

**The Artistic and the Literary Imagination in Australia and Beyond:
Finding Places of the Heart Among the Gum Trees**

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I. Australian Landscapes, A Painting Tradition

During 150 years, non-indigenous people's celebration of the landscape in Australia found its main expression in painting. Only since the late 1930s has the lyric of place taken major literary form, first in poetry and more recently in a literature of place, often described as nature writing. The world rise of nature writing has now begun to take hold in Australia so offering an opportunity to look back and deepen our understanding of times marked by its absence.

The pervasive shift toward the dissolution of embodied grassroots existence – the nowhere-ness of cyberspace – stirs a yearning for the sense of embodiment that goes with place and home. This two-sided process provides an opportunity to understand the shaping of an Australian imagination, the aesthetic dimension of a growing attunement to place, to a poetic sensibility that goes beyond poetry in seeking to defend and reaffirm places of the heart.

Was the distinctiveness, the originality, the variation of colour and shape of the foliage, the luminosity of a sunlit landscape in Australia more readily accessible to the artist than the poet or writer? Did its unfamiliarity put a brake on a sense of attunement to place? If so, was there little open-

ing in the early days for a literary response to the lyric of place? I go for 'yes' to each of these three questions. In exploring the expressions of a search for a sense of place today, this essay considers the reasons for the early dominance of the painting tradition and the later blossoming of both visual and literary art forms in the past half-century.

Because the poetic form is so inward, sensibilities had to become in tune with the landscape before a language of poetic feeling could develop. Poetry and painting are sisters in the evocation of feeling: *ut pictura poesis*, in the words of Horace. Poetry addresses the subjective. It is the expression of the poet's feelings, and its power to touch the heart is a power to deepen and expand feeling as it gathers meaning. A poetry of place – poetry, lyric prose, music – could only thrive when people's hearts were *with* Australian places in something of the way Aboriginal people feel about their place. Artists paved the way for this to happen as did the early bush balladists and versifiers, the writers about bush and rural life. They have a unique place in the stories of place and landscape in Australia. I think of Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, and Bernard O'Dowd, of the latter's belief in the indwelling spirits of the bush, of his image of the bush in "Delicate Amber Leafings of the Gum." He was writing poetry about the same time as May Gibbs was breathing life into the gumnut children around the turn of the century – iconic characters who have lived on through five generations. Christopher Brennan also comes to mind. His province is the Australian landscape, the setting for dances of classical spirits in a half-light.

Although the reactions of settler people were varied and contradictory, looking back, one may discern a continuous thread of outlook and sentiment. Those who claim that reactions to the Australian landscape were uniformly negative – that the early settlers "hated trees," as W. K. Hancock wrote in *Australia* in 1930,¹ a view that persists even today – are rather mistaken. The reality is much more complex and contradictory. Some people found unfamiliarity exhilarating and some aspects of landscape charming. Complementing this belief about the uniformly negative reaction is another: that people's emotional ties with the land reversed suddenly. It is said, for example, that landscape painter Louis Buvelot in the 1860s "discovered" the gum tree, thereby changing his contemporaries' perception of Australian nature more or less overnight: a claim so wild that art critic and environmental writer Tim Bonyhady has compared it with the transformation of perception from mountain gloom to mountain glory in 18th-century Europe.² Profound indeed. A much more prescient view is that artists, and Louis Buvelot is important here, tapped into the cross-currents of opinion about the landscape and burst forth with gloom and with praise. Because of the controversy their paintings stirred up, the artists became rather like in-

visible lochs holding and releasing the flow of response that was over a time to fashion a place called home. There is no sudden transformation from encircling gloom to golden sunlight, no metamorphosis from melancholy to happiness. In the long run, these adjectives may be the right ones, but they are embedded in a coil of living that spiralled along its non-linear path, uncoiling at times in backwards arcs, refurling once more and moving onward. Even in Russell Drysdale's 1941 Albury paintings, the old vision of "a landscape alien to man, harsh, weird, spacious and vacant, given over to the oddities and whimsies of nature" is rekindled, but in Drysdale's own unique way.³

The early immigrants projected onto their surroundings a loneliness of the heart. Few were able to reach out to clasp the hands of those who had long found ways of giving and returning with the unique lands, trees, and waters of Australia – the indigenous peoples. In 1886, Frederick McCubbin, an artist with a palpable sense of place and life, painted the young girl Edith who has lost her way in the bush and is crying. Is "The Lost Child" a statement about us, the non-indigenous ones? That we are not yet at home here? That we don't yet belong to this place? A painting of non-belonging?

Even at the end of the century, the belief of not belonging, of loneliness, was projected onto the landscape. In 1903, Tom Collins, author of the classic *Such Is Life* wrote in the *Bulletin* of how our continent "waited in serene loneliness."⁴ Of course, this lonely story contrasts sombrely with that of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Through the years when the newcomers behaved as though the land was strange, unoccupied, lonely, and waiting for *them*, where they could, indigenous people continued to dance, sing, and depict their landscapes and seascapes.

II. From the Melancholy into the Sunlight

It is mid-August 2004, and I am walking slowly through the life of artist John Glover. The light is changing as we move from the England of his youth and middle years to Van Diemen's Land and back again in memory. His mind's eye, now lit by Australian sunlight, reworks his Old World scenes. And Glover himself has changed as he reflects the light of his new home back onto the old, so transforming his vision. There are a hundred paintings gathered here in Melbourne, and these span his life.

Migrating to Australia in 1831, already an established artist in the manner of John Constable, he looked forward to "a new and Beautiful world" in Australia. Fidelity to nature was a motto of the landscape art he represented and, as the *Age* critic wrote on August 18, 2004, he "achieved amazing fidelity and atmosphere in landscape."⁵ That faithfulness to the

appearance of the gum tree earned him the disdain of critic G. T. W. B. Boyes in the 1830s. This critic's view of his trees as "designed with hideous fidelity to Nature"⁶ says as much about an influential attitude to Australian nature as it does about Glover's paintings.

Glover was one of the exceptional people of his time – as an artist of Australian landscape and as a person who hoped through his paintings to imbue the migrants (including the convicts and their rulers) with moral virtues. Already in his 60s when he arrived in Van Diemens Land, he was an artist open to new experience, a man of fluid imagination, an important contributor to the maturing of a new sensibility that others were to deepen and expand. He perceived the whole landscape as a vista through and beyond the light foliage, the hints and glimmers of light, land and more leaves beyond; however numerous, one can still trace "the whole distant country" beyond the leaves.⁷

Responses to the landscape artists' impressions, together with comments and evaluation of the landscape by their contemporaries, provide some sense of their turbulent times. Among Glover's twisted and intertwined branches of varieties of Tasmanian eucalypts, a landscape in which he quickly found "a trilling and graceful play,"⁸ one may discern both a gloom and a glory in the reactions of his contemporaries and of later generations.

At a time when the uniform trees of native forests had the blessing of the romantic poets (Wordsworth being one), there were mixed reactions to the gum tree forests. An influential view was that the gums are not as adapted to the beauties of landscape as the oak or the elm; their sameness of appearance creates less interest. In 1836, Major Thomas Mitchell, often seen as the Cook of the inland, took an opposite view as he traveled south along the Murray and the Darling. What he saw were the "yarra" gums rising more than 100 feet, their "huge gnarled trunks, wild romantic formed branches often twisting in coils, shining white or light red bark, and dark masses of foliage, with consequent streaks of shadow below."⁹ They evoked for Mitchell a beauty "fully equal to the wildest forest scenery of Waterloo or Ruysdael."¹⁰ In his quest for comparable beauty, Mitchell discerned the shapes of gothic cathedrals, in this way making the landscape more exalted and hence more desirable.

Even the writer Marcus Clarke, who wrote in 1871 of how only in Australia may one find "the Grotesque, the Weird" in "the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write," also sought to become "familiar with the beauty of loneliness."¹¹ Perhaps Clarke is reflecting upon a struggle within himself. Importantly, Clarke is giving expression to a terrible loneliness of his heart; a desolation that comes with engulfment in the singularity of the

strange unrequited by the solace of a familiar 'real' world now being shadowed and supplanted. He is also reflecting upon Louis Buvelot's paintings and of how the artist may have come to love "the barren and the uncouth" to become at home in a nature given to "strange scribblings."¹² Notwithstanding his own feelings about the "fantastical land of monstrosities," Clarke responded to the poetry of a landscape refracted in Buvelot's paintings. As "the Southern Cross freezes in a cloudless sky of icy blue," Clarke senses that whatever the "haggard gum-trees blown into odd shapes" that Buvelot's "poetic fancy" is attuned to a nature he has come to love.¹³ Writing of Buvelot's 1869 painting "Waterpool at Coleraine," he senses that home is a pool of water reflecting the trees that surround it. In living a new aesthetic, Buvelot, the father of Australian landscape painting, was taking others along an unknown and winding path in the search for home. For many, an encircling gloom into the sunlight. Louis Buvelot began painting in Australia in 1860, and although he did not change the way people viewed the gum tree – in one fell swoop as it were – he was very influential. Yet Buvelot's mind was no *tabula rasa*. Even he, an artist who found the gums "so poetic," took in his new surroundings with images of oak and elm already imprinted like the mirrors of his mind's eye. A man who inspired the Heidelberg artists in the beauties of the Australian landscape painted eucalypts with qualities of "oak-gums."¹⁴

Perhaps more than anything, the reason reflective writers today point to an absence in the celebration of Australian nature is because the process was only partly conscious. It zig-zagged, it was questioning, often contradictory. In responding to the poetry of the place, artists were stretching their minds and souls to see in new ways. Cultures are not made; they grow. Within the crucible of life and experience, a new vision began to be fashioned. The landscape, the trees that had appeared strange and un-beautiful were taking on new hues, casting patterns of shade and blazing in a clear sunlight.

Against a background of some indifference to the art of Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, in 1890, artist Sidney Dickinson summed up the task of artists in gaining public interest as "the expression, with all the power and feeling" they could command "of the intimate facts of our own life and environment."¹⁵ Importantly, the emergence of an aesthetic is a process; it is not something carved as a monument, nor a sudden change in visual perception. Nature painting in the late 19th century was integral with life: The Heidelberg artists drew their feeling from a distinctive, unique natural world. They also drew on the life, mainly rural, being lived in that world. In catching the poetry of a scene, they also captured the life of the newcomers whose human nature it was reshaping. Nature artists they

were, in a sense. Their art was also as much a response to the lives of diggers, bush workers, rural settlers, and prospectors. They were integral with gum trees, rivers, billabongs, cows, cottages, with a fidelity to depicting what they saw, even a little soil erosion.

As the preeminent art historian Bernard Smith has observed, the Heidelberg artists showed “affection for the lyrical moods of nature.”¹⁶ Arthur Streeton was to find peace “among the great silent trees” as he wrote in a letter to Tom Roberts on September 20, 1890.¹⁷ These were his cathedrals. Given to him as a gift of nature. Light and shadow in the great ash forests in the hills northeast of Melbourne. These were the 1890s and beyond, the time of Australian nationalism; it was from the natural world Streeton and the Heidelberg artists of Melbourne took their strength of spirit. They also gave voice to the complexities of light and shadow of an all-encompassing bush and the inspiring qualities of our native forests and fern gullies. Smith concluded that the romantic mood flows strongly through this school of painters, and it was their work that moved into “the full blaze of sunlight” the eucalypt and the melaleuca.¹⁸

III. Changing Sensibilities – The Literary Tradition

Today, when the poetic or lyric aspect of nature is beginning to receive some careful attention, perhaps there comes a deeper perception of the range of responses to the variety of forms in which that dimension may be appreciated. Those who give “lyric witness” in writing nature “are listening and speaking as a poet does, and that work depends upon a musical, a lyric, sensibility and voice.”¹⁹ The lyrical voice finds expression in musical, in visual, in poetic forms. Today, many non-indigenous people are finding a new responsiveness in themselves, even letting “the country do the talking.”²⁰ Has our collective sense of loss of nature endowed us with the capacity to hear the country speaking to us? This responsiveness is precious and new among non-indigenous people, something to be proud of and, for reasons I will explain, something to be nurtured. A gathering awakening to the spirit of place in Australia, a changing sensibility with roots both in our own history and in a more general societal transformation have begun to carry us along on a second wave of nature writing.

It was a group of poets dedicated to celebrate the unique environment of Australia in the 1930s who gave articulate expression in their writings and poetry to that uniqueness. They called themselves Jindyworobaks, from an Aboriginal word meaning *to join*. In this case, joining the non-indigenous people with their environment.

To me, more than anyone else among the Jindyworobaks, Rex In-

gamells has a sense of the distinctiveness of Australian culture and the crucial role of a unique environment in the formation of an artistic sensibility. "The real test of a people's culture," he wrote in 1938, "is the way in which they can express themselves in relation to their environment" and the consequent "loftiness and universality of their artistic conceptions."²¹ Appreciation of natural distinctiveness, whether this be "the atonal music of the magpie" or "the strange, unorthodox trees along the Murray," is the key to "the birth of a new soul," for these "belong to the indestructible spirit of the place."²² Poetry about the experience of the landscape and nature can only be poetry if it can capture the spirit of the place. It may call out feelings that create and foster spiritual values, at times in exalted form. Here we are entering a realm where an aesthetic comes into being in a profound way, often resting at the edge of awareness.

Painting concentrates on direct experience of the natural world; poetry and prose, especially lyric prose, as in nature writing, speak to and recreate the subjective. In this important sense, poetry – and the literary endeavour as a whole – and painting are reversals of each other. Importantly, they are also complementary to one another. In the first, nature talks back, or does the talking; in the second, she is (mainly) silent.

In 1905, artist Sydney Long drew important attention to the limits of painting to "express the lonely and primitive feeling of this country" and the greater possibilities of music in rendering its melancholy and plangent voice.²³ This awaited a maturing and crystallisation of feelings that ran deep enough to become accessible to a language of the heart. Of course, there have been those, Turner especially, who saw painting itself as a literary pursuit. For him, poetry represented the ideal vehicle for landscape painting and he looked to the visual effect of poetry.²⁴ The close relation between the two is manifest the other way around, too, where real or imagined works of art prompt an exhilarating poetic response.²⁵

Moreover, whereas a person is moved to paint or to write a poem, the latter is an introspection, often brought on by the exile of absence, or of a returning after a notable absence, or in the context of a threat to that place. As it is in Judith Wright's beautiful poem "South of My Days," a wartime reflection on the New England of her growing up in the time of a real threat to that homeland. Here we are entering a realm where an aesthetic comes into being in a profound way:

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite –
clean, lean, hungry country.²⁶

A poem ahead of its time in many ways, "South of My Days" is like a beacon looking toward the creation of others' places of the heart in the next half-century. It also speaks of that build-up of a sensibility, an aesthetic that could only come to be over a period. The last lines of the poem point to this accretion of feeling, of "the high lean country/full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep."²⁷ Without these memories, there is no poetry. Poetry's power is to deepen and expand feeling as it gathers meaning – a power to touch the heart. Australia had awaited the Judith Wrights with their old stories.

IV. Nature Writing on a New Wave²⁸

The birth of nature writing in the English-speaking world is generally associated with the writings of Henry Thoreau. He celebrates wildness as the epitome of all that is good. Like Wordsworth, whose study was "out of doors," Thoreau glories in the landscape. In *Walking*, written not long before his death in 1862, he praises wildness: "In Wildness is the preservation of the world."²⁹ Glorifying in its wildest manifestation – in the darkest wood one finds "the marrow of Nature" – he abjures what his contemporaries saw as simply modifications of nature for humans' benefit. He wrote, "Man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape and make it more tame and cheap."³⁰ Thoreau's praise of the wild is a search for otherness, a refuge from the self, a release of the spirit. He is necessarily unaware that the deformation of the landscape and its cheapening is but the first instance of a tragedy that has come to confront us today.

The emergence of nature writing in the mid-19th century intimates a recognition of nature as Otherness, not simply as a taken-for-granted expression of God's bountifulness. In this sense, Thoreau's celebration of the landscape in its primal glory is like one early response to the loss of God at the beginning of the industrial age when nature was becoming semi-secularised. Nature writing, then, was an attempt to recover meaning that had begun to lose its Christian moorings.

Nature writing in the manner of the lyric essay is in this mode. But it may also take other more prosaic forms. As a literature of place, nature writing came to take varied forms: Field guides, natural history, nature experience both personal and interpretive, humans' role in nature all qualify. Nature writing in the 21st century is framed by the humanly made crises of the natural world. Not surprisingly, those who praise the places they know and love are often moved to speak with sadness, indignation, even anger. For example, Peter Cundall, ABC's thoughtful and cheerful gardening pre-

sender, becomes loud and passionate on the cruelty, the contemptuousness in the looting of the Styx, a “truthful place” of old growth forest in Tasmania, his home state.³¹

Are our sensibilities changing? The answer is certainly yes. Several years ago, a Melbourne writer brought up among the gums confided with honesty that, seen from London, his home in exile, and even on his return, he had found Australian trees – the landscape – unappealing. “Now,” he said, “I feel differently; I see its beauty.”³² He was not alone. Even twenty years ago, it was rare to find an Australian like the late H. C. (Nugget) Coombs who spoke to me of his felt joy at sighting the eucalypts on return from abroad. “I wanted to put my arms around them;”³³ his voice is firm, no sense of self-consciousness. There were others, of course: the works of Eric Rolls and many others in recent times are part of a fine thread of writing in praise and defence of nature and place that goes back to the 19th century. Yet, it has taken a long time for something like an ode to the wonder and glory of our eucalypts to appear.

The new sensibility is finding literary form: Murray Bail’s 2000 novel *Eucalyptus* has received remarkable and widespread acclaim. *Gum: The Story of Eucalypts and Their Champions* by Ashley Hay, published in 2002 on the manifold responses to the gum trees of Australia during more than two centuries, traces the winding paths of response. (In Australia, the eucalypt, a member of the *Myrtaceæ* family, is synonymous with the gum tree. The unopened flower is covered by a cap, hence the name eucalypt, from a Greek word meaning *to conceal*.) These works and others offer mirrors in which we may see ourselves. They also assist us in looking at artists, their critics, and other writers of the early days with new eyes. In their loneliness, in their aspirations, their coming to terms with the “unnaturalness” of the natural world of Australia.

This brief look at the beginnings of a literature of place offers a clue to what is happening now. We are seeing a second wave of nature writing worldwide, and it is taking Australia along with it. If the first wave was a response to the rise of industrialism, the second is called out by a new revolution symbolised in the nowhere-ness of cyberspace and a tendency toward the dissolution of embodied grassroots existence. Importantly, today we find a decline of ritual and an emergent reflexivity, a capacity to probe and identify the sources of one’s existence and consciousness.

The celebration of place today, particularly lyricism, is a sign of an awareness that nature exists within humanly created categories, not as an unmediated Other. Although shimmering waters and moonlight on the trees may call out a universal response of beauty, what is seen as beautiful, even pristine, in nature is characteristically created culturally.

In Australia, there are exciting signs of a break in the silence. The bringing together of people who combine literary flair with ecological sensibility in nature writers' festivals, anthologies, and artistic endeavours is timely and appealing. The International Watermark Nature Writers' Muster 2003 combined an international focus with a locally based Australian initiative. The place was Camden Haven near Laurieton and Kendall, a place of merging waters on the north coast of New South Wales. Following on the heels of Watermark 2003 were the Tasmanian-sponsored Nature Writing Prize, an anthology of nature writing from Australia and North America, *A Place on Earth*, and a book of essays on changing places and their meanings in Australia, *Changing Places: Reimagining Australia*. Each of these books contributes importantly to our perceptions of place at a time when its meaning is undergoing rapid change. All of these developments are signs of an attunement with a worldwide response to the transformation of the meanings we give to nature. In other words, whatever their local Australian stamp, they are in step with a second stage of nature writing – a world phenomenon.

Not surprisingly, the two 2003 books of essays on place – some 50 altogether by talented writers from Australia, New Zealand, and North America – are complementary, overlapping in authorship but also, to a degree, disjunctive in their aims. *A Place on Earth* gives special priority to lyric essays or prose poems of place. Writers in this genre “are listening and speaking as a poet does, and that work depends on a musical, a lyric, sensibility and voice.” “They are,” editor Tredinnick continues, “giving lyric witness.”³⁴

And although lyricism is part of the strength of each of these volumes, *Changing Places* puts the development of a sense of place in Australia into the larger frame of change, especially global change, so raising burning and highly controversial questions. Editor John Cameron introduces what for me is the site of a major paradox we ignore at our peril. A sense of place presumes embodiment; it is local, the home of stories of persons tied by quite immediate but often invisible threads to one another and to locale. Yet, “cyberspace is a disembodied space that is no place at all.”³⁵ Put together, these two conceptions create puzzling questions.

The most salient is this: can embodiment survive the onslaught of disembodied space? Can we reconcile the new luxury of an awareness of our place in the world and the universe with retaining that sense of place that ties us together with a locale and persons who also belong there? Can the Internet, along with other media of disembodiment, give people “a much-expanded sense of place in the world?”³⁶ Paradoxically, that expanded consciousness gives impetus to the process of finding an Australian sense

of place. The various authors fit themselves around the theme of the changing meanings we attribute to place. The outcome is neither benign nor anemic. An extreme view where the old sense of place has become past its use-by date sits uncomfortably beside the concerns of those who could in certain circumstances opt to die defending the place they love.

V. A Vision and a Defence of Nature

Within a shared sensibility, there lie perceptible differences among nature writers. Can the lyrical be more than a poetic genre, I wonder? May expanding feeling instil a sense of disquiet? May such a sense reach out “to show possibility,” in the words of environmental thinker, essayist, and poet Peter Hay? May changing hearts and minds be part of the artistic and literary endeavour?

Nature writing or a literature of place is akin to poetry; but it is also different. Poetry is written or spoken from the standpoint of the self; it is personal, characteristically oriented toward the natural world to which it responds as given. Some nature writing is very like poetry – the lyric essay.

The lyrical as something more than simply a poetic genre is given remarkable and powerful expression in much of the environmental writing in the spring 2003 edition of the Tasmanian-based literary journal *Island*. Serendipitously, this issue “both celebrating the natural world and cautioning against its misuse”³⁷ coincided with the first Watermark Nature Writers’ Muster. Both celebrate nature writing, and each claim that it is undervalued in Australia compared with say, North America. Each contributes to change. Published in *Island* is a small selection of more than 100 hundred entries in the inaugural Wildcare Tasmanian Nature Writing Prize. There, in *Island*, one finds an interweaving of lyrical writing with accounts of the defense of Tasmania’s forests and rivers. Interwoven, too, is a memory of tragedy – the deaths of two wilderness photographers who believed that “if people could see the beauty of Australia’s wild places, they may be moved to save them.”³⁸

There are passages in *Island* that speak from the depths of people’s souls, souls tempered in an often excruciatingly painful struggle to save a river, to save Tasmania. Rarely does one find such passionate expression of the lyrical as something more than a poetic genre than in some of the writing around the Tasmanian artists’ exhibition, “Future Perfect,” held in April 2003. Artists, a senator, and others made an appeal at the artists’ festival seeking redemption for past wrongs. Writer Richard Flanagan’s appreciation of his fellow artists is a lucid example of the lyrical at its height. He speaks of his fellow artists who divined “that through their work they might

help to remake Tasmania in the raiment of dreams.”³⁹ He is admiring their vision, their determination, their guts. And he draws on a well of feeling that has deepened in the years of struggle to save a river. The dream is visionary yet born out of often bitter struggle.

His feelings about Tasmania’s future – people joined together by goodwill – are bound up with the dreams of the last thirty years: “... the beginning of a time when our stories and our images, un beholden to anything other than the cosmos of our souls, will reinvent this island.”⁴⁰ As in Wordsworth’s or Shakespeare’s sonnets, this is surely “a cry from the heart.” Richard has a lyrical way of saying things he feels deeply about our engagement with the land. Arising out of feeling, it is more accessible to poetry than prose. What he says expresses a relation to the land, to place, to the future that our culture suppresses. His essay is the voice of conscience, a beautiful example of how one may be lyrical and passionate at the same time.

This is a visionary moment, and his lyric is a paean of praise and thanksgiving for those “extraordinary fresh forces, seething and bursting to break out” of the imprisonment still encircling them within Tasmania.⁴¹ We are speaking of an extraordinary power, a unique beauty, a power at last finding a voice to say passionate things that those whose thoughts drop groundward and that narrow-minded governments have refused to hear. Like all visions, it is “an opening up, as the heavens are opened up by a rainbow when the rain stops falling,”⁴² Elizabeth Costello’s words in J. M. Coetzee’s novel resound here. In the hands of persons inspired by a sense of possibility, these visions, these rainbows may be seen as akin to religious illumination.

VI. The Evocation of Feeling and the Quest for Home

Essays in *A Place on Earth* resonate with Judith Wright’s feelings in “South of My Days” – of “old stories that still go walking in my sleep.”⁴³ They are essays about places in Australia and beyond that live *through* the landscape as Judith hoped, not by imposing ourselves upon it.

In her chapter “Wind Ensembles,” poet Laurie Kutchins answers my question in words of beauty and wonder. The wind of her home place, Wyoming, echoes through her body, “human speck in this country made out of wind and sky,” body of country, Laurie’s body joined through wind and breath.⁴⁴

Wyoming, place of winds, formed her in symbiosis “as deeply as any human love,” and the work of embodiment continues on elementally even into a time of enforced exile from her birthplace. The landscape of spirit

remains one with physical terrain. The wind as connective breath goes on sculpting her even in physical absence from home. Laurie's "connective breath" resonates with the murmurings and loud talk of the wind in the sea that joined Eddie Koiki Mabo to the sea and the land at his homeplace, Las on Murray Island. Saltwater man exiled from his place, a man with an ache in his heart, joined to it by unbreakable threads. Laurie or Eddie, we are speaking about embodied lives. In his essay "Writing Place," Peter Hay, Tasmanian environmentalist and poet, evokes the same relationship to place: "A concern for place is a concern for community is a concern for home."⁴⁵ Hay is speaking the same language as Kutchins, of many but not all indigenous peoples. The many-faceted interrelatedness of place and persons is founded upon this understanding. Barry Lopez, whose own place has long been in Western Oregon, sees the connections this way: Growing into the love of a place is much the same as growing into the love of a person. "Our blessing ... is not what we know, but that we know each other."⁴⁶ What ties these two together? He looks to opening yourself in the way of trust that place and people will give you. Intimacy and vulnerability are crucial to a form of awareness that draws upon the whole self. It is less analytic and cognitive, more intuitive.

Lopez is able to draw on his own experience of being in the landscape, of being with and of it. This puts him in tune with indigenous people. Unsurprisingly, he turns to his experience of indigenous people as they enter one of their villages or landscapes: Their intercourse with that place is many-faceted as they weave together diverse elements. Theirs is the obverse of the tourist experience that turns nature into scenery and commodities to be consumed. It is more, much more than this. There is a spiritual alongside a corporeal human affinity with the landscape, a profound reciprocity. Lopez's understanding puts me in mind of William Stanner's sense of Yolngu people's two-sided ties with land – both corporeal and spiritual.

Critical theorist and environmentalist Kate Rigby offers a sense of the interconnection between the spiritual and the corporeal in her essay, "Tuning in to Spirit of Place," through "embodied co-presence."⁴⁷ Hers is a "coupling of physical manifestation and sensuous perception."⁴⁸ Here we have again something like the *I* and the *thou* of human and place; going with that living intertwining is again a recognition of the mystery and arcaneness of what she calls "the indwelling spirits of place."⁴⁹ As in Lopez's understanding, the many-faceted sense of the complex interrelatedness of place and community rests upon the realisation that divine knowledge is a mystery and, like all mysteries, only partly fathomable. These essays and others inch close to a sense of living through a sentient landscape rather than *off* it as a thing to be managed and coerced.

Are these writers responding to an awareness of malaise? Is there a connection between some people's sense of urgency about conserving, re-affirming, and nurturing an embodied life and its inexorable undermining by those remote and faceless processes whose outcomes we find so convenient – the Internet, our e-mails, the mobile, the One World? What should nature writing be about, what is its role and value? And are the second wave nature writers among the children of a privileged age able to indulge ourselves as the last dancers on the planet earth celebrating and lyricising the beauties of forest and river before they vanish?

Peter Hay's sense of the task of nature writing today accords with that of Lopez and others. Perhaps "the *primary* project of place and nature writing is to reclaim and to assert the corporeality of place and the processes of nature."⁵⁰ This context is a recognition of a growing tendency to deny the existence of anything beyond the text. This spells dissolution, a total freedom from constraint. He is among the writers with something like a primal responsiveness – with people like Judith Wright ahead and behind them – to the deathly terror of our times. Place is a gift – like parents, family, children – and gifts have a claim on us to give back. Alaska, nature writer Richard Nelson's long adopted place, is a gift of "incomparable magnitude," and he explains in "Island of the Rain Bear" his feeling of responsibility to give back in return.⁵¹ This, as everyone senses, is a knowledge people feel in their bone marrow. The spirit of the gift. Alaska or Wyoming, Glenlyon or Tasmania or Sherbrooke Forest, it doesn't matter. They nurture us and bid us nurture them. "Responsible occupancy," Barry Lopez's phrase, means nurturing. It may also denote beginning to live differently not only to succour one's place on earth but as witness to others.

Among the second wave of nature writers, there are some shared understandings: that progress is not linear, that living *through* nature is qualitatively distinct from absorbing scenery and commodities, and, above all, that where we lose touch with an embodied existence we lose ourselves.

Environmental historian Tom Griffiths conjures up an image of the mighty rivers of inland Australia drawn from Francis Ratcliffe's *Flying Fox and Drifting Sands*: as tigers, slumbering and in their wakefulness, stirring powerful emotions;⁵² for me, a Blakeian nostalgia deepened in memory by the majestic Murray River of my youth. Are the nature writings of the second wave like advancing tigers – powerful, resilient, beautiful – giving promise of oncoming understandings between humans and landscapes as living, sentient beings? Do these celebrations signify that we may live *through* landscape, not impose ourselves upon it – a plea made by Judith Wright thirty years ago? Or are they simply feeble, self-centered glorifications of what is left as the rivers still, depleted by the pumps, or dammed up

before they can flow and bound, leap and frolic spreading over their banks to lap along the flood plains as of old?

Fortunately, I believe, the thinking and intuitions of many writers and artists of place, often living in far-flung climes unknown to one another, tend to cluster (miraculously?) around the theme of place and embodiment. There is a sense that people are tied to place in much the same way as they are tied to one another and to nonhumans. In this time of a terrible destruction of places and people – their dislocation – in varied ways, the question is being asked: How might we live in reciprocity with nature and with each other? There is an intuition that the land is like poetry. In his beautiful book *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez says just this: “The land is like poetry; it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life.”⁵³ And if this is true of land, what about we humans?

Some people’s experiences take them beyond celebration, even to a way of being lyrical that resounds with the spirits of the places they have struggled to defend. Exemplary people. As I have said before of some of those who gave their all to save a river, to remake Tasmania, here the lyrical may transform into something more than a poetic genre. To return to the metaphor about river tigers, I find these people like tigers – powerful, resilient, shimmering like the striped waters of the beginnings of morning. From dark to light?

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NOTES

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¹ W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, cited in Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carton South: Miegunyah, 2000), p. 3.

² Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, p. 160.

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⁴ Tom Collins, *Such is Life* (Sydney: Sirius Books, 1962), p. 81.

⁵ Richard Nelson, “For Shock of the New”, *A3 Arts* (2004), p. 8.

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- ⁷ John Glover cited in John McPhee, *John Glover 1767-1849* (London: Spink & Son, 1986), p. 5.
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- ¹⁵ Sidney Dickinson, "The Australasian Critic", *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia: The Colonial Period, 1770-1914*, ed. Bernard Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 249.
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- ²⁰ Tredinnick, *A Place on Earth*, p. 36.
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- ²⁴ Andrew Wilton, *Paintings and Poetry: Turner's Verse Book and his Work of 1804-1812* (London: Tate Gallery, 1990), p. 93.
- ²⁵ Peter Steele, "Zones of the Imagination", *Meanjin* (2004), pp. 2.7-11.
- ²⁶ Judith Wright, *Collected Poems, 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1994), p. 20.
- ²⁷ Wright, *Collected Poems*, p. 20.
- ²⁸ Sections IV through to VI draw upon my articles in the Melbourne-based serial, *Arena Magazine*.
- ²⁹ Henry Thoreau, "Walking", *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Viking, 1964), P. 609.
- ³⁰ Henry Thoreau, "Walking", p. 598.
- ³¹ Peter Cundall, "Styx to Truth", *Island* 93/94 (2003), pp. 141-2.

- ³² Who shall remain unnamed; personal comment c. 2003.
- ³³ Personal comment, Darwin, Sept. 1993.
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- ³⁵ John Cameron, *Changing Places: Reimagining Australia* (Sydney: Longueville Books, 2003), p. 10.
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- ³⁷ David Owen, "Editorial", *Island*, 93/94, pp. 5-6.
- ³⁸ Scott Millwood, "The Making of Wilderness: The Story of Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis", *Island*, 93/94, pp. 7-29.
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- ⁴⁰ Richard Flanagan, "Future Perfect", p. 140.
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- ⁴⁵ Peter Hay, "Writing Place", *Changing Places*, p. 281.
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- ⁴⁷ Kate Rigby, "Tuning in to Spirit of Place", *Changing Places*, p.112.
- ⁴⁸ Rigby, "Tuning in to Spirit of Place", p. 114.
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- ⁵⁰ Peter Hay, "Writing Place", *Changing Places*, p. 284.
- ⁵¹ Richard Nelson, "Island of the Rain Bear" *A Place on Earth*, p.189.
- ⁵² Tom Griffiths, "Cooper Dreaming", *A Place on Earth*, p. 87.
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