



Nature Writing for Love of the Earth

by John Charles Ryan

John Charles Ryan believes writing that takes nature seriously can mould our relationships to the living earth. Nature writing expresses the complexities between people and more-than-humans: wildflowers, whales, peregrines and all shapes and sizes of animate and inanimate nature between. Such writing can show what nature is to us: not a mere backdrop for human affairs but rather a place of dreams and drama, inspiration and excitement. Nature has a voice to share. If we listen closely, we can hear wisdom...

A frenzy of lightning streaks across my drowsy mind. What is real mixes with what is imaginary in a hazy zone between midnight and morning. All the cells of my body hum as I lie cocooned in a down-feather sleeping bag. Unsteady rain patters against the taut nylon of my shelter. Half conscious, I hear muffled scratching beside me. I open the noisy zipper of my portable home and peer outside, aiming a small torch at a trembling shape.

With a long muzzle, an echidna rummages through the gnarled and exposed roots of gum trees. Her quills are drawn like needles into the air as she scuffs around for an appetiser to satisfy the sting of hunger. Lapsing into dreaminess again, I imagine the spiny creature burrowing into my belly, crawling into my body, tunnelling around, seeing what could be found inside me.

My eyes open. I wait for myself to come back from the nocturnal encounter. The spring sun glows through the tent's translucent walls. I unfurl myself as a morning flower does, like a colourful blossom in my outdoor gear. The dusky clouds clear. Crystalline blueness returns to the sky. Bursts of chilly air carry sharp, fragrant eucalypt scents to my cheeks and nose. I am awakened. Morning smooths out a stormy night's tousling.

Kwongan Poetry

I am sleeping in the kwongan. Located roughly between Geraldton and Perth in Western Australia, this landscape is a creative miracle. More kinds of plants exist here than in tropical jungles. But one could not estimate the botanical sumptuousness of the kwongan from a distance. The low-growing bush survives harsh heat and intense wind because of its small flowers and spiky leaves. I attend sensuously, crawl on my hands and knees, lap drops of wildflower nectar, put my nose into secret nooks and crannies. I adapt too.

On my feet, I search for nerved hakea. It flowers in soft pink tassels during a brief window in late August. I spot a group growing at the edge of some paddocks. Lying on the ground again, I look upward through the leaves of the shrub. The nerve-like branching of its veins traces a pattern of lightning across the sky. Was this the electricity I dreamt of last night? How can a plant communicate through sensations in my dream world? I jot down in my field journal a string of fast-flying phrases. My notebook becomes a unique melting pot of science, intuition, stories and sense impressions that later become poems.

I must admit something. I am a botanophile: a lover of plants. I write poems about wildflowers. To me, trees, shrubs, orchids and other members of the green world are sacred and intelligent. In this part of Australia, they also vibrate to very old rhythms. But when I first came to this special part of the world, I felt bewildered. The plant life of Western Australia is remarkably different to the eastern United States with which I was intimately familiar. I grew up in coastal New Jersey, then moved to the lush rolling hills of Massachusetts. For many years, I took walking pilgrimages through the wildernesses of California and Canada. The comfortable sights of oaks and pines have been supplanted with the images and aromas of banksias and tingle trees. ♡

Writing Royal Hakea

Three weeks later, it is in the middle of September. Spring time. The Southern Ocean foams and pounds furiously against the

dramatically dropping coastline. I am on a walk with the Friends of the Fitzgerald River National Park. We ascend sandy undulations, looking behind us from time to time for a glimpse of the sea. Orchid flowers emerge from cracks in the clean grey granite. Their orange and red hues pulsate like panting tongues in the wind. At the top of a plateau, we find another unusual plant: the cousin of the nerved hakea of my electrified dream. Royal hakea was named by early botanists for the glowing orange splotches adorning the prickly crowns of its leaves. Like a tower of stacked cabbage heads, it veers in the breeze, almost topples but springs back to a standing position.

Tentative and shy, I am not sure how to greet this plant. What is the etiquette in the bush? Shaking hands won't work. Looking around furtively for fellow bush walkers, I drop to the ground and crawl. On my back again, I gaze up to the heavens. The patterns of veins in each ornate leaf seem to fracture the sky. I have visions of sharks in the sea bearing their teeth. I think of the sharp claws of a primordial animal deep below the ocean's surface. Phrases come naturally and easily. I let them. I write these in my field notebook. The spontaneous flow of writing will eventually become part of a poem about this ragtag colony of plants.

But there is another vein to consider here.

While they are stunning and inspiring, these magnificent life forms are also imperilled. As prominent biologists report, we are living in the "sixth great extinction," an era of crushing biodiversity loss. Scientists estimate that 50% of the planet's species might disappear by the end of the 21st century. We're realising, hopefully not too late, that the sustainability of our increasingly global culture is shared with birds, rocks and flowers. I can only drop to the ground again when I think about the facts.

Why Nature Writing?

In times of grief and disconnection, nature writing whispers about our connectedness. The fate of hakeas is also ours. The right words, those from the heart, can create intimacy and restore sensuousness to our relationships with the world. Nature writing—including poetry, stories, plays and perhaps even blogs—is writing that takes an interest in the environment. I have chosen to relate a botanophile's love of plants. You could take an interest in animals, rocks, seaweed, the sky, the stars or the natural world as a breathing whole. Attention can be powerful.

A sobering thought is that only 3% of the original kwongan remains. Remarkable places with astonishing plants are in need of celebration and protection. Writing is connected to the appreciation of our world. Words can inspire others. They can fulfil a private need for connection or mourning. Or writing can record experiences of the natural world for our grandchildren and our communities. ☺

References

Nature Writing Handbook: A Creative Guide. Sierra Club Books, 1995
 "Nature Writing for Readers and Writers." www.naturewriting.com, 2011

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