J]ust because we have had some unusual hot weather doesn't mean it is caused by climate change." Most

of southern and eastern Australia experienced some kind of bushfire activity since October of that year: this was unprecedented and unsettling. Since then we have seen four of the warmest years on record, and the rest of the world has experienced unusual and extreme weather events. Oceans and waterways degrade and animals and plants die while politicians debate the cost to the economy of a carbon tax or carbon pricing. We have the ability as a nation, as a species, to divorce ourselves from the evidence that surrounds us: our connection to the natural world consists of holidays at the beach or visits to wildlife sanctuaries. Yet an act of the imagination can connect us to the world around us; I did not really hear flying foxes fall out of their trees, but by imagining those deaths I made them significant, at least to myself. We can imagine an animal or a child dying of dehydration or contaminated water. By reconnecting ourselves in this way to the tiny individual consequences of our actions as a species, we also reconnect to what is profoundly human in all of us.

When temperatures reach 40°C over several days, the flying-foxes roost on top of each other on the shaded side of the trees, in the understory, the base of trees or even on the ground. It is when the flying-foxes begin 'clumping' like this that human volunteers – the inoculated ones – move in and begin spraying them with water to cool them down. Distressed individuals are cared for as if they are human beings, receiving treatment for heat stress. Deborah Bird Rose writes that '[H]uman beings offer love and commitment; they bring assistance, bear witness, and, through their actions, testify to an interspecies ethic that responds to suffering and, at the same time, praises the gifts that flying-foxes bring to the world.'⁷ Rose writes of what she calls the great 'Yes!' that becomes a profound ethical choice, an affirmation that "conveys the desire to participate in the great flow of life's own desires and ways of becoming."

Flying-foxes are keystone pollinators whose seed dispersing activity has a disproportional effect on the whole community structure in comparison to their relative biomass. Flying-foxes pollinate as they feed and disperse seeds as they move around. They only eat fruit crops when native food is unavailable; nectar, pollen and native fruits are their normal diet. As the little animals feed, their fur and wings become dusted with pollen grains, which are transferred from tree to tree, connecting forest remnants across large distances. The relationship between plants and flying-foxes is a form of mutualism known as '*chiropterophily*.' Humans need flying-foxes and need to learn how to live with them in mutuality. Fossils reveal that flying-foxes have been a part of the night sky for more than 3.5 million years, but their numbers have decreased dramatically over the last 50 years primarily due to loss of habitat, but also uncontrolled killing at orchards, net entanglements, overhead powerlines, barbed wire fences and severe heat events due to climate change: in short, at human hands. As Rose writes, '[M]utualisms are entanglements of interdependencies.'⁸ The historic wholesale slaughter of the flying-fox and many other animals and birds in Australia is just one more example of the very real war against nature that we are seeing in our time. Humans are in the business of killing and creating a worldwide global genocide of animals. Rose writes about the necessity for acts of love at the edge of extinction; the practice of love is, she says, "a grateful response to the gifts of life, a pledge of solidarity with earth life, and a commitment to participation in the complexities of mutuality."⁹

In the dog days of that summer, I looked obsessively every day at the red stain on the weather map. As human beings, we are more or less self-conscious and self-aware; our moments of clarity are brief but pierced with indescribable knowing, and we understand in our hearts that things are not the same and never will be again.

In January 2018 I stayed in a friend's apartment a few bends in the river away from where I had been living in the hot summer of 2014. The north-facing balcony simmered with heat for weeks on end. In the evenings after watering the pot plants, I would leave

the air-conditioned rooms and walk across to the rooftop swimming pool on another building. I stood in the lukewarm water and watched as flying foxes crossed the sky in ones and twos as they had done years before.

They flew low across the stacked gardens of the apartment balconies, seeking food, seeking who knows what? Do they seek comfort as we do? Flying-foxes are very sociable, like us; they are focused on finding food in many different locations at night, and use 'camps' for social contact and rest when they are together during the day. If far from home, they will visit another camp to rest. They live in a joyful attitude of harmony with the natural world, of camaraderie with fellow creatures. The little animals flew so low that I could see their faces and later that night sitting on the balcony, I imagined that I could hear their wings beating.

The Yarra River ("The River of Mists") flows wide and brown close to where I lived in Kew in the gated community Willsmere, a former 'lunatic asylum'. Everyday I walked around the boulevard, down a steep path to where the Grey-headed Flying-fox colony lives. The flying-foxes hang upside down from the trees, little untidy bundles with silvery grey heads. Their delicate black wings are folded around their bodies, and they sway from tiny feet hooked around the slender branches of smooth-barked trees, tall, white, with tangled spreading canopies that lean over the river. River Red Gum, Yellow Box, and various other Box-Ironbark cover the escarpments, cliffs and spurs. Golden Wattle, Manna Gum and Woolly Tea-tree. Yarra Bend Park contains around 50% of its original native vegetation, but only a small proportion of this is considered relatively intact. The Eastern Freeway bisects the park, filling the air with traffic noise and pollution.

The river curves, flashing silver in-between the tree trunks, then golden brown in the shade. Single leaves lying in the grass in shadow are jewelled with water drops from the thick morning fog. I walk along the river path towards one of the wilder parts of the wetland, and hear music ahead, the sound of a clarinet being played, the pure notes pouring out from a hidden player somewhere ahead on the riverbank. The traffic noise forms a rhythmic background to the music. I walk back to the first flying-fox tree with the clarinet notes resounding, receding. The little animals make chattering, squeaking sounds like small birds. The colony sleeps during the day but there is always some movement and restlessness.

From dusk to early evening the colony stirs. Scouts or leaders fly off singly or in pairs, flying in ever-widening circles until the rest of the colony is awake. I watch as the flying-foxes swoop and skim along the surface of the river, wetting their fur which they lick, taking their evening drink before dispersing across the city in search of food. The gentle twittering of daytime becomes a cacophony. Sitting on the riverbank I am enveloped in a bell of sound; I am living in an other-than-human world, looking up at the bellies of flying-foxes. There is an intense air of excitement and expectation, and it is as if for just these few moments I am a part of the life of these animals. I am aware that this is a poetic response, which I am imagining that I can feel what they do; nevertheless it is a strong feeling, and I want this fleeting sense of belonging. Self is implicated in world.

The world speaks, and all we have to do is change our perspective to catch its messages. As De Lillo writes in this most poetic of his novels, *The Body Artist*: "The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running lustre on the bay. You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web."¹⁰

Early mornings find me walking to a clearing on the windy plateau above the Yarra where I can see the city across a wide swathe of dark brownish-green foliage, the clouds

a soft band along the horizon, mist swirling below. I find the wing of a Swift Parrot – an increasingly rare species of bird in Victoria – on the grass outside the walled community and carry it home with me to dry out and keep. There is a tall Yellow Box with a spreading crown covered with tiny pale gold blossoms just outside the wall where lorikeets and rosellas feed noisily in the late winter afternoons. The wing is a beautiful grass-green colour with a tinge of red, torn off the body of the bird by a fox or feral cat, quite recently.

As I write on a morning in December 2018, the forecast is for 38°C with hot winds. This has already been the hottest December for 24 years. In the early mornings of these sultry summer days everything is still possible. It is still possible to believe that the flying-foxes made it home after finding enough food, and that the remaining families hang from the branches and still have enough leaf cover and understory to protect them. I watch for the seagulls who come swooping up the river; I hope that some of the birds who sip nectar from flowers will find their way to my garden, to the bowls of water under the trees. Only two red-bellied parrots and a lorikeet chatter from the flowering gum near my house. The stillness is a surprise. It envelops me, as if a cloud has descended. In the early morning it is possible to believe that we still have seasons, which this season will be followed by a cooler one, that the rains will come.

I am living near another river in Melbourne now, the Maribyrnong, the Saltwater River, whose name loosely translated means “I can hear a ringtail possum.” I am discovering a world of stories associated with this river, threads of connection that tie me to this ancient Aboriginal place. There are massive River Red Gums along this river, but no flying-fox colonies. There is no swimming pool open to the night skies, birds, rain, winds and stars. In my new home by a different river, birds predominate, their voices filling the air, their bodies rising on the wind. There are native rats, lizards, wallabies, eels.

The river snakes its way through the western suburbs, forging deep gullies and ravines that leave flat plateaux for the wind to rush across. From the air you can clearly see the dramatic folds of land with the dark line of trees and river winding through the valleys. A brown river, lined by ancient trees and quiet sandy pathways. A slow river, curling back on itself, a slow meander of water that carries a faint oily slick and leaves grey bubbles where it laps the black mud at the tide’s return. The houses high on the plateau’s rim face Melbourne, the city a frail skeleton twelve kilometres away along the skyline.

Below the houses the sounds of human life fade, birds dart and call, leaves hiss, breezes lick the water’s surface. Steep escarpments scraped of trees shimmer with golden grasses on one side and across the water sculptural shapes of iron, brick, glass and concrete rust, crumble, crack, and sink into the invasive grass species, peppercorn trees, prickly pears and thistles that have overtaken the bank of the river on that side. A wasteland of buildings that the Department of Defence has allowed to slowly return to the earth, they are largely unused and house a population of native and feral animals and birds. This could be an urban sanctuary were it not for the fact that the land is now for sale and will be cleared for development. I have seen small tents along the Maribyrnong where homeless people live. Occasionally little groups of people fish from broken jetties where a steamboat once moored on its way downriver. They fish for eel as the Indigenous people of this area did for thousands of years.

On the edge of the plateau where I live the wild river light glints between ancient landscape forms. In one direction there is a busy road, factory roof lines, and multi-story buildings under construction; in the other stands a massive solid-trunked eucalypt, home to birds, shelter from the wind. In front of me, flowering gums with sweet-scented blossoms. Overhead, silver-bellied birds flock, wheel, swoop, their wings cracking like

sheets snapping on a line. The wind chases through the trees, softly passes me, flicks over leaves, lifts the swirl of birds into the sky, effortlessly.

I breathe with the grasses at my feet, the darting insects and tiny birds, the swerve of starlings, the curving river, the brown and olive trees, the solid ground beneath that is not solid but interpenetrated with air and water. For just a moment I remember that I am part of this, a piece of the living wholeness.

Studying the flying-fox has meant that my own observations and experiences have been overlaid and enriched by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose's work. When I write about the flying-fox I am dealing with not one animal but two, flying-foxes and homo sapiens. It is the interaction of these two species that interests me. The flying-fox is one of the most harassed and least appreciated of wild animals. I want to call for an understanding of this amazing species, and wildlife extinction in general. The flying-fox vocalizes as does wo-man; this voice has not been stilled. Not even by us. This defiant song is what links humans to all creatures. What Rose calls "extinction cascades" involve failing connectivities across species, including our own: she reminds us of "the terrible wreckage of life in this era," of the threat to symbiotic mutualism, and of the eroding of potentialities in human and more-than-human life.¹¹ It is this threat to the future unfolding of life that is most distressing.

I called this essay *Swimming In The Dark* because that pool beneath the night sky is where I began thinking about flying-foxes. And of course it is also a metaphor, for ignorance, confusion, lack of direction ... our own lostness. The "passionate immersion" in life that Rose writes about includes all biotic life; that descent to the flying-fox colony along the river on many mornings and evenings introduced me not only to a vibrant community of other-than-human life, but to the river itself and to the ancient connections and relationships attached to that place. There is no landscape without people, and there is no wilderness. Jessica J. Lee experienced the intimacy of landscape through swimming. She writes of landscape as "a place that is more than simply human: of mushrooms, the element of surprise; of mosses, their complexity just out of reach. Above all, it is a place of water. The most intimate of all."¹² And in this most intimate of immersions, with the water touching every part of our bodies, we must face the fact that human interference has spoiled even this element.

In his 2013 novel *Submergence*, the Scottish writer J. M. Ledgard alters the reader's perspective of Earth, showing us that the oceans contain most of the space on this planet. The number of ancient life forms on the seafloor far exceeds the mass of all life on land, leaving the writer with a sense of wonderment about the scale of life on our world. From this perspective, humans are a fragile species Ledgard says, "miraculous, yes, but tottering."¹³ Human lives matter and are insignificant all at once. Ledgard calls his novel an attempt at "planetary writing," more political than most nature writing.¹⁴ Fiction allows for the true mystery at the heart of the world to co-exist alongside the hard scientific facts.

I think of the final scene in Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2012), a film that contains a dark ecological message. Dennis Grunes writes about the "illimitable mystery" at the heart of this film, about the fragility and transience of life, and the magic of earthly love.¹⁵ A frail structure of branches and twigs is built, serving as a metaphoric shelter on what is to be the last night on Earth. The most vulnerable of the characters, the one unable to cope with the stresses of everyday life, proves to be the strongest in the face of annihilation: she sits in the wigwam with the children and tells them stories as the world is about to end. I imagine that these stories will be stories of companion animals, of wild and once-wild nature, of songbirds, of ancestral beings, of fires in the desert. I imagine that this final shelter is on a hill surrounded by rivers, beneath the star-filled night sky, and that the children are accompanied by creatures of all kinds. It is strangely like my

own holy hill, the one near the colony of flying-foxes. When I moved to the house by the Maribyrnong, I began to walk at night when the brutal and intrusive sounds of traffic and aircraft decreased for a while. Swooping silently up over the trees out of one of the dark ravines where the river once flowed, the flying-foxes travel out to the last gardens on the edge of the city.

“The land is a being who remembers everything.
You will have to answer to your children, and their children, and theirs –
The red shimmer of remembering will compel you up the night to walk the
perimeter of truth for understanding.
As I brushed my hair over the hotel sink to get ready I heard:
By listening we will understand who we are in this holy realm of words.
Do not parade, pleased with yourself.
You must speak in the language of justice.”¹⁶

Notes

1. Jennifer Coralie is a writer, artist and independent scholar living in Melbourne, Australia. Jennifer’s doctoral thesis examined the activism and philosophy of the poet Judith Wright; she is a contributor to the forthcoming book *Madness In The Woods*.
2. I use ‘we’ and ‘us’ to connote human/s. Human/s are animals; that which is/does more than one thing; homo sapiens; self-conscious beings; ‘we’ can also mean global society; the human project; the body politic.
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