Of Cyclones and Bovines: Living in the Torrid Zone

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Anthem to the green tree frog
Litoria infrafrenata

Your croak wakes me from deathlike sleep
just as the seasons pause to reincarnate.
3 am and the world hinge is swinging: opening
closing, the live and the dead are parting.

You wake the dead croaking through the layers
of evolution from your spot next to the screendoor.
The *Mandukya* is in my ears, the brahmins
and the frogs chanting their circular breathing.

Daily I wonder at the painted glee of your
colour, green so green it would make the Irish
envious—I find you sitting in camouflage
on the edge of a leaf or, as tonight, belly-flat

against the glass door waiting for insects—
I've found you visible as daylight, as still
as the soughing night air atop the iron railings.
You play tricks on tourists hiding inside the flange

of the toilet bowl so forever after they'll see
those tiny flat-ended hands grasping—
it's humour and the joy of colour—and of
course the transforming midnight croak. (Hawthorne 2009: 9)

I grew up on a farm on the Western Slopes of New South Wales where in a good year the annual rainfall was 18 inches (450 mm). That amount of rain can fall in a matter of days in Far North Queensland and the frogs are of a size and colour that was unimaginable to me who had handled only the tiny frogs of the drylands. To top it off, in the last five years I have endured two Category-5 cyclones, Larry and Yasi both of which hit us at Mission Beach where I spend my summers and as much of the year as I can. And then I went to India, South India where the monsoons fill the streets with water.

Cyclones and cassowaries

The tropical world is one in which excess is the norm. An excess of rain; an excess of no rain. The rhinoceros beetle a creature baroque in its excess of size and badly

designed landing plans. The curlew with its ghostly call like a keening wind or the python lying in digestive torpor with its wallaby belly. The Hercules moth as big as a bat or the giant butterflies that wing in on a depression. The frigate birds, sea eagles and the cassowary or their smaller cousins, the drongo, bee-eater and thrill-seeking sunbirds. Beneath the surface, there's the cow-faced dugong, leatherback turtles and a host of sea creatures.

The plant world is just as voracious. Trees become like forests in just a few years; vines stretch their tendrils around trunks and taps and verandah posts. Mangos drop on the road and are so numerous no one stops to gather them up. The cassowary follow the fruiting plants: the lilly pilly, the white apple, the Davidson plum and all the mangos hanging from the tree.

I wrote the following poem as a celebration of the cycles of growth one sees on a single walk up Bicton Hill.

Bicton Hill

Consider the geometry of the spiral
Fibonacci Pythagoras Archimedes
a nautilus shell a sunflower
the curl of a cyclone

walk the spiral path
to the top of Bicton Hill—
walk recursively

in parallel
the sea eagle rises hillside
through the thermals

its way faster and smoother—
the walking path is open
and shaded, rough and flat

white cockatoos screech their
flight over the tree tops
a flight of squawked delight

small seed pods, bright
coloured leaves—red
yellow, green—dot the way

step around the mound
left by the cassowary, the red
fruits of palms digested

this forest has survived more
cyclones than any human
will endure, its tall trees

grounded by vines and
keeled buttressed roots
so many lives at each storey—

canopy, trunk, root—the earth
beside it hosting those ancient
cycad palms grown tall with time

circle the hill looking
out over tropical beaches
island resorts, farms and forests

the finger of the Clump
points seaward, lies low
on the sea, shelters the curl

of Boat Bay where dugong
graze and developers dredge
plans for a pointless marina

this hill with its layers of life
—fruit, flowers, insects, birds—
will go on being what it is

buzzing life inside its own zone
the hill a cone of activity
a monument of solidity (Hawthorne 2009: 5-6)

Then come the cyclones. After Cyclone Larry I was obsessed with trying to capture that experience: the build up, the waiting, the sense of amazement that wind could blow so hard. And afterwards, the silence, the skeleton trees, the leaf-pasted walls, the sadness and the nightmares. This became my book, *Earth's Breath* which takes its title from a quote from the *Rig-Veda*: *Where was earth's breath, blood and soul?*

Earth's breath

Breath is an origin story
before breath is non-existence
winds ride the edge of the storm
cloud messengers galloping loud
orchestral kettle drums beat.

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 arenot so lucky with
Larrikin Larry, no shears large
enough to make his pate shine
as we watch, the ground turns bald
with his blunders through the undergrowth.

A shredder over his shoulder, Larry
larks about turning bark and leaves
to confetti and in his next breath
plays graffiti artist, pasting every
wall door and window.

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

as Larry changes direction, running rings
widdershins, bellowing earth's grief
no longer at play, this brat is serious
his blood has curdled, our souls are rattled
ears drumming against bawling Larry. (Hawthorne 2009: 22-23)

Bovines and Monsoons

Just after the publication of *Earth's Breath* I went to India on an Asialink Literature Residency. My plan was to write a collection of poems called *Cow*. At the time I was immersing myself in Sanskrit and Tamil poetry. The Sanskrit text I was reading via a class at La Trobe University was the *Harivamsa* where you get lines like the following: "16. The sun seemed to be sinking into the belly of the new clouds where the deep waters hang, gushing and bellowing." (Translation: Susan Hawthorne)[1]

[1] The *Harivamsa* is an ancient Indian text related to the *Mahābhārata* that dates to around the second century BCE.

In the Sangam tradition of Tamil language there are poems like that by Cittalai Cattanar[2] 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. (Ramanujan 2008: 76)

After a visit to the gardens that make up the Theosophical Society which contains some unimaginable huge banyan trees, I found myself writing this poem: *what she says about nomadic life.*

> **what she says about nomadic life**
>
> there are two ways of walking in the world
> you can walk along a path in which your
> colourful garments are a rainbow
> or you can walk with your limbs
> strung with ropes and string so you
> resemble the downward pointing roots
> of banyan trees in motion an ocean
> of sound such as arises when a great herd
> of cattle sways along a dusty road (Hawthorne 2011a: 120)

In translating Sanskrit poetry also, these experiences of tropical excess spill over into the text. I have written a free form translation of Kalidasa's poem *Meghadūta* (*Cloud Messenger*) which contains these lines:

> as the wind drives you slowly slowly
> the cātaka bird sings sweetly sweetly
> skeins of cranes are in flight
> cloud seeded they fly in formation
> like a garland aloft pleasing to
> the sky-turned eye (Hawthorne 2012)

As I wrote this, I could see the frigate birds and the pelicans who flew over in the silence after Cyclone Larry.

In India even the cows are bigger than anywhere else. There is an ancient species, the gaur who can sometimes be seen in the National Parks, where one day I got a glimpse of a herd on the hillside.

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2 This name is sometimes spelt Seethalai Saathanar.

what she says about gaur

immoveable
ancient as diamonds
old as song
gaur are statues against green

mountains
ridge their backs
verbs crest the ends
of sentences

heads
a saddle between
where water gathers in the wet

the female line
zigzags
the sloped hillside
the dual feminine

Matagavam
mother of the gaur
stands like a giant fortress
at the base
inverting the mountain
top

early risers
greet the day
moaning low

at night
a multitude
of sickle moons
graze

long-sighted eyes
horns almost a circle
pale summer grass
coloured

rufous coats shining
beneath a harvest moon

Matagavām: Sanskrit: cow mother. (Hawthorne 2011: 89-90)

The cows in my poems have changed shape. I grew up with Jerseys and Herefords, but now when I think of cows, I see gaur, water buffalo and Brahmans with their delicate neck folds.

Tropical love has a different quality. No open fires and huddling beneath bed covers. In the tropics everything is more open than that, it's a liquescent feast.
Recently, for a short play entitled *Sahī*, I wrote the following poem:

> Anasūyā:
>
> I don't know
> you at all
> but my heart
> has thundered
> in my chest
> my limbs a
> restless monsoon
> I am drenched (Hawthorne 2011b)

Cyclones, monsoons, the wild growth of vines, the call of birds, the sea that can be like a mirror or endlessly agitated, these things are now inside me.

> **From Wind Mind:**
>
> I am in with through the cyclone
> which is inside with through me
> the cyclone which is at the heart of things
> the cyclone which is at the edge of chaos
> we too are like the swirling objects
> in a Remedios Varo painting
> twirling spiralling simultaneously
> at the edge and at the centre of the
> universe in a massive creation of life
> we are the cross-hatched winds of
> Gungara the spiralling wind
> from the Kimberleys, we are a poet
> defiantly writing herself into creation
> and as I rise from bed to write
> I see that the dog has a paw
> across your shoulder and it seems to
> epitomise what I am struggling to express (Hawthorne 2009: 78)

Living in the torrid zone has brought me to different way of seeing the world. I've had some of my most extreme experiences in the midst of enormous beauty. Twenty-five years ago I wondered at the writings of those whose imaginary worlds are formed by the tropics: the magical realism of Latin American literature is more than a comment on its political history, it is also about the temperature and the humidity. Or take Salman Rushdie's excessive fiction in *Midnight's Children*. Spend a night in August in India and know that the monsoon affects everything. I am like Kuvalaya who meditates on what it means to travel to unknown places. Kuvalaya is the name for the night lotus.

what Kuvalaya says

rain clouds are gathering at the edge of the world
when we enter the forest the trees
gather their branches over us darken the day
shadow hides us from one another

Sarasvati's speech turns our simple words
into poetry like the mane of a galloping horse

they call me Kuvalaya the night-opening flower
I sing with them carry words
to faraway places to a land across the sea
where once they say
millennia ago
some of their ancestors retreated
others dispute this
and none of the legends is conclusive

I come as a visitor I come with a head full
of words full of landscapes and languages
whether I find my world in the lyrics of their
world is for me to discover here the herd
plays I enter this world of shadows of half-told
stories where the lotus opens at night (Hawthorne 2011:31)

Works Cited

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