

Autopoiesis and Ecopoetry

Susan Hawthorne¹

Poetry has always been the song that is imprinted in human culture, and equally importantly the song that we learn from the natural world. What can happen to poetry, what might happen to poetry, where are poetry's songs, in a world where nature could be overwhelmed by the over-consumption of resources,² and where nature itself might become unrecognisable through the effects of our inventiveness on its integrity. Is ecopoetry a form of elegy or a vision into the future? Or, perhaps even more interestingly, is it a glimpse of an enduring position that humans have had over many thousands of years?

On 20 March 2006, in Far North Queensland I sat through the blasts of Category-5 Cyclone Larry. My meditations on the experience of Cyclone Larry took me to the *Rg Veda*, to Tamil poetry and the Sanskrit language, to Greek and Biblical stories and to a feminist dream of a world without war and violence and exploitation. The *Harivamsa*³ includes the following description of monsoonal storms.

16. The sun seemed to be sinking into the belly of the new clouds where the deep waters hang, gushing and bellowing.
17. The Earth, turbid by the press of waters, whose paths are yet to be found, is garlanded with grass bursting from her.
18. And the mountains, their peaks full of trees splintered by a thunderbolt, fall, cut off by the raging streams.
19. Just as rain falling from clouds courses along a depression, so with earth's blood, spouting from ponds, fills the forest tracks.
20. The forest elephants mimic the roaring clouds, their trunks and faces uplifted appear in the violent rain like clouds reaching for Earth.
21. Having closely watched the beginning of the rains and seen the dense clouds, Rohinī's son spoke to Kṛṣṇa privately at the appropriate time.
22. Look, Kṛṣṇa, at the black clouds with portentous cranes emerging suddenly rising up in the sky, they have stolen the colour of your limbs.⁴

Well before reading the *Harivamsa*, I found myself using similar imagery. The Indian text and my own were written many generations apart in different parts of the world. We are not the first generation to have to deal with "the dark hurlings of nature", although we may be the first to have brought it upon ourselves.

Wind's rasp

1.
The wind never splinters at the edge
never

yesterday and the days before
were perfect
still
as the butterflies
zoned in on the depression

on this day
a dying bird
with no call left
shattered by the wind's antics

2.
How does a pelican know
when it's safe to fly in
fly over in solitary silence
bringing hope?

Can seven frigatebirds
calculate a week, a day each?

Can infinity be eclipsed
or pain recalculated by the
Vedic mathematician?

3.
How will the winds
tell us the future?
...

4.
The dark hurlings of nature
are terror enough for our reptile brains.
When man-made horrors occur
will the albatross fly in
to watch the carnage?

I don't recall birds
on the day the towers fell

but here on the beach
after the wind's ripping
rasp
are ten black cockatoos
calmly eating the spilt seed⁵

It is no accident that time and again earth is compared to the human body. Our planet like us is a living system – its ecosystems like our circulatory and endocrinal systems rise and fall responding to the events taking place on its surface and in its interior spaces. This is not a romantic idea of mine, it is metaphoric, but no less real for being so.

Our human experience suggests such metaphors to us as we grapple with ways of understanding our selves and our relationship to the world whether it be earth as body, wind as breath, the great flows of rivers, oceans and lava as tears and blood, grass and trees as hair and limbs.

In Tamil Nadu, the Sangam tradition includes a wealth of poems about the natural world in which landscape and the stages of love are intimately entwined. Here is a poem by Cittalai Cattamar, ⁶ a work from the sixth century entitled *Akananuru* 134.

Rains in season,
forests grow beautiful.
Black pregnant clouds
bring the monsoon, and stay.
Between flower and blue-gem
flower on the bilberry tree
the red-backed moths multiply
and fallen jasmines
cover the ground.⁷

One of the challenges as a poet is the struggle to be taken seriously, because poetry is regarded as soft, full of emotion and very individual. But when you look at the mythic tradition you see just how accurate are the descriptions (for example, they accord with the descriptions of different wind strengths in the Beaufort scale). These literatures (some based on earlier oral traditions) are a record of a whole people. We individual poets also collectively contribute to that knowledge. Until the last few years,

there was no such thing as ecopoetry, but now there are journals and conferences and courses. As for emotion, when you are faced with life-threatening events, so too with eco-disaster: to deny the emotion is simply to prolong the trauma. Post-Cyclone Larry, we all talked endlessly about our particular experiences. Language, storytelling and poetry are the human response to such experiences. And my response was to document what happened through writing poetry.

Forest

There is a forest and a young girl
the girl goes into the forest
the forest is a rainforest
her guide is a cassowary
the cassowary knows her way through the forest
she knows all the fruits of the forest
she is mistress of the forest
the fruits are red blue orange green and yellow
the girl must collect the fruit

But along comes the big wind
a wind that lifts her
twists the trees round and round
so that their trunks are spiralled
the wind hauls trees out of the earth
and throws them every which way
the girl shelters under the heavy black feathers
of the cassowary which pin her to the ground

When the big wind has passed
nothing is left
the girl is disoriented
she no longer knows which way is up
she hardly knows which is east or west
which is sun which is moon
clouds scud across the sky
but they have lost their shapes
no longer are there stories in the clouds
just loss

The cassowary tries to comfort the girl
at first there is plenty of fruit
fallen fruit mango lilly pilly quandong
the girl wanders behind disconsolately
from time to time she nibbles at the rotting flesh
but it soon sours
the bitter seed takes over from the soft flesh

As the days pass
the cassowary must wander further and further afield
she ventures into places she's never been to before
followed by the forlorn rag worn girl
soon the fruit is nowhere to be found
the two sit down to wait for wind fall
quietly they drop into sleep
quietly they die^s

In this poem I have tried to capture a mythic or elegiac quality. That quality of sadness that pervades the whole body after such an experience. Larry was bigger than Hurricane Katrina in terms of its wind strength. Where we were, the winds came in at around 300 kph. The roar was deafening. The trees were all stripped of leaves. Every bit of leaf matter was then pasted on to the walls. Huge trees were uprooted, rooves flipped over like a tin can opening. Guttering, pipes, corrugated iron and glass were scattered through the bush. Even now, the rainforest has not really recovered. Bare branches remain like a classroom of children, their petrified arms in the air.

My writing about the environment spans a number of very different ecosystems. There are the drylands where I grew up – these worlds infuse much of my poetry. It's my ecological home base. You can find references to it in the work which forms the bedrock of my collection, *Unsettling the Land*.

There is something about
the air, the layering of dust, the loss
of grass, the particular sway of old
eucalypt branches and their browning
leaves. I feel my chest fill to breaking
I'd like to ask if you too think it's worse
this time—How long for recovery?
Every grief is simply layered
on top of the last. And the last.
Does the earth feel that way too?
How many griefs must we ply and
plough? How many layers before
the sadness breaks the earth's heart?⁹

Our world is a matrix of systems. The natural world, the world of plants, of ecosystems, of geological time, of changing temperatures and weather patterns are autopoetic systems. That is, they are self-creating systems. These systems lead to biodiversity.

Poetry too is autopoetic in a way. In extreme situations, the poet starts creating. Poetry is a way of making sense of the world and, because a poem concentrates words, symbols, metaphors, images, whole histories even, it is possible for poetry to hold these large events – or if small, focus our attention on the tiny, the barely visible.

For example, in the title poem to my collection *Earth's Breath* I set the character Larrikin Larry against the rampages of Heracles. When I first wrote the poem, a couple of days after the cyclone, it was all Larrikin Larry – but even then, he had something of the character of Heracles. Somehow, in linking Larry to Heracles I was able to capture the power of the cyclone, the recklessness of it all.

In the same poem, and this only came more than twelve months after the cyclone, I brought in the story of the Biblical Samson and Delilah, wishing for a scissor-wielding woman to come along, cut his hair and disempower him. This is also a metaphor for the ways in which the masculine systems of global capitalism and militarism have not only contributed to but created the ideal conditions for climate change.¹⁰

The poem also contains a reference to a poem in the final section of the collection which draws on the idea of the *yuga* – the many-millennia stretches of time that the Indian tradition refers to. And then, a little later, a reference to the fragility represented by the sneezing Larry of nursery rhyme, and people falling down (the original nursery rhyme “ah-tishu ah-tishu, we all fall down” is an allusion to the spread of the pneumonic plague).¹¹

Earth's breath

Summer has been long
its breath has spanned millennia
and now comes the rain
the storm, the raging
rotten breath of cyclonic winds

Myths are made of such noise
the rampages of Heracles
have filled our childhood ears
the violence of men and gods
he sneezes and we all fall down

Who will be Delilah, brave enough
to calm Samson with a pair of
scissors, his long hair fallen
trampled like old vines that
strangle the biggest trees?

We were not so lucky with
Larrikin Larry, no shears large
enough to make his pate shine
but as we watch, the ground turns bald
while he blunders through the undergrowth

A shredder over his shoulder, Larry
larked about turning bark and leaves
into confetti and in his next breath
the graffiti artist is pasting every
wall door and window

But even wind needs to draw breath
a moment's stillness, earth's smoko—
then we heard the trampling across the roof
the flue knocked off, the guttering
torn ripped and discarded

as Larry changed direction, running rings
widdershins, bellowing earth's grief
no longer at play, this brat is serious
his blood has curdled, our souls are rattled
as summer retreats and silence falls

In India, the god Indra is personified as a cyclone. He is also the god of the monsoon, the rainy season. We do the same. Even in this scientific and rationalist era we name each and every cyclone. Whether it is Indra or Larry or Katrina, these names carry poetic weight.

E. J. Banfield, a journalist, lived on Dunk Island for many years and wrote about his life as a beachcomber. He also wrote about the devastating cyclone of 1918 in a book called *Last Leaves of Dunk* (1925). He has mythic stature in Far North Queensland, and so I have taken some of his words as the opening quote for part one of *Earth's Breath*. He writes of the period before the big cyclone in 1918: "During a breathless calm a mysterious northerly swell set in."¹²

The breathless calm to which Banfield refers remains with me. The day before the cyclone was one of the most beautiful days I have ever experienced. Calm. Clear. And truly breathless, even in the midst of frenetic tidying and tying down of anything that might move in wind. Late in the day, my partner and I walked around the garden with the video and everything on that day shone.

Part two of the collection, which is entitled "Earth's Breath", begins with a quote from Monique Wittig's *The Guérillères*: "They say that a great wind is sweeping the earth. They say that the sun is about to rise."¹³ I chose this because *The Guérillères* is a marvellous novel by the French writer Monique Wittig, in which she dreams of a world without war. For me, her wind has the same mythical stature of that which gave the book its title namely, "Where is the earth's breath, and blood, and soul?"¹⁴ Here is the contest between vision and elegy, creation and decreation.

Sometimes, in all our talk of climate change and environmental crisis, we talk politics, economics and science. But the greatest thing that Cyclone Larry left me with was an emotional response. It was both physical and psychic. The psychic response played itself out in dreams – or rather nightmares. It was as if the cyclone were inside me.

The cyclone inside

Are we ready for the wind?...
Will this wind come inside us?
– Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, 1978.

the wind– the wind
is inside me

I am not ready
for this cave in

on the gallery floor
as the installation rolls on

earth roaring, water roaring
and this– this– cyclone inside

These are not irrelevancies. When the body and the psyche are in shock, it is difficult to function. Imagine all the individuals of the world reacting to these climactic changes. We will not only need to write a lot of poetry, we will need to listen again to the myths that have sustained us. It's all already there, if only we would listen.

The following poem resulted from a mix of dictionary trawling where I found the word *yugantameghaha* and a quotation from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Moths rushing full tilt to their ruin | fly right into an inferno."¹⁵

Yugantameghaha

At the end of every cosmic cycle
at the end of a generation—*yuganta-*
meghaha—clouds congregate
gathering souls for the next *yuga*

cloud breath, soul mist
rasping winds, rattling bones
here come the galloping horses
humans astride their flanks

here come the thundering clouds
breaking the world apart
the Hercules moth climbs every building
rising upwards through 110 floors

scaling the earth to find the moon
that light in the sky through which
he might escape earth's pull
and melt into the inferno of light.¹⁶

It is time that we take up acts of earth kindness to the planet on which we live. We should also give more space to poetic knowledge because poetic knowledge is memorable – we only have to consider the long traditions of oral literature to see that. Poetry is elegy. Elegy for the past, for a world that no longer exists. Poetry is also visionary, a way of imagining a different future for our planet.

Coda

In the aftermath of Cyclone Larry, I look around and see the need to write more and more. The following poem was written after watching a television program about the Liverpool Plains in New South Wales, a rich agricultural centre threatened by coal mining.

armour

she dreams of making armour for the earth
a helmet to prevent the drillers from beginning
a breastplate so they cannot cut open her heart
greaves to stop the underground lines
breaking through to the watertable

it confounds her that anyone would want
to mine Liverpool Plains
to make the earth a corpse to strip
back the muscle layer by layer
to let light in under all that rich deep earth
to groom her for profit burn coal embers
in the asthmatic air the heat increasing
to burn away everything for the emptiness
of waterdrained lungdrained flatlands

Let them eat coal not food.

Notes

1. Susan Hawthorne is a poet, publisher and political scientist. She is the author of five collections of poetry and her sixth, *Cow*, will be published in 2011. *Earth's Breath* (2009) was shortlisted for the 2010 Judith Wright Poetry Prize. Her work has been published in several Best Australian Poems anthologies. She has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Melbourne and is the author of *Wild Politics: Feminism, Globalisation and Biodiversity* (2002). She has supervised PhDs and MAs in writing at Victoria University, Melbourne, for fifteen years and is now Adjunct Professor in the Writing Program at James Cook University, Townsville.
2. For a critique of over-consumption and current economic systems, see Susan Hawthorne and Ariel Salleh (2009), "Thinking Beyond, Thinking Deep", *Island*, 116, pp. 8-17.
3. The *Harivamsa* is an ancient Indian text related to the *Mahabharata* that dates to around the second century BCE.
4. *Harivamsa* 54, 16-24. I read this for the first time in a Sanskrit class in 2009. As I translated my excitement built. I recognised the emotion behind this text because it reflected my experience following the rampages of Cyclone Larry.
5. Susan Hawthorne (2009), *Earth's Breath*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, pp. 64-66.
6. This name is sometimes spelt Seethalai Saathanar.
7. A. K. Ramanujan (2008), *Poems of Love and War*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 76.
8. Hawthorne, *Earth's Breath*, pp. 56-57.
9. Suzanne Bellamy and Susan Hawthorne (2008), *Unsettling the Land*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, p. 5.
10. Patrick Jones makes an interesting connection between the food we eat and the "quality of the fuel we use for poesis, for making meaning". He makes an analogy between highly processed food and highly processed writing. See Patrick Jones (2010), "All Rights Relinquished: Permapoesis", *Cordite Poetry Review*, <http://cordite.org.au/?p=10527>, accessed 2 August 2010.
11. Susan Hawthorne (2005), *The Butterfly Effect*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, pp. 38, 39.
12. E. J. Banfield (1925), *Last Leaves of Dunk*, p. 5.
13. *Rg Veda* 1. 164. 6c. Monique Wittig (1970), *The Guérillères*, Picador, London, p. 70.
14. *Bhagavad Gita* 11.29. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1980), *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 19.
15. For a very fine translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* see Barbara Stoler Miller (1986), *The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, Bantam, New York. For this verse see p. 102.
16. Hawthorne, *Earth's Breath*, p. 67.