

## THE SLOW WING

*Posted by Ilka Blue*

*It casts out, away from its reflection, feather and bone beating out a memory that is not theirs alone,  
a skyward intonation which becomes the muscle of every slow wing.*

I've been invited to write a post on the *Slow Wing*, a satellite workshop happening in Australia as part of the upcoming Uncivilisation festival. I'm going to begin with an ending, because I want the axis of this piece to be slippery, ambiguous, to summon the conflict in this world. For the *Slow Wing* is about the paradox of nothing changing when everything has changed, about a fixation with life that's become the root cause of ecocide, and about re-imagining the world by deepening our relationship with death.

The ending I begin with comes from Paul Kingsnorth's post *Empire of the Ape*, which concludes with Doug Tompkin's response to the very common and hopelessly charged question, of what a person can do to stem our raging environmental crises? Tompkin says *do what you can do*. His words echo those of ecophilosopher Patsy Hallen who I've often heard say *if your struggle is one without joy, you are in the wrong struggle*. Underneath their words I find an Elder's recognition that life is fuelled by death. This wisdom makes more potent their direct message that yours is a unique belonging to this world. Your existence influences the world, whilst simultaneously bearing no influence on its universal pulse. This is the shadowy beauty of ecosystems. However like many, it is not enough for me to rationally understand how these dynamics work, I am swamped by inertia and plagued by outbursts of panic and anger. This part explains why I vocally blurted *You have to get off the train!* in reaction to Kingsnorth's post. The train is a reoccurring symbol for me, residue of my indoctrinated pull to the false safety that machines and progress proffer. In the context of Tompkin's counsel to *find an issue you are close to and which matters to you and you take a position there*, my metaphoric reaction is that the greater universal pulse determines that some of us stay on the train, some of us get off at the wrong station, and some of us miss the train altogether.

I often miss the train. In 2009 I arrived at Heathrow with a sleeping bag, harmonica and journals of poetry, ready for a summer of writing. At the passport counter I showed documentation of my return ticket and a full bank account. To my shock, I was taken to a holding room. After 8 hours of interrogation the Border Force Officer informed me I was refused entry to the UK and he added that I'd be wise to find a job in Australia rather

than be (a woman) out exploring the world. The sound of that summer train was painfully loud as it rolled off to my future without me. I'd like to be able to reconcile my fate by claiming to be an Activist worthy of making a blacklist, to be someone courageous, like Tim DeChristopher is. But I am more tree than I am spear, and I simply fell victim to the vulgarities of modern civilisation. I can only claim being scared and common. *I do what I can do*. The long years of my plainness, my *complicity*, have afforded me a meditation on the chaos of human transgression. Only by being still, lost to days of inaction and sadness, have I been able to sense a different world, sense my animal tone. And it's revealed a hard paradox to stay awake to - by not battling ecocide I am participating in my own death.

Not long ago, I sat with the dying and death of an important Matriarch in my world. Many times during her passing I reached for mythologies, rituals, traditions, something to help the passage but I found nothing. Mine is a Culture void of the practices created to help people through such a powerful transformation, it is a Culture in denial of death. Imagine what this means collectively in the onset of ecocide...

Modernity's estrangement from death can explain our dysfunctional relationship with the more-than-human world. By being apart from (not a part of) 'Nature', means that humans are not subject to the universal laws of transformation, which this planet embodies as the seasonal cycles of death and birth. In this modern era there is no returning, no exhale, no fall, we move only forward, onward, upward, and our addiction to the push requires the consumption of LIFE. The paradox here is that in our intentional denial of death, we are manifesting the biggest death in human history, Earth.

*Slow Wing* asks the very confronting question: how do we reconcile with a dying world? Death is here, it has always been here. To be clear, my work is concerned with strengthening cultural and biological diversity with the express purpose of mitigating species extinction. As I state in my thesis, *Storytelling beyond the Anthropocene: a quest through the crisis of ecocide toward new ecological paradigms*, ecocide is the death of nature not the nature of death. Thus the *Slow Wing* does not propose we accept ecocide, it asks how to be a civilisation in autumn. As a friend taught me during my recent experience of death, *dying is a very different state to living*. Everything shifts with those words. Dying is the movement of loss, it is the action of falling, it is a return. Dying brings us back to death, without which there is little transformation in the universe. And here's the connection. Transforming Modernity into alternative paradigms requires that we open to more than a

singular state of Reality. Death gifts us that opening, as do multi-dimensional and multi-referential ways of knowing such as Mythology. Multiple realities constitute multiple possibilities and this complexity creates the diversity of our ecosystems. Diversity is essential for the existence of many things, not least the wild soul.

Through my research I've begun to see the reciprocity between cultural and biological wellness: *As we extinguish large portions of the planet's biological diversity, we will lose also a large portion of our world's beauty, complexity, intellectual interest, spiritual depth, and ecological health ...the future we're presently headed toward...is a future of soul-withering biological loneliness (David Quammen, The Song of the Dodo, 1997).* In *Empire of the Ape* we read the statistical reality of the biological loss in the UK. These numbers are similarly reported in countries around the globe. What is less publicised is our loss of language. *While biologists suggest that perhaps 20 percent of mammals, 11 percent of birds, and 5 percent of fish are threatened, and botanists anticipate the loss of 10 percent of floristic diversity, linguists and anthropologists today bear witness to the imminent disappearance of over half the extant languages of the world (Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, 2009).*

When a language becomes extinct the diversity of our planet shrinks because we've lost a unique knowledge of belonging to the more-than-human world. For this reason I strongly agree with Kingsnorth on the importance of rediscovering old languages alongside creating new ones. Remembering the language of place will help us adapt to and from a dying world. And this is how we found the bridge between *Slow Wing* and *Uncivilisation*, by remembering that *stories belong to different places (Diane Bell, Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin, 1998).*

Holding a satellite workshop in Australia 16,750 kilometres (10,400 miles) from *Uncivilisation* as the crow flies, actively *celebrates writing and art which is grounded in a sense of place and of time.* On the surface, the differences between Australia and the UK are obvious, but it is the mythologies held by the soil that interests *Slow Wing.* Aboriginal Australians are the oldest living culture on earth and their mythologies are not stories as understand in the western tradition, but a complex ecological knowledge used to move culturally within bigger universal systems. The mythologist Robert Bly believes it takes lifetimes for mythologies to grow, they are slow like mountains. It's an idea that helps explain the radical displacement of the Aboriginal Dreaming by Modern Civilisation, causing an equally severe biological displacement in Australia. The land had been called and sung and tended into being through a 60,000 year-long story, then in a violent instant, the waters and creatures were re-named with foreign sounds that the land would need mountain-time to learn. It is painful to live here, belonging to the culture that killed the language of the place I belong to. I read Ngarrindjeri woman

Sarah Milera's words *You can't change your relationship to a special place, to where your learning comes from. It's a powerful thing. The birds talk to you.* So I am here, listening, knowing everything has changed and remembering that nothing has. If it is *through stories that we weave reality* then as storytellers *we do what we can do.* The world is dying, let us tell this story respectful of the places we belong, let our words fall into the songs of death and maybe in time they will transform the end into a beginning, and we will return a world shimmering with diversity.

Details for *Slow Wing* registration [www.latorica.net](http://www.latorica.net) .....