

Poem

Ilka Blue Nelson

For the Black Cockatoo

My species were
born to Earth to be its 'teller'.
Once upon a time
we told of great skies
filled with flocks
of Gods.
A place where Spirit and Goddess carved out
the making of all things
matter and moral.
We told of creatures,
mountains,
rivers steeped in mysteries
much more than we could hold.
Our tongues beat like wings,
fanning the story of life.
But I can't tell you these things now.

Too much loss abounds
and there is yet much more to lose.

When you hear the bird that calls
between worlds
know that extinction is close.
Theirs is a cry not a song
a kind of screaming
that comes crashing through the sky
with that Boyd lilt,
those red feathers,
this ticking bomb.
These sticky web fingers
cannot name the Living Dead.

It is time!
Burn the trees
hail spirit through the smoke, or your devil
whatever incantation stills the chaos for you.
Life is broken here.
This bird
who flew to the heavens to find us water
now uses wing
to limp far, far away.

And how will the rain find us when they're gone?
Without them, I cannot tell.

Commentary

The call of the Black Cockatoo has always stirred my soul. I'm not clear on how one comes to have an 'animal totem' but I do observe patterns and presence, and these birds visit me often in the many places I've lived and wandered across Australia. They fill me with spirit like nothing else on this planet.

I understand storytelling as bringing us into story with our humanness, and how that is reflected in the survival or extinction of all other species.¹ This feeling is explored in my thesis 'Storytelling Beyond the Anthropocene: a quest through the crises of ecocide toward new ecological paradigms', in which I also share, "my knowledge of the world has grown in the body of a living woman and this is not knowledge to be justified but gifted. Scholarly research is critical in developing methodological rigour but it is not the arbiter of universal knowledge - our life source is. I am trying to remember myself in a more-than-human world and whilst deeply stimulated by 'thinking', an imbalance toward the cerebral realm feels dangerously anthropocentric for me".²

From my time living in Western Australia (WA) I learnt much about the Black Cockatoo and their plight including that they are referred to as 'the Living Dead', which stirs me in a very different way. There are stories in WA from a time when Black Cockatoo flocks blanketed the skies. These days they are under huge pressure from housing and resource development, with the Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (south-eastern), Baudin's Cockatoo, Long-billed Black-Cockatoo, Glossy Black-Cockatoo (Kangaroo Island), Glossy Black-Cockatoo (South Australian), Carnaby's Cockatoo and Short-billed Black-Cockatoo listed as endangered, and the Forest Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Karrak and Palm Cockatoo listed as vulnerable on the Australian Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 List of Threatened Fauna.

The Black Cockatoo are a spirit bird, a water messenger, a soul-breed. We lose all these aspects of ourselves with their disappearance. This poem is written from that place of knowing.³

Notes

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1. Ilka Blue Nelson (2019), A Quickening of Stories. Accessed 20/02/2019 https://youtu.be/ToHPZjor_4M
 2. Ilka Blue Nelson (2013), Storytelling Beyond the Anthropocene: a quest through the crises of ecocide toward new ecological paradigms. Accessed 20/02/2019 <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/63458/>
 3. Ilka Blue Nelson (2014), Homage to the Black Cockatoo. Accessed 20/02/2019 <https://soundcloud.com/ilkablue-nelson/homage-to-the-black-cockatoo>