

**AN UNQUIET POETRY:**

**Eco-Consciousness in Kate Fagan's *First Light***

**and**

**EARTHWORKS**

**a collection of poems**

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## **Statement of Authentication**

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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(Signature)

## Abstract

*An Unquiet Poetry* is a two-part thesis consisting of an exegesis and a creative component. The exegesis, “Eco-consciousness in Kate Fagan’s *First Light*”, examines Fagan’s collection of poetry *First Light* in an eco-poetical context, with the goal of determining how a consciously relational aesthetic positions the work in open dialogue with the human and non-human worlds of its surrounds. The creative component “Earthworks” comprises a collection of my own poetry, arranged in three sequences. Together, the exegesis and creative component consider the relationship between an experimental use of language and an ecocritical intention of addressing climate justice.

Supported by the theory of anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose and the research of Gomeri woman Professor Heidi Norman, the exegesis posits that a commitment to decolonisation is central to an ecocritical practice, which must witness the violence of the past while incorporating Indigenous knowledges, founded on sustainability. The exegesis further makes use of the theory of cultural thinkers Amitav Ghosh and Timothy Clark, to advocate for an experimental poetry which seeks to break bourgeois consciousness of the everyday through an ecological revitalisation of the imagination. *First Light* is read for its formal qualities, including the recycling of material, the use of a discourse of science and experimentation with perception, time and scale. Chapter One introduces Fagan’s task of place-making which is engendered through an ethics of interconnectedness. Chapter Two examines the question of language’s culpability and capability in confronting the many social and ecological complexities presented in Fagan’s collection.

My collection of poetry “Earthworks” is simultaneously performative, playful and serious in its approach. It is structured in three sequences, with the opening sequence “Echo” documenting an inheritance of colonialism in daily urban and semi-rural Australian life. The middle sequence “Ego” takes the form of an abecedarium, with 26 poems from A to Z juxtaposing the minutiae and complications of dwelling within the Anthropocene. The final sequence “Elemental” is structured in four sections, “Earth”, “Air”, “Fire” and “Water”. It offers a more meditative approach, through exploration of a sense of responsibility to the earth and its people. Language here is a tool for unsettling Western dualities of otherness, while alluding to a diverse, creative and more sustainable future.

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## **Eco-Consciousness in Kate Fagan's *First Light***

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised by scholars and public opinion alike that life on earth as we know it has entered into a new geological epoch known as the Anthropocene, or “the age of humans” (Muir et al. 3). This era has been named for human activity on the planet including deforestation, agriculture, extraction, industrial production and consumption which have dominated earth’s biosphere so drastically as to create global, ecological imbalances. In Australia alone, the reverberations of these imbalances were significantly felt during the 2019 - 2020 bushfires, which, fuelled by drought, freak temperatures and unpredictable winds within a few weeks consumed at least 17 million hectares of bush, farmland and decimated several towns (Muir et al. 12). In 2020, a NSW bushfire inquiry confirmed a clear link between global warming and the devastating fire season, which had occurred on a scale unseen “in Australia in recorded history” (Bushfire Inquiry iv). The report also forewarned that “a repeat of fires of that scale, or worse, is a realistic prospect” and that “we should expect to see serious fires more frequently” (Bushfire Inquiry 79).

The state of human anxiety toward “looming or currently unfolding catastrophe” as a result of global climate change has been described by Lynn Keller as the period of the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (2). Science demonstrates that we are right to be anxious; as Australian climate scientist Joëlle Gergis highlights, already 1° of global warming has occurred since pre-industrial times (defined as between 1850 – 1900) and with it, 50 per cent of the Great Barrier Reef is dead (Gergis 32). Further, even if we were to restrict global warming to the most ambitious current goal of 1.5°, additional destruction of between 70 and 90 per cent of reef-building corals worldwide is guaranteed, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°* (qtd. in Gergis 31). Of course, marine coral life is but one lifeform at risk; with an estimated 3 billion animals caught in the blazes of the Australian black summer, koalas are now facing extinction, while countless plant species languish on the endangered species list (van Eeden et al. 5).

For humans, the direct impacts of climate change are most discernible when considering the island nation of Tuvalu. Standing at just 4.5 metres above sea level, the island and its people are in a critically fragile position, being vulnerable to extreme weather patterns, rising waters, flooding, warming seas and erosion (Tiatia 329). “Being willing to

acknowledge the arrival of the point of no return is an act of bravery,” Gergis states (32). The interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism, which can be traced at least back to the 1980s, seeks first and foremost to acknowledge that point of crisis; to face head on the rising wave of climate effects and anxiety through the work of natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists and historians, all collaborating with environmental intent and a sense of human accountability to the earth (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). Central to the ecocritical practice is a commitment to decolonisation (Levin 172); there can be no environmental justice without justice for the Traditional Owners of the land, who lived harmoniously with nature for more than 60,000 years, prior to invasion in 1788. An ecocritical practice also entails a return to and incorporation of Indigenous knowledges and practices which are founded on an ethics of sustainability.

Since contact, the destructive impact of colonisation on both the human and more-than-human spheres in Australia is palpable. As anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose states: “Settler societies are built on a dual war: a war against Nature and a war against the natives. Each has been devastating” (34). Rose, who spent many years learning from Aboriginal teachers in the Northern Territory, summarises the Australian genocide and ecocide as follows:

Devastation includes the loss of around 90 per cent of the original Aboriginal population, the loss of all but a small number of Aboriginal languages, and the loss of earlier cultural coherence of the continent through Aboriginal networks of cultural exchange. It includes the loss of large numbers of plant and animal species, including the highest rate of mammalian extinctions in the contemporary world. (35)

Today, environmental destruction is continually tied up with an ongoing colonial project, as highlighted by Professor Heidi Norman’s 2019 study of the Darling River at Wilcannia, NSW. Norman is a Gomeri woman and leading researcher in the field of Australian Aboriginal political history. At the time of Norman’s study, the river at Wilcannia was “bone dry”. Known as the Barka to its Traditional Owners, the river has supported the Barkandji people for thousands of generations. However, due to over-extraction of water by irrigation companies and cotton growers upstream, the river no longer flows at Wilcannia (Cattermole qtd. in Norman). “As we came to understand from Barkandji people, the crisis on the Barwon-Darling



represents the biggest threat to their continued survival on country since the sheep invaded,” Norman states. The Barka is considered to be the Barkandji’s mother. Without water, they are threatened not just environmentally, but spiritually; the lifeblood of their culture is at risk. As Norman so poignantly emphasises, “the impact of colonisation cannot be measured as a moment, but rather as an enduring process”. It is a process which is intrinsically tied up with ecological wellbeing.

Critical theory of recent decades identifies the western cultural tradition of dualistic thinking as a starting point for environmental catastrophe and colonial violence (Rose 19). Descartes’ mind/body formulation, which sets apart the human, enlightened rational self from the bodily, intuitive and animal side of self, has been highlighted as foundational to an anthropologic philosophy favouring man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, active/passive and civilisation over savagery (Plumwood, “Active Voice” 5). The “hierarchical and oppressive implication of the Self/Other construct” can be traced all the way back to the book of Genesis, which instates man’s domination over beasts (Alizadeh and Pitt-Alizadeh 53). Luce Irigaray argues that this matrix of dualities in reality signifies *singularity*, since the labelled “other” is conceived of as absence (qtd. in Rose 19). It is a perceived “absence” of inherent value which has fuelled environmentally and culturally damaging practices for millennia, such as the clearing of biodiverse wildlife, dispossession of land from Indigenous peoples and fossil fuel extraction. These practices in turn have culminated in this point of climate catastrophe.

At the heart of the climate crisis lies an imaginative and cultural failure; as Amitav Ghosh states in his seminal work *The Great Derangement*:

the questions that confront writers and artists today are not just those of the politics of the carbon economy; many of them have to do also with our own practices and the ways in which they make us complicit in the concealments of the broader culture. (11)

Ghosh questions contemporary literary practices which feed patterns of consumerism or which propagate images of prosperity, citing the derangement of favouring architecturally shiny glass and metal plated towers during a time of accelerated and dangerous levels of carbon emissions (11). He suggests that cultural and literary artefacts function regularly as modes of concealment which refuse to recognise the realities of our plight. For Professor Timothy Clark, the condition of *emergence* of the Anthropocene highlights a state of

instability and uncertainty, wherein no precedent exists for the climate catastrophes and global changes yet to occur (*Threshold Concept*, 47). For both critics, the Anthropocene necessitates a “break in consciousness” and relinquishment of “faith in the regularity of bourgeois life” (Clark, *Threshold Concept* 115; Ghosh 25). Previously seeming “mundane” consumption practices and desires for prosperity must now be reread for the disadvantage and poverty they cause for other people, plant-life, animals or aquatics. In the ecocritical field, literary studies must undergo similar revitalisation as, with retrospective environmental and postcolonial knowledge, we are required to reconsider the cultural and ecological implications of literary texts bound up within a network of environmental echoes.

As an off-shoot of the ecocritical field, eco-poetics as a literary response to current environmental strife seeks to undertake that ecological quest of revitalising the imagination. What is required and what is sought in the eco-poetic practice is a major overhaul of “how individuals, societies, and cultures relate with each other and with the nonhumans and materials with whom humans share the planet” (Magrane 2). The practice has evolved off the back of a long tradition of nature poetry (Bryson 3), from the pastoral poets Theocritus and Virgil, both intimately aware of the power of nature, through the early modern and Romantic periods in the United Kingdom, and more recently in Australia, a swathe of environmental nature poets including Judith Wright and Les Murray. It is not the first time in modern history that poets recognise reciprocity within nature and seek to interact humbly with the natural world; what is unique is the emphasis on translating ecological consciousness into a wider sense of community and global action (Bryson 3).

The poetic form is particularly suited toward the invigoration of consciousness. Because of the poem’s capacity for manipulation, complexity in references and allusion and possibility for time distortion, the poetic form “creates conditions for the emergence of new analogies, metaphors and models for understanding objects of inquiry” (Barrett and Bolt 7). As Joan Retallack describes, experimental language catapults us away from the status quo of contemporary consciousness toward unknown possibilities (25). The juxtapositions that can happen in a poem may dislocate and alter patterns of thought, and may be instrumental to the necessary “break in consciousness” that action within the Anthropocene era requires (Magrane 9; Clark, *Threshold Concept* 115).

At its core, eco-poetics seek to overturn “a suffering Romantic egoism” in nature poetry, which traditionally places man at the fulcrum of the universe, with non-human plants

and animals as mere assistants to the human psyche and goals (Harrison 126). Instead, the practice appeals to transformations based on ecological science and “an ecocentric ethic of interconnectedness” (Gilchrest 2). Leonard Scigaj writes that “ecopoets distil ecological process into aesthetic techniques to restore our lost sense of connectedness to the planet that bore and sustains us” (12). For renowned Australian ecopoet John Kinsella, each text written is “part of a resistance against environmental damage” (Strahan and Kinsella 1), while Australian environmental philosopher Val Plumwood emphasises the role of ecopoetry in subverting hierarchical dualities between human and nature, and demonstrating nature’s many valid and valued forms of intelligence (“Active Voice” 9). Nature is no longer regarded as exploitable material.

In reality, contemporary ecocritical thinking founded on interconnectedness mimics a philosophical underpinning of an Aboriginal relationship to land which states that *land is law and you are not alone in the world* (Graham 106). Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka woman Dr Mary Graham explains the priority of land within an Aboriginal worldview:

The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our humanness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relations between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. All meaning comes from the land. (106)

Further, Aboriginal philosophies include a kinship system that includes the natural world, plants, animals and other phenomena. Graham writes: “For Aboriginal people, the land is the great teacher; it not only teaches us how to relate to it, but to each other” (108). Poets such as Bill Neidjie in *Story About Feeling* and Ali Cobby Eckermann in *Little Bit Long Time* have utilised the medium to explore and relate in part ecological and spiritual aspects of an Aboriginal worldview.

Central to the ecopoetic task is the practice of “place-making”, which attempts to establish human connection to country and land, based on the assumption that “the more we view the rest of our world as place and home, the more care we will take not to damage it” (Bryson 15 – 16). In Australia, this proves to be a difficult task, given that many of us are living on stolen land that is also categorically “wounded space ... that has been torn and fractured by violence and exile” (Rose 2). One of the initial steps to place-making is to witness: to listen with attentiveness to the destruction of ecological and cultural systems of the past,

as well the ongoing violence of the present. “It is a heightened listening, rich with ambivalence,” Saskia Beudal muses (Beudal 112). “As much as we can, we must listen to the cry of the disappearing curlew across the water, to the drip and crash of melting ice,” Gretchen Miller adds (Miller 327). To listen is to be responsive to the vulnerability of living beings and systems, and importantly, to connect – to take responsibility (Rose 47).

On place-making, Australian eco-poet and critic Peter Minter emphasises a shared poetics across geographical space, in which “the imagination dilates to admit everything, from all across the continent, the Pacific, the Indian”. In the introduction to Australian eco-poetic journal *Plumwood Mountain* (August 2016), he confirms:

Everyone needs to take responsibility for imagining their own unique kind of transformation. In poetry and poetics, we have to think about how non-Indigenous form, western form, romantic form, lyrical form, white form have a responsibility to current and future cultural conditions. (Minter)

This decolonial attitude resonates with Plumwood’s warning that a singular concept of place, rather than multiple, may be false in its refusal to recognise the many “shadow places that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, our likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility” (“Shadow Places” 139). For place-making to be truly ecological, it needs to extend across space and recognise the multiple places which, through the untidy links of commodification and imperialism, we are connected to and reliant upon.

In the 2009 issue of *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Blue Mountains poet Kate Fagan highlights the problem of applying Eurocentric thinking to an Australian colonised country, saying: “We need to bring an explicitly post-settlement critique to thinking about ‘eco’ in the Australian context” (Fagan et al. 3). Alongside co-editors of the journal Kinsella and Minter, Fagan emphasises the “philosophical and creative risks that are needed” in the face of global catastrophe (Fagan et al. 1). While for Kinsella, writing in the Anthropocene remains a “delaying tactic” (2), Fagan insists that eco-poetics must “denaturalise” nature; that is, remove the boundary between it and our human selves, “so humans can take place *in* catastrophe, to act within it” (4).

The quality of denaturalising nature can be read extensively in Fagan’s poetry. Pam Brown describes Fagan’s most recent collection *First Light* (2012) in terms of its boundary-

blurring undertaking, saying: “Many of [Fagan’s] poems are on a threshold or a brink of crossing, and they are kind of consciously off-centre, as she threads and links lines of thought and feeling” (Brown 1). As a musician, Fagan’s work is usually read for its musical qualities, although some attention has been paid to her recycling of language in consideration of its materiality and relational aspect to the natural environment (Turner; Hart). Gabrielle Dixon-Ritchie describes Fagan’s earlier collection *The Long Moment* as inviting confrontation with the “radical unpredictability” of “climatological and geological predicaments” (Dixon-Ritchie 167). While Libby Hart emphasises Fagan’s affinity with Language poetry, in which language dictates meaning (Hart), Dixon-Ritchie describes a geophilosophical aspect in Fagan’s writing which maps across both linguistic and geographical space, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s assertion that “thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth” (qtd. in Dixon-Ritchie 162). Dixon-Ritchie reads Fagan as an eco-poet, however no extended analysis of her work as been conducted in an eco-poetical context, to consider the relationship between Fagan’s radical use of language and an ecocritical intention of addressing climate justice.

This exegesis seeks to explore Fagan’s boundary blending poetry in *First Light*, with the goal of determining how a consciously *relational* aesthetic positions the work in open dialogue with the human and non-human worlds of its surrounds, “so humans can take place *in catastrophe*, to act within it” (Fagan et al. 4). The collection is characterised by rapidly moving thought filtered through experimental form and lyric, and alternates between the personal and the social, with an emphasis on elements of the natural environment encountered through bush, rural and urban settings. The collection resonates with a philosophical quality which addresses issues of climate, creativity, literature, affect, relationships and colonial history.

This exegesis is based on an extended close analysis and refers to five of the six sections present in the collection. “Observations on Time, Cargo”, “First Light”, “The Correspondence” “Authentic Nature” and “Thought’s Kilometre” have been chosen as reference chapters for the current analyses. The analyses are arranged by topic, divided into two chapters: “Making Place” and “Expanding Language”. The first chapter introduces Fagan’s task of place-making which is achieved through an engendered ethics of interconnectedness. The second chapter examines the question of language’s culpability and capability in affronting the many difficulties of climate change and decolonisation in Fagan’s collection.

Through examination of Fagan's experimentation with concepts of interconnectedness, perception, time and scale, as well as her use of linguistic techniques such as recycling of material, the use of a discourse of science, explorations of the micro and macroscopic and self-conscious semantic experimentation, the exegesis will determine how Fagan's musings on environment and language unsettle the bourgeois realities of the Anthropocene era while witnessing its present and past violence and advocating for consciousness reformation through linguistic experimentation. "I like the idea of an unquiet poetry," Fagan states (Brown 2). Her work, which like light is at once dappled, changing, bright and muffled, refuses to conform "to the architectures in which modernity was built", instead alluding to "a very different kind of world – still *this world here*, but transformed" (Fagan et al. 1). The question remains as to whether the poetry can inform ecological action in the physical world.

## CHAPTER 1: MAKING PLACE

Place-making in ecocriticism has long been recognised as essential work for an ethical approach to reconfiguring humanity's position within the biosphere of the planet. While early ecocriticism placed emphasis on understanding "the immediate, specific place, where we live" (Kirkpatrick Sale qtd. in Bate 232), following on from the "nomadology" of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in Australia Stuart Cooke proposed a form of place-making which thinks beyond immediate place to a more nomadic trajectory, "given that ecosystems flourish by virtue of their myriad interconnections with *other* places" (Cooke 230). This approach to place-making resonates with Plumwood's assertion that recovering a storied sense of dwelling must include all those "shadow places" which provide ecological and material support for any individual or community ("Shadow Places" 139).

In *First Light*, Fagan's approach to place-making reverberates with the knowledge of profound interconnectedness in nature, and across a globalised planet. This chapter will explore Fagan's approach to place through an ethics of interconnectedness perceived through looking, experimentation with the representation of perception and time, attentiveness to the non-human other and engagement with the technological and the modern. Fagan's poetics work to recover meaningful ecological space on a simultaneously minute and macroscopic scale.

### 1.1 TO LOOK, TO SEE

In *First Light*, Fagan's striking yet subtle vision of interconnectedness permeates the entirety of the book, beginning with the opening line of the first poetic sequence, "Observations on Time, Cargo". Fagan states: "All I can see are weather and its imitators", before adding, "I decide upon four themes: tragedy, character, temporality, locus" (3). Fagan, gazing out at an alternately fire-ravaged and flooded world, is struck first and foremost by climate – by the movements of weather, of "snow" and "cold", and by a sense of "tragedy" in time and place (3 – 4). This statement introduces weather as an umbrella motif of the book, and is the first instance of sensual interconnectedness, wherein all beings ("characters") and material are contained within the universal, transient and ever-changing sphere of climate.

The “imitators” of the weather cycles which Fagan mentions are reflected within the cosmic patterns of the biosphere, to which the poet’s eyes “continuously turn” (6):

To dizziness  
as though visiting a dream,  
lines of hills, brocade  
yoked to absolute relatives. (6)

Here, the phrase “absolute relatives” highlights a double paradigm which Fagan seeks to explore within the collection. Firstly, it refers to a *relational* aesthetic, wherein all elements of the human and non-human world are “yoked” to one another perceptively and represented as such within the poetry. This is achieved through the poet’s visualisation of a rich fabric, a “brocade” consisting of all observations of things across space and time, intimately interwoven. From “lines of hills” to “a dog’s geometric howl” and a “field of apprehended birds” (8), cosmic patterns in nature reverberate throughout “Observations on Time, Cargo”. Secondly, the phrase “absolute relatives” refers to a perceived *absoluteness* which Fagan describes as inherent to vision within any subject. Things *appear* as absolute to the individual mind. She writes:

Here is a scene  
made impossible in relative terms –  
only what we see – (4)

Here, Fagan describes an observed scene which, contrary to her vision of *relativity*, is now made *impossible* in relative terms – but only in what we see. Fagan emphasises that it is the way that we look which allows us to see or not see an inherent interconnectedness. As “Observations” makes apparent, this collection is about *ways of seeing*: about perception and “apparition[s]” ... “happening in the half-light” (4), and about how, with a certain tilt of the head, one may understand the *absolute relativity* – that cheeky oxymoron – within which all elements exist seemingly in perfect wholeness, and yet, *impossibly*, in relation to all. The paradoxical quality of the act of looking is emphasised through a series of oxymorons, utilised



by the poet to describe the act of seeing:

It became a task of many intervals: one public,  
one confined, one yawning  
as a highway. (6)

These apparently contradictory terms – the public and the confined, the wide open yawning and the far-reaching yet confined highway – create a push and pull effect in perception which mimics the ebb and flow of the ocean, to primarily establish that sense of swelling relativity which reveals itself through the act of looking. Lines of connection appear between the public and interior worlds, through tired expanse and narrowed haste. Throughout the collection, Fagan works toward a dissolution of that initial perceived absoluteness, where all things meld in dynamic interconnectedness within a world of “weather ... tragedy, character, temporality and locus” (3).

## 1.2 LIGHT, TIME AND SCALE

It is no coincidence that the book is titled *First Light*, given that it is about ways of seeing and connectedness. Light, like interconnectedness, filters its way throughout the poems, as Fagan gazes upon her surroundings. “Shadow facts” are made apparent and “red light” offers up “ways of relating with clouds” (4, 15). Light is associated with renewed perception and an increased connectivity to all entities.

This is true of the cento “First Light”, the first in a series of poems which recycle past texts to offer up new imaginings (15). “We’ve been living I think/ in a kind of drowning light,” Fagan admits, before arriving surprisingly at “a kind of punctuation”, wherein her consciousness is reinvigorated by all light’s variations – sapphire, solar, ordinary – as if “this being’s old light carries/ the whole world of present activities”. The tone of this piece is conversational and playful, with the poet experimenting with aural sounds: “hum hum hum aum hum hum./ Well it’s neither red nor reflected light”. The humming sound works performatively, as Fagan clowns in her consideration of light, sparking the imagination to toy with the substance in all its various modes. “He continues throwing roses into the garden/ until he misses. He throws the white roses,/ he misses.,” Fagan writes. There is an element of

surrealism in this imagery, which satirises a sense of randomness in poetry, to ultimately emphasise a decided creative control. “Let me choose,” Fagan insists, thereby deciding on a significance in her games with light. Returning to “Observations of Time, Cargo”, we see that light in its various and recycled forms – just as in the recycled form of the centos – is the permeating substance which allows the consciousness to see again:

I opened my eyes and wiped out soot,  
drove aside stars,  
all my sight forgiven there. (6)

Fagan’s light-filled vision is inherently connected to the “soot” of earth, and the sky above. Her being is relational to her cosmic surrounds. In clearing the “soot” from her eyes, she attempts to perceive the world from a decentralised perspective – no longer tied to imminent place – but one in which time and space meld in fluidity.

This decentralised perspective is developed within “Thought’s Kilometre”, the final poem in the final sequence (of the same name) of the entire book, which works as a kind of punctuation to the collection. The tone of voice in “Thought’s Kilometre” varies quite radically to the jovial, playful mood of “First Light”. It is dreamy, melded and contemplative in its fluid descriptions of time and space:

Blue time continues, placement in sensual flux  
We insist upon intervals that give stillness to dispersal and watch  
the running window as it catches the exact turn of an  
afternoon  
...  
Space is clouding over and we fall in (81)

In this stanza, Fagan portrays the sensuality of “running” space-time which, although we may “insist upon intervals”, is actually shifting and melding. Fagan’s decentralised perspective, no longer tied to the historical Western human, views time and space as immeasurable and fluid. The role of language and its inability to effectively demarcate things across space and time will be explored in the second chapter “Expanding Language”, as will the significance of

language in the recycled centos; for now, it is enough to describe Fagan's work in destabilising temporal and spatial structure through experimentation with time, scale and perception. These techniques work to deconstruct linearity and bring seemingly distant points together, in order to perceive "this world of geometry and truth" anew (71). In "Observations on Time, Cargo", Fagan writes:

A world gathers  
at the beach, spray sucked onshore  
in columns of chalk. (10)

Her perception of an entire world gathered at the beach is an example of macroscopic manipulation, wherein in any given space, observations of patterns of science are made (in "columns"), which enhance a sense of proliferation, of both species and material substance of the earth. The statement "repetition shows its evening task in birdcalls" defies mundanity in the world (8), instead demonstrating its eternal cyclical nature, while linking one moment of birdsong to the repetitious and geometric brocade of the biosphere.

Utilising a language of science and mathematics enhances Fagan's cosmic vision of interconnectedness, wherein beings are doubled and redoubled, no longer "isolated in low gravity" (9) but relative within a "field of apprehended birds, motion's curve/ stalked by ordinary fractions" (10). Here, Fagan implicitly recognises the mathematical sequence inherent to all life: the Fibonacci spiral, a mathematical sequence which is foundational to growth patterns in almost all elements of nature, and therefore art. Each number of the sequence is the sum of the two numbers which precede it. Because it is logarithmic, visually the sequence appears as a "curve" or spiral (10). In this poetic moment, the movement and arrangement of the birds is determined by maths, and move within a relative spiral. It is a beautiful imagining, in which Fagan creates an image of the world in space-time which is sequential, flourishing and connected by lines of relativity between all things.

The mathematical vision of connected space-time can be likened to Michel Serres' theory of folded time, wherein time is multiple and folded, like a handkerchief: "The handkerchief is folded, crumpled, shredded. Time ... resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one" (Serres and Latour 60). "Time is a beam expanding in phase," Fagan writes, and within that perceived light, which shines from her vision, Fagan

illuminates the fabric of earth, destabilising linearity in space and time while undermining any singular anthropocentric subjectivity or absoluteness in beings (11).

Fagan's vision is similar to Minter's theory on place-making in which "the imagination dilates to admit everything" within its own "unique transformation" with greater "responsibility to current and future cultural conditions". As an alternative to linear time, decolonial thinking advocates for recuperative work in imagining all time as accessible (Rose 25). Rose argues for a concept of enduring time, in which continuity is expressed between past and future, thereby acknowledging the ongoing effects of violence in the present and its reverberations back to the past. Aboriginal concepts of time have greatly influenced Rose's writings. Fagan, too, has expressed the need for incorporating Indigenous perspectives within current ecocritical traditions. In the 2009 issue of *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, she states:

I'm suspicious, for example, of the uncritical levering of eco-poetical thinking around the work of Heidegger. What's the real trajectory of tropes of the domestic Euro-forest when confronted by Australian colonised country? (Fagan et al. 3)

Fagan is wary of applying an entirely European eco-poetic framework to works composed on stolen land, and on land which reverberates with its own cultural stories of interconnectedness in place. Her poetics of interconnectedness can thus be read in relation to age-old Aboriginal concepts of time and space, which are foundational to the sustainable maintenance of Country and have been so for tens of thousands of years.

Bill Neidjie, Gagadju poet, is one example of an Aboriginal thinker and story-teller who perpetuated throughout his lifetime an ethics of interconnectedness, between human and animal, plant, sky, divinity and soil. In Neidjie's extraordinary text *Story About Feeling*, notions of temporal linearity and separateness do not exist. Rather, the Indigenous body runs vibrantly with the stuff of the universe:

Tree, grass, star...  
because star and tree working with you.  
We got blood pressure  
but same thing... spirit on your body,

but e working with you.  
Even nice wind e blow... having a sleep...  
because that spirit e with you (2)

The text in part relays some of the complexities of Aboriginal ecological thinking, in relation to interconnectedness between elements of weather, creatures and time. For Neidjie, time is at once ceaseless in its flow, yet always still, compressed to a single point:

Tree e follow you'n'me,  
e'll be dead behind us but next one e'll come.  
Same people. Aborigine same.  
We'll be dead but next one, kid, e'll be born.  
Same this tree. (4)

Time appears cyclical, or hardly moving at all, and there is fluidity between the spirits of all beings. In riling against "Eurocentric" perspectives (Fagan et al.3), Fagan recognises the vitality and centrality of Indigenous knowledges in the formation of supposedly "modern" ecological thinking. To read her text on colonial soils is to read it against an Aboriginal cultural history and knowledge centre, which must be returned to again and again, if positive global ecological change is to occur.

### 1.3 THE NON-HUMAN OTHER

The world of weather is "where all species perform their earth-making" (Magrane et al. 3), and Fagan's poetry attends to this, moving as it does to touch consciousness with those non-human beings, embedded and living within the cycles, integrated within one affected sphere, and observed with *attentiveness*. In *Reports from a Wild Country*, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose maintains that attentiveness is the first step to ethical involvement with the world, by acknowledging others' claims of experience, especially if related to violence, in the on-going quest toward decolonisation (30). For Rose, an attitude of attentiveness actualises empathetic connection between beings, through listening.

Throughout Fagan's collection, her consciousness passes between and is touched by many beings, other than humans. These include "a bird flying north and north-west" (27), a "meteor" which falls and rises "like a thought" (31), fighting cats (27), "seabirds" (63) and a "white-bellied eagle" (65), an "isolated tree" (34), a "cat landing a fish" (66), a swamp hen (67), "two magpies fallen/ from a nest" (73), "a wild bird, an owl with/ lettered markings, small falcons whose wings row beside rust/ underbellies" (92) and "a lapping dog" (93). These beings are diverse, intimately observed and written with an appreciation of their unique awareness and autonomy. They are appreciated within moments of reciprocity, described by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* as "a moment of mutual recognition... you realise that this presence possesses a similar awareness of you, even though it is not human" (29). This is true of Fagan, who writes in "Observations on Time, Cargo":

Animals ward off isolation,  
sirens, insects  
disturbed by territorial acts. (11)

In an era which has been described by biologist EO Wilson as the Eremocene – the "age of loneliness" – (a designation which draws attention "to the prospect of a future in which we have extinguished so many of the Earth's life forms that we find ourselves bereft of most non-human companions" (Muir et al. 6)), Fagan displays a welcome affinity and connection to those non-human beings, which for her, provide familiar company.

One of these beings, the honeyeater bird, appears in the later sequence "Authentic Nature", within the poem "Workman, Honeyeater" (62). "Authentic Nature" is the fifth and penultimate sequence of the book, which encourages us to consider how it is we relate with the environmental world, and the unavoidable aspects of colonial history and technology which mediate our relationship to nature. At its core, the sequence persistently questions any notion of authenticity in nature. In "Workman, Honeyeater", Fagan describes the bird as skipping "along a thousand leaves like arrows, closer to truth than I could hazard" (62). Perceiving truthfulness within the so-called *natural world* maintains echoes of a romantic lyricism which Fagan occasionally relishes in, and which critic David McCooey calls an attitude of "the real as nature" (McCooey 57). Fagan writes in celebration of the lively honey-eater, whose "helmet of sleek feathers shook/ in the long fluid rain" (62). It's a moment of delighted

appreciation of the bird and its entanglement with the elements, as it hops along the roof of the house.

She then proceeds to compare the scene to another imagined by Objectivist poet George Oppen, who favoured in literature the aesthetic quality of the built:

These eaves  
say nothing of Oppen's culture  
of fitting: *quietly the roof lies*

*that the carpenter has finished.* (62)

Fagan's vision of the house is one in which there is no "quiet" separation between the built and the natural environment; rather, the honeyeater, the long, fluid rain and the thousand leaves are all integrated and interacting with the built roof of the house, which is "chambered and chiselled/ to the rough designs of the heart" (62). The poem is a revelry on a certain Australian relationship to place – as opposed, perhaps, to Oppen's cleaner, more Americanised one – in which the surrounding environment is intrinsic to the well-being of the ramshackle home. Fagan is pleased by the movement, freedom and ease observed in the honeyeater as it "chitterscolds and darts/ carries the day in its wake" (62), entwining the natural with the built. The moment subverts any notion of separate nature.

Reading this poem, it is impossible not to recall Gerard Manley Hopkins' 1918 piece, "The Windhover":

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing (1166)

Critic Brian Willems describes how Jesuit priest Hopkins coined the word *inscape* to represent "the individuality of objects of perception, the essence of what makes one thing this thing and no other" (3). Willems has drawn numerous similarities between Hopkins' appreciation

of “thingness” in all beings, and Martin Heidegger’s theory of the individuality of all entities, which maintains that they remain themselves “whether we represent it in our minds or not” (Heidegger 165). What he doesn’t take into account is the striking movement of the windhover, and that its thingness seemingly disperses through its immense energy and movement.

In “Workman, Honeyeater”, Fagan resonates most strongly with the energy and movement of the bird, delighted at its flurry and fervour as it skips along the air. While Hopkins and Heidegger celebrate a purist autonomy in beings, they are seemingly less concerned with a larger ecological perspective. Fagan, in her ecstatic appreciation of the bird and its integration with the built environment, critically levers Heidegger’s vision of autonomy-in-thingness, instead viewing its existence as eternally *relational*. The idea is furthered in “Letter X: On Truth”, a poem from the sequence of verse letters entitled “The Correspondence” (Fagan 25). Fagan writes: “things/ shrug off their names to become/ more fully themselves” (37). Here, non-human-beings are celebrated most fully once freed from the shackles of human language. Fagan’s vision of the non-human world is thus founded on an attentive and empathetic recognition of the non-human other which exists fluidly in interconnectedness, and which is prone to limitation by a certain relationship with language. As we will see in chapter two, however, poetic exploration of the non-human world can conversely work to enliven a relational expansiveness between human and the environment.

The idea of inherent interconnectedness between all beings is further evident in “Through a Glass Lightly”, one of Fagan’s cento poems from the sequence “First Light” (23), in which she draws attention to changeability in the world. She writes: “The nasturtium is to itself already/ a memory” (23). This observation reckons with biological mutability, an observable phenomenon within the cells of all organic beings (Lynda Birke qtd. in Alaimo 5); Cells “constantly renew themselves,” bone “is always remodelling,” and “bodily interiors ... constantly react to change inside or out, and act upon the world”. In this case, the nasturtium is to itself NOT a self – at any given moment, it has altered, an unfixed entity. Fagan sees “a living fretwork” echoing through all beings, in their mutability, but also their connectedness to all matter, all thought, and all feelings (23). The nature of the nasturtium is reflected in the human love which Fagan describes as similarly situated “in the future of cells dividing” (23). There is demonstration here of a reciprocity and oneness between evolving nature and human lived thought and feelings. “*I am redistributed,*” Fagan writes in the cento “Luminous”



(19), and it is this reverberating intelligence which occurs both in the affective experience of love and the contemplation of a web-like nature.

As an addendum to Fagan's consideration of non-human beings, we will return to "Observations on Time, Cargo" and Fagan's scrutiny of "insects/ disturbed by territorial acts" (11). Here, Fagan applies the problem of colonisation to the wider Australian environment and the non-human other, recognising the plight of those creatures at the whim of human imperialistic practices, whether it be habitat dissection or misguided species introduction, commonly undertaken for anthropocentric gains. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene As a Threshold Concept*, Timothy Clark argues that "what becomes especially visible in this Australian context is the need to read colonization as an interspecies affair" (Clark 123). Fagan has recognised this, ultimately viewing ecological destruction as an agent of colonisation. Fagan's attentiveness to the insect world thus demonstrates what Rose calls ecological "commitment" to understanding the colonial problem in the non-human other. Her attention to all creatures and their varied and shared forms of intelligence deepens her work in place-making, as she witnesses across the microscopic, and the macro, within a web-like vision of interconnectedness in which all elements dissolve to one another.

#### **1.4 THE TECHNOLOGICAL AND THE MODERN**

In the ecocritical trajectory, Clark identifies a school of thought in which connectedness is perceived not only between human and non-human beings, but between environment and technology, nature and culture, the ancient and the modern (*Threshold Concept* 57). Stacy Alaimo furthers the idea within her concept of "trans-corporeality", in which "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 2). Alaimo thinks *across* bodies to acknowledge "the often unpredictable and always interconnected actions of environmental systems, toxic substances, and biological bodies" (3). As in Donna Haraway's earlier coinage "natureculture", the falsity of separating nature from culture is emphasised (Haraway qtd. in Clark, *Literature and the Environment* 161). Instead, human culture is visibly perceived as "always part of the natural systems of energy exchange in the biosphere" (Clark, *Literature and the Environment* 57).

In terms of *making place*, Fagan partakes in active acknowledgement of biospheric connectedness between beings which traces, for example, pathways of toxins between our

activities and our own bodies. The result is a more nuanced depiction of the world and our role within it. This is particularly evident in “The Octet Rule” (59). As the first poem in the sequence “Authentic Nature”, the poem has been imbued with a weighty and ironic intention, of addressing nature authentically. The title of the poem positions it within a rigid, scientific network; “The Octet Rule” alludes to a chemical rule in which an atom containing eight electrons in its outermost shell is at its most stable state. This rule defines the form of the poem, which is made up of eight sections of eight lines, with by and large eight beats in each line, such as in “Engines roar, body electric”, or as close as possible to achieving eight beats, such as in “Say hello to the supermarket” (60). The structure of the piece thus mimics that chemical attempt at peak stability, with an established intention to envision nature to its atomic structural integrity, depicted according to rule and according to what we might expect “authentically” in nature.

But what is authentic nature? From the opening line of the poem, Fagan undermines any rule of structural integrity and containment. She writes: “You built a house & refused/ to furnish it” (59). The structure of the house – or, metaphorically, the poem itself, and the notion of what nature is – is shown immediately to be empty. Relinquishing any notion of the picturesque in nature, the poem is instead replete with references to machines, iPhones, Cash Converters and the drycleaner. The only references to traditional “nature” – the physicality of the land itself – are the “leaves outside”, which are accompanied by “engines roar”, and the “bromine hills” which the speaker scales “iPhone in hand” (60 – 61). Close juxtaposition of these supposedly opposing elements of machinery and environment intrinsically binds them, indicating a crystalline belief on Fagan’s part: that there is no separation between the human, technological world and the leaves and grasses of nature.

The vision is in accordance with a statement made by Fagan in the introduction to the eco-journal *Ecopoetics and Pedagogies* (2009), in which she insists: “When ecopoetics stands outside of a nature that is constructed according to human-centric principles, a failure of scale and reality occurs” (Fagan et al. 4). Fagan indicates that nature must be denaturalised so that humans can act within – and not outside of – catastrophe. In “The Octet Rule”, Fagan demystifies nature by revealing the human element at play and in constant altercation with it. “Still life with turnips./ My kingdom for a Porsche!” she laughs (61). “Where are you, sweet muse/ of the expert horizon?” she demands, before discovering a note from the drycleaner, clipped into her bag: “*tough luck*” (61). This contemporary poetics questions stereotypes of

the poetic and artistic process with ironic flair, denying seriousness from a still life as well as a traditional muse, thereby undermining a Romantic sensibility toward nature. Instead, Fagan celebrates the unglorified version which remains inseparable from the modern, the technological, and the banal.

Fagan furthers her depiction of technology in nature by engendering an ethical shift in place-making, through examination of human causal pathways. Fagan reconceptualises subjectivity to demonstrate how our actions contribute to environmental degradation of our surroundings and our own bodies. The “bromine” hills that Fagan roams within the text refer to a fire-ravaged area which has previously been coated in fire retardant (61). Fire retardant is a substance primarily composed of the chemical element bromine. When utilised, the substance yields free bromine atoms and is a known contributor to ozone depletion. Situated in the age of extreme weather effects, the earth has been made more prone to fire, resulting in human usage of a substance which in turn causes ozone depletion and even greater extreme weather effects. In one simple image, Fagan thus highlights a circular system between our actions and the catastrophic effects of climate change. Tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption reveals global networks of social injustice and environmental degradation, which Fagan implies should be noted and possibly acted upon.

It’s a call to responsibility which furthers her quest “to unmake alienation... to re-perceive the intimate connections between the minute and the immense” across all materials (Croggon 1). Fagan’s recuperative work is furthered across space and time, as she links modern environmental relations with Australia’s colonial beginnings. “Fancy collars strut like scenery,” she writes, likening humans in an instant to the peacocks of a colonial garden, while directing the reader to abruptly consider how these suited people ended up there (60). Fagan’s eco-poetry incorporates the colonial question of domination and establishment through uncanny observation of the absurdities of modern settler culture. Her experimental technique of splicing unrelated imagery creates a sense of mirage, and confounding:

You could try double blinds,  
upsized screens, the matchless zest  
of lime curtains.       (59)

This sense of confounding – or, the hidden – is heightened through incorporation of pop culture references (“Theme Belvedere”, whose lyrics describe a change in the status quo) alongside visceral imagery of jarring contemporary Australian human relations (“his shirt riding too high/ her burning sober neckline”) (59). “Grates/ doesn’t it,” Fagan demands, highlighting the quickness and ferocity of modern culture which has obscured an untouched past. Fagan thus mimics the competing elements of contemporary culture while implicitly remembering – beyond the lime curtains – “the question of Australia, and recognises beginnings (including colonial ones) as phantasmal immaculate conceptions, in truth vexed and messy” (Dixon-Ritchie 154).

In the final stanza of the poem, Fagan admits: “The octet rule does not apply” (61). This statement is indicative of relinquishment of the rigid rule of *authenticity*, in favour of delving in to the obscure, unravelling the currents of the past and unveiling a nature that is both irrevocably linked to our actions in technology, and to our colonial inheritance. “I find true authority unbearable,” Fagan insists (60), further sabotaging certain “relations of power that inform the everyday” (Brown 2). The over-arching desire for subversion of societal narratives in “The Octet Rule” will be explored further in the second chapter of the exegesis. Fagan’s resistance to authority will be unpacked in regards to recycled language and linearity, as she furthers her rebellion against the hidden while advocating for an experimental language which works toward consciousness expansion.

The strange and blinded enactment of harmful practices toward environment or colonised peoples in the Age of the Anthropocene can be viewed as a condition in which humans, drastically aware of the inadequacy of their lifestyles for global health, nevertheless continue to enact them without any viable alternatives. Ghosh refers to this confusing state of humanity as the “great derangement” (10 – 11), in which cultural desires conceal our own complicity in environmental harm. But there is hope; Ghosh finds possible resolution through renewed consciousness-formation, enabled by a creative practice of writing. As environmental poet Judith Wright describes, the primary eco-poetic concern is “to step over the position of the subject and a reductive form of subjectivity” (Wright qtd. in Cooke 131). The following chapter will explore how Fagan’s stylistic choices and language manipulation work to alter human consciousness, subvert authority and resist inevitable paths to climate destruction. Story-telling and poetics emerge to be one pathway toward revitalisation of the human place on a globalised planet.

## CHAPTER 2: EXPANDING LANGUAGE

In “Letter I”, the first poem in sequence “The Correspondence” (27), Fagan asks: “*What is the use of poets/ in a bereft time?*” The question, posited in epistolary form, asks the reader to consider the potential of the poetic text in relation to contemporary social and political issues within the ecological sphere. Textually, the question is actually preceded by its own answer; in Fagan’s own words, penned immediately prior, “concepts spark and crack/ where vision pauses” (27). The use of poetry in a bereft time is that it extends our awareness beyond deprivation, through linguistic vitality, raw experimentalism and striking affect. Poetry resonates outward from a place of crisis to invigorate our imagination and allow us to experience in a new way the subtleties of the world.

The question of the bearing of poetics nevertheless resonates throughout Fagan’s collection *First Light*, as she speculates, adjusts and experiments with language in an attempt to ignite consciousness to think above and beyond the status quo of contemporary living. To Fagan, it seems that the experimental capacity of poetry may dislocate bourgeois patterns of thought, and may also be instrumental to the necessary “engagement with speculative futures” that action within the Anthropocene era requires (Magrane 4). This chapter will explore Fagan’s approach to language through exploration of the links between language and meaning-making, language and colonialism, language and land and language for subversion and healing. While sceptical toward the colonial inheritance of language, ultimately Fagan places hope in “invention” (97), as a site of human vitality in creation, and as a method of working toward renewed consciousness and societal change for greater ecological wellbeing.

### 2.1 INSCRIPTION TO RECALL A WAY

*First Light* is structured in six sections, with the first sequence of the collection, “Observations on Time, Cargo” acting as an introductory piece to the following sequences. While “Making Place” discussed Fagan’s introduction to ways of *seeing* in “Observations on Time, Cargo”, this section of “Expanding Language” will discuss Fagan’s introduction to ways of *representation* in “Observations on Time, Cargo”.

In the first poem of the sequence “All I can see are weather and its imitators” (3), Fagan establishes a line of relation between the act of seeing, and the act of writing, to eventually highlight how the construction of self is informed by how we represent the external world in language.

Things and appearances are moving,  
positive freight lines up  
in letters.

Inscription will recall a way  
bent as a polished tooth toward  
objects of sense. (3)

Here, Fagan evokes a sense of subjectivity in perception, as the external world of “things and appearances” appears to the internal gaze, to then pass onto the page, in the form of written “letters”. Emphasis on perceived *movement* in the outside world evokes a sense of fluidity, spaciousness and boundlessness in temporal space which is present throughout the entirety of the book and which makes itself more apparent whenever Fagan is positioned closely to nature, such as in the much later poem “Authentic Nature”, wherein Fagan describes the “vaulted sky/ where sun gives shape to limbs” (71). This sense of geometric boundlessness is emphasised in “Observations on Time, Cargo”, through the images of “lines of hills”, “polychrome rocks” and the “field of apprehended birds” (8 – 10). As described in chapter one, these images portray a fractal relation of interconnectedness in vast and echoing space. Nevertheless, Fagan strives to relay that spacious landscape through writing, where “letters” and “inscription” work to represent the fluid external world onto paper (3).

The line of connection between sight and representation in language is emphasised in this opening sequence through use of a language of trade. Words such as “freight” and “cargo” act to symbolically transport the external world into inscription (3). Fagan’s declaration that “inscription will recall a way” identifies an intention in her poetic text, *First Light*: to write toward “sense”, that is, knowledge or ways of understanding (3). In Fagan’s representation, this way may not be clear and straight like a highway, but instead be “bent”

like a “polished tooth” (3). Here, the bendiness of the proposed path to sense recalls Jacques Derrida’s emphasis in “Plato’s Pharmacy” on the ecstatic, malleable and winding process of writing as play. In Derrida’s conception, infinitely transformative and self-creating truths within language are revealed through a “force of play” in writing (Derrida 65). The “polished tooth” of Fagan’s vision induces that sense of magic in play, with the tooth invoking some kind of mystic association with tooth fairies, maturation and wisdom.

In “Observations on Time, Cargo”, Fagan’s writing proceeds to relish unabatedly in playfulness in language which skirts “the ‘bright obvious’ still-house of speech” (5). Instead of stasis, the written word meanders on the edges of perceptibility; images appear always in liminality, in half-darkness and uncertain, moving, shifting. “Awareness comes in material shades,” Fagan writes (7), and that’s certainly true as her work reveals itself in stages, with a gradual feeling “like a long series of cabins” (6). There is emphasis on depth in space or “gravity” (9), and of eyes moving to discovery, to “see, redouble –/ This second or another– ” – to make us look again (10). While this opening sequence is tantalising in its meandering, half-lit quality, simultaneously it is driven by an undercurrent of movement established by *inscription recalling a way*. The directional movement is encouraged by Fagan’s rolling introduction of imagery shifting us from one alluring moment to another “as though visiting a dream” (6). Reading her poems, we “skip from a dog’s geometric howl/ to intimacies bawled below” (8), in search of the enticing “peaches/ tied in the richest windows” (5). These images flit at the edges of our consciousness as we smoothly travel between them. They contribute to a feeling of fluidity also in Time – “a beam expanding in phase”– which seems full with the possibility of unbounded human consciousness (11).

Driven to explore and to relate to the world sensually, what becomes apparent in “Observations on Time, Cargo” is that writing and ideas *flourish* where vision pauses, to shoot forth into fruitfulness. As Fagan writes: “A new morning is steady cargo. Still blank ocean” (9). A new morning, blank like a page, contains multitudes and possible depths of meaning and diversity, ready to be revealed like the fullest peaches.

How simply words cluster,  
love and death, maroon resolve  
folding to a page. (7)

Here, that word *resolve* hints at some pending resolution to be unfolded on paper, while the declaration itself – how simply! – revels in the capacity for the literary to meld and ponder macroscopic issues of love and death, instantaneously, craftily. Two disparate concepts are melded into one. Fagan continues: “The soles of feet are elegant originals” (7), explicitly referencing the metric feet of the poem, as she likens them to the soles of human feet which wander and link, creating meaning in motion as they travel across places and ideas. The line is a beautiful evocation of what Magrane calls “geopoetics in practice”: an interlinking of place and poetry which concerns past, present and the possibility of shaping new futures through “a route-finding practice” (Magrane et al. 1). In “Observations on Time, Cargo”, Fagan perceives the creative control of the poet who, in moving through space figuratively, geographically and literally, holds the potential to re-make meaning in relation to society and land, to “cut the street like old super-eights” (11). It is established that language and poetry to the poet’s mind hold great capacity in meaning-making, and that this will be unfolded in the later sequences.

## 2.2 AN INHERITANCE OF COLONIALISM

In “Observations”, Fagan’s alignment of “letters”, “inscription” and “apostrophes” with “freight” and “cargo” also highlights an inheritance of colonialism still present in language that is associated with the act of trade (3). This recognition underlines the complicity of the English language in the dispossession of Aboriginal lands, as well as the destruction of ecological landscapes. The concern is expanded upon in two later poems: the poem “Proviso” from the centos sequence “First Light” (16), and the poem “Authentic Nature” from the sequence of the same name (73).

One of the undertakings of Fagan’s collection as a whole, then, is to utilise language in a way which recognises the violence concealed within it; this is decolonial work in line with Rose’s theory of recuperation which proposes “searching out the hidden histories and the local possibilities that illuminate alternatives to our embeddedness in violence” (Rose 24). In “Proviso” (16), Fagan explicitly describes the genocidal aspect of colonisation, while highlighting the role of language in perpetrating that violence:



Driving down Broadway  
I told my child: it was never yours,  
only a naming call, pitched their tents  
& destroyed whole nations  
eight miles from here. (16)

The poem is apparently set in New York City, given that the speaker is driving down Broadway, and that the cento is composed of poems by New York poet Anne Waldman (Fagan 99). “Broadway” might also refer to the Australian city of Sydney, the poet’s closest city which hosts a main street of that name (16). This is the beauty of the cento form; it combines contextual possibilities across space and time, broadening the poem’s scope and in this instance, highlighting a shared colonial history.

In the above excerpt, the speaker informs their assumedly white child that the land is not theirs, nor was it ever, and that the colonisers began their genocidal occupation simply with “a naming call” (16). Fagan here recognises the sinister colonial capacity and historical legacy of language. The “naming call” – designating ours, and empty, not yours – has instigated the violent removal of people, animals and vegetation, justified by the false assertion that *there was never anything here before*. In Australia, this colonial falsity has been described by ecological thinkers as the “Great Australian Emptiness” (White 15). Australia was founded on *terra nullius* – that false and violent declaration which paved the way for genocide and dispossession across all peoples and species. As Fagan implies, it is colonial language which has allowed for the construction of the American or Australian settler town that is “founded on a hologram” (16). These countries exist as illusory space and maintain an amnesiac relationship to the past, based on forgetting.

Fagan links a linguistic role to this violent forgetting, describing words which are “large enough to contain you: during,/ pine, upend, the eating of men” (16). Words which perpetrate, words which destroy, words which disappear whole cultures and ecological systems. It is enough to think of the renaming of every place in Australia, despite having held Aboriginal nominations for thousands of years – Sydney for Gadigal, Melbourne for Naarm and Brisbane for Meanjin, to name a few. The poem is also dedicated to “Election Day” (Fagan 16). Given that the cento was composed on November 11 2008 (99), one can assume that the election referred to is the USA Presidential Election held on November 4, 2008. On that day,

the first African American president in history, Barack Obama, was elected to office. Something to celebrate, then, but as a proviso, the poem acts as a qualification to the election, as the poet reminds the reader and imaginary child that the political spectacle is imposed on a place that was never theirs.

Fagan further portrays wariness of the political sphere and the anxiety of observing a future unfold, as states fall to either red or blue. She writes: “We live in a burning sideline,/ same old fetch” (16). Here, the nature of politics and decision-making in capitalist society is highlighted, wherein the public is largely relegated to the side-line, watching as the powers that be battle it out at centre stage. Fetch is archaic English for a stratagem or trick, and use of the word again draws attention to the illusory quality of society. How much self-determined power does the public really hold, within a structure in which we are continually relegated to the sideline?

As mentioned in chapter one, the fifth sequence of the book “Authentic Nature” is largely concerned with questions of authenticity and subversions of power, as well as the relationship between language, land and subjectivity, which will be explored in the next section of the chapter. The poem for which the sequence is named, also called “Authentic Nature”, is interesting firstly for its consideration of a transposed colonialism in the intellectual sphere. Fagan considers how European theorists are continually applied to settler-society landscapes, writing:

Some kind of transplanted integrity  
has taken place, the words  
and rhymes of older empires  
fraying under eucalypts (74)

Fagan recognises the imperial aspect of continuing to apply European thinking to ancient Aboriginal land, which is replete with its own history of story-tellers and thinkers. The sense of superficiality of the colonial application is emphasised through Fagan’s use of the clinical-sounding term *transplant*, which describes some foreign material moving to an unrelated place. The “lessons/ of an unlevelled meeting” between one country, imposing itself on another place, are listed by Fagan in her mention of two European medicinal plants – arnica and eyebright – which have been introduced as medicinal balms in Australia but which

simultaneously obscure an Aboriginal vision of native plants, such as varieties of acacia used traditionally for arthritis, sleep and indigestion (Fagan 74, Gott).

“Authentic Nature” takes on the task of undermining the authority of the “rhymes of older empires”, by instead digging “for a different language,/ a new balm for the bruise/ of lost opportunities” (74). This new balm is found within the meditation of the poem itself, which thoughtfully addresses the problem of authenticity through language.

A long shadow passes  
    over the garden. Yesterday  
I buried the bones, feathers and skulls  
    of two magpies fallen  
from a nest during storms,  
  
each bundle like coal,  
    a plain music of repair.  
Something about the gesture  
    troubles me. Authenticity  
comes at a price it seems –           (73)

The tone of this poem is intimate and soulful. Its softness begins the process of a “music of repair” for the wrongs committed through language of the past. The bodies of the magpies represented as bundles “like coal” portray the gentleness of the moment of burial and a feeling of closeness between creatures. Nevertheless, the speaker is troubled by the meaninglessness of the act, given the vast ecological destructions at work in the world which the speaker is likely complicit in. Fagan questions the role of the ego in such an act, which might serve only to appease the human mind without contributing to any authentic ecological solutions. She then extends this doubt onto language itself, writing:

neo-con cons make *truth* a panacea  
for *ego* while nature becomes  
a cipher for speak-easy  
consumption tactics   (73)

Here Fagan highlights the commodification of words such as “truth” which are utilised to act as a “cipher” – a disguised way of writing, a code – for more digestible “consumption tactics”. Reference to “authenticity” coming at a “price” further highlights the transactional quality of our lifestyles, wherein we pay-off and shy away from ecological responsibility, by using language or certain acts to hide, disguise and distance the realities of our choices.

But the poem “Authentic Nature” plays an important role in addressing these problems of authenticity, through its literary reflection related to decolonial and ecological thinking. Inclusion of the final phrase “the obvious humidity” draws attention to a settler Australian discourse which has played a part in obscuring connection to authentic place (74). It is a phrase which stated repetitiously has succeeded in evacuating areas of northern Australia of historical and cultural significance in language, all the while furnishing settler “Aussies” with some vacuous sense of national self. *It’s not the heat that’ll get ya, it’s the humidity!* – the trope goes. It is this kind of colonial and commodified language which Fagan’s poem works to subvert. The poem asserts authenticity in its own right as a meditative expression of the author’s relationship with problems of authenticity.

### 2.3 LANGUAGE, LAND AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The sequence “Authentic Nature” also plays a part in positioning the poet in intimate relation to the more-than-human world. This is particularly true of “Echo Sounding” (63) and “Robertson Panegyric” (68). These works echo with a vitality in language which has reverberated through nature, the human consciousness and into the text of the poem.

“Echo Sounding” is a five-part poem which traces the river of sensuality between the external natural world and the speaker’s interiority. In the opening part, Fagan establishes the speaker’s openness to the external landscape, writing:

My dreams rise and fall  
like a yacht

roped to the day. (63)

The image of the rising and falling yacht is one that celebrates harmonious interaction between man and the natural elements. This portrayed intimacy is furthered in the observation of a “white-bellied eagle [which]/ lifts its catch” at exactly the same moment the poet’s “thoughts arrest/ overhead for a second” (65). In this instance, the poet’s thoughts directly mirror the bird catching its prey. There is direct relativity between human consciousness in dreams and thought, and the shimmering environment. It’s a gorgeous moment of reflectivity which furthers that sense of connectedness between all things discussed in chapter one. There is implicit recognition here that literary criticism or poetics can no longer be written “as if it were a matter of human agency alone” (Clark, *Threshold Concept* 116). Rather, language and thought are intrinsically tied up within the patterns of the nature.

In the second part of the poem, Fagan furthers her portrayal of a co-harmonious and supportive relationship between nature and human. She describes the ancient forms – “primitive mangroves” – which exist and flourish along the shoreline, juxtaposed alongside the man-made yacht of modernity (63). Describing the “shell grit/ scrubbing the hull”, Fagan imbues some kind of intentional relativity between the grit which acts serviceably upon the boat, simultaneous to the boat moving fluidly over the water (64). The clipped style of these two-line verses imbues spaciousness into the text of the poem, which visually mimics the boat, bobbing atop the water. It is through the poetic text that harmonious relation between man and nature is celebrated. Fagan utilises the language and form of poetry as a positive force of intimacy which exists beyond an extractive view of nature. Nature is called as a witness to human experience, and human experience remains responsive to nature’s energies.

In part three of the poem, the atmosphere of sun and serenity evolves into a feeling of tension, as the sun begins to set:

The sun is a portrait  
of necessity. First equation:  
  
velocity of wind  
or the coming dark. (64)

In these stanzas, Fagan depicts an external world that is mathematically bound to cycles and repetition, but also necessity. No longer the fuzzy vision of harmonious sun on water, Fagan highlights how human consciousness and activities are tied to the natural cycles; when the environment changes, so too do our feelings, and our capacity to act. It's a poignant recognition of our dependence on the working order of the environment, and one which reflects on a larger scale, our entanglement with predicted greater upheavals of climate change. Fagan furthers her portrayal of tension through incorporation of a triad of sex, death and fear:

My back is hard against  
the deck, nylon spills

ballooning from the reel  
in scattered loops.

Cry out, scale and living tooth,  
pail of chicken gut

tips over where your foot  
catches mine.           (64)

The speaker's hard back evokes anxiety at the shifting weathers and closing darkness, but positioned as it is against the deck, simultaneously suggests sensuality through a memory of sex, in hardness. From the opening of the poem, the speaker's memory has referred to another human present in their consciousness, and possibly present upon the boat's deck ("your jawline" (63)). The nylon spilling over the hard deck visualises a feeling of pleasure in release, while the ensuing "cry out" is pungently sexual in its evocation of orgasm (64). Sex combines with elements of life ("living tooth") and death ("pail of chicken gut") as two humans catch feet within the world of weathers (64). This is life embodied in the text of the poem, in all its pain, lust and glory. Fagan refuses to shy away from an ecological perspective of human-like-animal, pitching and swaying in love, sex and death, atop the water.

The final part of the poem is a complex representation of the interactions between language, land and human consciousness:

Cloud delivers the jetty  
into parable.

Metal reflections  
show a cat landing a fish,

transfixed as Narcissus  
above the deep. (65)

Here, the cloud which acts upon the jetty actively transmits a lesson to be learned from nature, if one is open to do so. The poet recognises a kind of agency in the natural world from which human consciousness can grow. There is also recognition of the intrinsic element of nature, embedded in classic literary tales. Human subjectivity is positioned in relation to the world, in a way that is open and perceptive. This quiet sense of subjectivity is furthered in Fagan's final representation of the cat, "transfixed as Narcissus/ above the deep" (65). In this image, the viewer initially perceives human ego through the "metal reflections" which bring to mind the Greek figure Narcissus, who stared lovingly at his own reflection in water for eternity (65). But the image is complex; in reality the cat is wholly absorbed in its task of fishing. Fagan recognises the beauty of a creature absorbed in the cycles of life and death, irrelevant of ego.

"Echo Sounding" thus works to depict a human consciousness which is curious and receptive to nature. The poetic text is celebrated as a means for dismantling what Deborah Bird Rose calls "narcissistic singularity" in the self, by "finding dialogue with other people and with the world itself" (Rose 21). Formation of human subjectivity in relation to the non-human world is furthered in the later poem also in "Authentic Nature", entitled "Robertson Panegyric". "Robertson Panegyric" evokes place through the panegyric form, which is traditionally a published text or speech in praise of someone or something.

Out where sun-sweet grasses  
           push at eucalyptus stumps,  
 where piney hulks  
 restrain the sky and cockatoos  
           crack succour  
  
 from sappy cones  
           before rising in a whump  
 of jewelly wings, where jumping  
 jodies teem cyrillic  
           over littered bark     (68)

Fagan's use of language in this poem is sonorous and echoing. Alliteration and assonance within the phrase "sun-sweet grasses" evokes on the tongue that sensuality of the blades, shimmering gently against smooth trunks; similarly in the phrase "cockatoos/ crack succour" the technique of hard sound c alliteration passing onto contained assonance portrays intimately the animal being, absorbed in its action, similar to the cat in "Echo Sounding" (68, 66). Further, the sensual drip of the sap in "sappy cones" is wonderfully evoked, again through emphasis on smooth s sounds, while the onomatopoeic "whump" is joltingly suggestive of the forceful wings of the cockatoos, at work in the air. The word "jodies" is Australian slang for a type of jumping ant (68). Its use here pokes fun at a settler relationship to the bush which tends toward burlesque of the outback and the human position within it. This type of parodying language may have evolved as a response to a perceived alienated and ambiguous position within the country by many early convicts-*cum*-settlers, who initially conceived of Australia as exile (Rose 45).

In this poem, attentiveness to nature actively enlivens the poetic language; there is no attempt at human projection in the surrounds, only an explorative and playful endeavour at depicting that sensuality, vivacity and teeming spirit of the world which is informed by an active listening (Miller 327). It is almost as if Fagan provides a *sounds in translation* of "the cool world/ closing in" (70). This translation is led by recognition of the subjectivity of non-human beings, rather than any egocentric imposition on them. Fagan pairs the more-than-human world with verbs in the active form, to emphasise a wilful activity in nature, an



aliveness, an exciting and touchable energy: “salt” is “fizzing”, “flies” are “robbing focus” and “sheep retreat in jerky trot” (69 – 70). This picture of a vivacious natural world resonates with Plumwood’s eco philosophy – that we must work to perceive the agency of nature, so as to grasp more fully the inherent value of the environment beyond ourselves, and consequently, to reimagine our connected place within it (“Active Voice” 9).

Language thus emerges in “Echo Sounding” and “Robertson Panegyric” as a tool for listening and for relating to place in a way which recognises the many beings which inhabit it. Consequently, it is also the stepping stone toward human consciousness reformation, with the goal of establishing a subjectivity that is open and humble, and less restricted by authority in society.

## **2.4 POETRY AS SUBVERSION**

Fagan’s use of language for subversion is most evident within “The Octet Rule”, the opening poem of sequence “Authentic Nature” (59 – 61). This poem has already been addressed in chapter one for its subversion of any notion of authenticity in nature, and its representation of the intertwinement of the natural world, the technological and the modern. Here, the focus will be on subversion of inevitability in the literary text, which simultaneously reflects subversion of seemingly inevitable power structures within society. As we recall, Fagan “like[s] the idea of an unquiet poetry,” (qtd. in Brown 2), and “The Octet Rule” is certainly unquiet in its use of juxtapositions, splicing and outrageous imagery, which advocate for renewed consciousness formation through poetic experimentation.

As described in chapter one, the title and structure of “The Octet Rule” are aligned; with eight lines in each stanza of the poem, and by and large eight beats in each line, the structure mimics the scientific octet rule which states that an atom with eight electrons in its outer shell is at peak stability. The entirety of the poem is however based upon the formulation of a rigid structure which is repeatedly broken throughout. This resonates true with the opening image of the poem, “you built a house & refused/ to furnish it” (59). Already this has been shown to undermine authenticity in nature; simultaneously, the metaphorical refusal of furnishing also undermines the validity of the structural “house” of the poem and consequently, any inevitability in meaning for both the poetic text and wider societal narratives.

The idea of structural subversion is made exemplary within the fourth stanza of the poem, in which Fagan demands: “So what if machines parody all future empires?”, before mentioning “an instinct for novels” (60). This statement pinpoints a certain trait in contemporary culture that is infatuated by the linearity, or “realistic attitude” of the novel form, as was so vehemently denigrated in Andre Breton’s famous 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* (6 – 7). In the *Manifesto*, Breton drastically dismisses the rationality and inevitability of the novel form, emphasising the necessity of poetic departure from the logical so as to explore the capacity of imagination in literature. Similarly, Fagan seems unimpressed with the “purely informative” style of literature (Breton 7), writing: “All this talk about meaning/ is making me dizzy” and “don’t lose it/ when your books start acting/ recklessly & telling people/ to shut up” (60). The poem actively seeks to undermine *fixed* meaning. Instead, it is characterised by short, sharp sentences which swiftly swing “in circles” to create meaning which is outward and “cylindrical” (60).

The result is a boundary-crossing piece which continually subverts linear narrative, while painting a picture of a contemporary lifestyle that is simultaneously isolated, highly conscious and witty:

Anyone else  
on this damn ship? He complained  
about the spelling but I hung on,  
brilliant as nowhere special to go. (59)

Here, Fagan wonders aloud whether anyone is following her wayward creative act, while conversely, a male authority complains about technicalities of the banality of spelling. Fagan hangs on, however, shining through her poetics, despite avoiding all sense of inevitability as encapsulated in “nowhere special to go”. Instead, the experimental capacity of poetry is held open toward a goal of enriched consciousness, as indicated by the epigraph of the poem, “The mind turns around, no longer facing in its direction” (Cage qtd. in Fagan 69). With this line, Fagan forewarns a consciousness shift, informed by the avant-garde experimentations of composer John Cage, which were known to disassociate listeners from the rigidity of their perceived context, and throw their thinking into alternate modes. “Comedy/ is a kind of basic displacement” Fagan highlights (60), and it is this that her text consistently achieves:

displacing fixed meaning, as she undermines any separation between nature and the modern world, “subtract[ing] components” and reinvigorating age-old phrases with grating unexpected imagery, as exemplified by “Still life with turnips!” (61)

Fagan’s subversion of linearity and expectation in content then extends to subvert wider societal narratives of consumerism and consumeristic modes of being. She utilises the image of the “plug-in devotional icons at/ *Cash Converters*” which make her think “about fake annunciation & tides/ of cheap belief” (61). In Fagan’s vision, consumerism appears to be the new religion; it provides appeasement to the troubled anthropocentric ego, but ultimately, manifests as “a kind of basic loneliness” far from any wholesome nourishment (61). The word “annunciation” also indicates a concern with commodification in language (61); as Fagan states in “Ecopoetics and Pedagogies”:

My main gripe with ecopoetics is a drift into transcendent “solution-speak” that dilutes criticism while maintaining the status quo. Comfortably green. Fashionably eco. There’s no point piling up the bland-out (Beckett: fail again, fail better). More energy, less mainstreaming! (Fagan et al. 3)

The “tides of cheap belief” mentioned in “The Octet Rule” refer not only to cheap items bought religiously in society but also to a fake annunciation in language which purports to live consciously and ecologically (61). This concern ties in with the previously discussed problem of ecological authenticity in “Authentic Nature” (73). Fagan here makes a mockery of mainstreamed eco language by declaring “Aggravate/ purity” (61). She draws attention to the massive role of consumption and commodity in our lives, as channelled through our shopping, when she writes: “Say hello to the supermarket” (60). Her statement “My kingdom for a Porsche!” is a humorous and humble indication that despite our best attempts at living ecologically, we all harbour fondness for consumeristic items but are able to direct more energy into altering the ways in which we think and desire (61).

The poem consistently aggravates thinking through stylistic experimentation which not only unchains it from linguistic inevitability, but also unchains the eco world from an inevitable “supermarket” future (60). In Fagan’s world, the “sky exceeds/ prediction” (61); there is always more, there is the unknown and it is up to us to explore those possibilities, in both ecological and artistic consciousness. Her skittish techniques of splice and juxtaposition

ultimately undermine the stability of the octet rule which she has claimed to be exploring. “Usually/ have to break it,” Fagan admits, “Turn up/ mind radio & sample freely” (61). The world envisioned – “still *this world here*, but transformed” – is one in which art is fundamental to resuscitating human consciousness within the environment (Fagan et al. 1).

## 2.5 HEALING AND EXPANSIVENESS

While language as colonial inheritance has been depicted as a historical, destructive force within the cento “Proviso”, simultaneously language emerges within that same poem as a vital tool for re-thinking human consciousness in relation to the land and its first peoples. In “Proviso”, the mother, telling her child of America’s colonial history (“[they] destroyed whole nations/ eight miles from here” (16)) engages in story-telling to break an amnesiac relation to the past, by recognising the “weight of history” and witnessing past and present violence (Rose 14). The on-going presence of possessive and destructive forces on the land is depicted within the statement “We do this landscape/ crowned and slow” (16). Here, the verb *do* is indicative of an aggressive relationship to the land based on action and extraction, rather than harmonious interaction, while “crowned” carries forth an on-going imperialistic element from the past. The text of the poem holds both the memory of violence and recognition of on-going implicit violence; this is important ecological work in line with Rose’s theory that “to write as if the suffering of those who were harmed never mattered would be to perpetuate violence in the present” (Rose 14). Fagan’s construction of subjectivity in the poem thus attempts to embrace a multi-sided vision, relative to both Indigenous and western communities.

Fagan’s experimentation with construction of the perceptive self, progresses throughout the cento sequence “First Light”, as she writes toward dissolution of the egotistical subjective consciousness (Fagan 14 – 24). This is achieved first and foremost through the notable form of the poems; as centos, all ten are composed from many other texts. In the appendix notes, Fagan states: “The cento is a Roman form of sampling or collage poetry that dates from the third century”; she then lists all source texts and authors (98). It is astounding to note that some of these poems are made from over ten source texts. Fagan has combined and modified – effectively *recycling* old works – to create brave and bold pieces which are not only ecological in the sense that they repurpose the old to make anew, but

which also undermine any sense of the egotistical subjective self, instead embodying connectedness between all things and thought. These pieces establish a sense of community through the sharing of ideas and language across space and time. They encourage reflection across a range of source texts, while instigating a new vein of thought. The overall effect of the centos is to propagate a language which writes outwardly and collaboratively with other poets and thinkers, toward reinvigorated human consciousness.

The poem “Cinematico” is a prime exemplar of the work of the centos in dissolving the subjective self and thinking toward expansion. The poem opens:

This makes no difference.  
A sentence  
the sentence  
makes no difference between.       (18)

Fagan calls into question the rigidity of language which attempt to structurally fix and label the external world and its beings. The detrimental effect of defining living essences of the world in an unyielding and separatist language is expressed. Fagan continues: “Array her in cloth of gold,/ she does not remember any oranges” (18). Here, language as a sugared coat of gold actually works to distance the described being from their rich and wholesome self. Instead, Fagan writes not to define the external, but to expand it and link it with other beings. She accumulates a combination of plant-life and expressive items within the text, to suggest the multiplicities of self, writing:

Assemble moss roses  
china lilies plants articles  
and and and and moving  
completely in every direction.  
Dancing.

The subjective self is disbanded into elements of the alluring, external world, which dissolves outward into everythingness, like light. This description actually mimics the recycled texts of the centos which connect and combine thinkers across space and time. “The scene opens

with a storm, rain but no hail,” Fagan writes, immersing the “figure” outwardly within the weathers of the world, incorporated but never battered. The poem is gentle in its subversion of linguistic and subjective rigidity; as a manifestation of many lines of thought, it works toward a mode of being that strives in every direction, but harmoniously and humbly.

This language of expansiveness – and consequently, expanded way of being – is elaborated upon within the cento “Dadabase” (17). Fagan’s techniques of splice and juxtaposition are made immediately apparent in the construction of a Dada-esque conglomeration of words and images which, like in the “The Octet Rule”, work to undermine the authorities of linear rationality and bourgeois values. “Neo-classicism discovers/ mice” writes Fagan, immediately envisioning holes within the framework of classicist art. The poem acts as a “paroxysm”, a sudden outburst of creation which is performative (“hello honey this is cinema”) and which “consolidate[s]/ the harvest of exact calculations” through its consolidation of many poetic texts. Written in a truly surrealistic style, which combines dream-like imagery to potent effect, Fagan demands: “Has genius ever spoken to you/ about accordions?” The poem asks us to reconsider the egotistical drive behind literary and artistic creations, upending traditional emphasis on individualist creation, and spurring us instead to imaginative practice and collaboration.

Emphasis is made on the importance of the literary in forming and invigorating consciousness.

Clearly there’s an emergency, an Australian  
treatment for belief. Why do we choose  
such dark places for our books? (17)

This “emergency” is the anthropological crisis, reflected in our position at the brink of climate disaster, but it is also an emergency in thinking, exemplified by “an Australian ... belief”. The “Australian” way of conservative and defensive thinking is identified here, and Fagan’s solution to altering the status quo is through an emphasis on “books”. She ironically mentions writing poems “to go with adbreaks”, returning to consider the role of commodity in our lives and suggesting a lean toward a poetics that diverts from society’s consumeristic tendencies, while inevitability remaining entrenched in them. Indeed, the affinity between commercial culture and the literary in the modern world remains strong, as Fagan humorously draws a

parallel between the Star Wars theme *dada dadada dada* and the nihilistic art and literary movement, Dada, which seeks to shatter the bourgeois realities of the world. The effect of the poem is to satirise ostentatious trajectories within the creative world which aspire to “genius” and projected “sainthood”, while simultaneously placing importance on an invigorated art and literature which can assist contemporary thought toward new and unexpected modes of being, beyond the stalemate of the status quo.

The final poem of the book, “Thought’s Kilometre” (81), is Fagan’s last hurrah on the experimental and powerful potential work of language toward consciousness reformation and resistance to linguistic and philosophical limitation. The poem makes up the majority of the final sequence of the book, of the same name, “Thought’s Kilometre” (80). Having already subverted authoritarian prosaic modes of being in “The Octet Rule” (60) and “Dadabase” (17), this poem has a more spacious alignment. As quoted from Seamus Heaney in the epigraph: “Make your study the unregarded floor” (qtd. in Fagan 81). Let’s look where we usually would not, Fagan implies. Simultaneously: Let’s look at the foundations on which we stand. The title of the poem immediately evokes a sense of distance, of spaciousness where one’s thoughts might dally and extend, unrestricted. The sequence opens:

Our desire to confine meaning knows itself impossible but this  
cannot arrest heat and wanting  
Blue time continues, placement in sensual flux  
We insist upon intervals that give stillness to dispersal and watch  
the running window as it catches the exact turn of an  
afternoon (81)

In this opening stanza, Fagan highlights the very human desire to insist upon static moments in things which are fluid and “running”, like the path of the sun as it turns the afternoon. The “intervals” which we insist upon are labels, measures of separation that are formed as a lens, like a “window” to provide some sense of meaning to human consciousness. Fagan returns to consider the link between language and meaning-making in subjectivity, writing: “To observe, letting words write us, embodied in every nerve/ Space is clouding over and we fall in” (81). Words are signifiers which are taken up in the body, and in the earth, and without them we could be adrift in consciousness like clouded space. “Language resurrects beauty and sites it

in muscle,” Fagan continues (82). It seems that Fagan posits language as distinctly *signifier* – a nominal tool which defines meaning in our surroundings by fixing it to earthy form. The potential of language can resurrect beauty – just think to the evocative sounds of “Authentic Nature” – but it also has a tendency to confine, and confine within the material.

That tendency emerges in a later stanza of “Thought’s Kilometre”, as Fagan touches on the commodification of language. She writes:

On the close heel of a century the television war transforms into  
a supernet spectacle of Cultural Facts available to online  
subscribers

Baffled again by taboo

People reach for description (85)

Fagan seeks to portray the extent to which people rely on description for meaning-making in their lives, and how an obsession with language can confine us to our material technologies, as well as the digital world. The reliance of people on description for meaning-making is evident in online and social media realms, in which the “self” is expressed and re-expressed through different forms of linguistic and visual language. It is also evident within the culture of identity politics, in which language is synonymous with self-making. The phrase “supernet spectacle of Cultural Facts” highlights a hungry absorption of language within society, as well as its existence transactionally, in an age in which information is synonymous with cultural power. Fagan is wary of the transactional sphere of language. She demonstrates its superficial nature through the alliteration and inherent burlesque of the phrase “supernet spectacle”. The issue resonates with Amitav Ghosh’s statement concerning language and art, in which *modes of concealment* mask the harsh realities of an anti-ecological and fast-paced existence within the contemporary world (Ghosh 11). We live blinded by our own cultural practices.

Fagan instead suggests use of a poetic language which expands toward “total consciousness” similar to that found in “dreams” (84). This potentially expanded consciousness is alike to those “games” which Fagan describes playing as a child; they were “different as they happened after pallid sun had set upon the early afternoon, leaving us to recreate dailiness from memory, starred by night and impossible to verify” (86). Playing – both physically, and with language, experimentally – in darkness, permits the children to



travel further than before, to be adventurous, to trial, and to relinquish their attachment to “dailiness” (86) – the routine and the usual. Within this newfound freedom, Fagan emphasises: “We learn to trust our inky borders” (86). Poetry and its method of “moving sideways” can help to generate a space to better understand ourselves and our surroundings (87). In contrast to a commodified and fast-paced interaction with words, Fagan alights upon a language which drifts into dreamscape so as to free our minds from contemporary life – toward expansiveness of self.

Rather than remaining egotistical and imperialistically “at the centre of utterance”, “Thought’s Kilometre” thus displaces the subjective self to consider “how being a subject inhabits meaning” (Harrison 135). The effect is that the subject is detached from the digital, and dissolved into the fabric of a textual universe, which refuses to prioritise the narcissistic individual, but which drifts “strewn and touching” in images, light and ideas (Fagan 95). This kind of language is deeply entwined with nature: “A wanted tide [which] empties into alphabets and moves on, filling and/ refilling, comfortably elusive” (86). It’s a language which knows the limits of language itself, like the “rivers” which mean more than “their names” (86). To Fagan, there is depth, beauty and spaciousness in the world, and in our minds. There is room to move, to adjust ways of thinking and living, through an altered relationship with the medium of language.

It is emphasised, however, that through language, Fagan seeks to address very concrete concerns, including “a blazing future...predicted/ A koel, the vertical air, a series of summers” (95). Here, reference to the blazing heat of predicted Australian summers is forewarned. For Fagan, language is a tool which might be used to make change in responsiveness: “Poetry waking thought”(96).

Stories step up to receive guests, to ask about power drawing  
inconclusive ends, marking slow time  
A white poem a blue poem a landscape poem  
History stations us, our real regard for presence accepted in  
tomorrow’s tongue (96)

A believer in the power of the literary to address people from all walks of life, Fagan describes a kind of diversity in poetry – “white... blue... landscape” – which might collaborate toward

action through linguistic experimentalism; “History stations us”, she writes (96). History has positioned us at a crucial crossroads. If as humans we truly believe in a sustained biological diversity, in harmonious existence with creatures and land, and in a “real regard for *presence*” (96, emphasis added), then we must work to achieve equity and justice for all beings and facets of the earth. As Fagan depicts, change must occur first and foremost through language, through embracing “tomorrow’s tongue” toward new ways of being and thinking, so that the “roots and leaves and rain” might remain and flourish, each as they are, irreplaceable (97).

## CONCLUSION

Fagan's emphasis on the role of the literary in creating space to address ecological and cultural problems, resonates with the recently released Australian essay collection *Living with the Anthropocene* (2020). In their introduction, editors Cameron Muir, Kirsten Wehner and Jenny Newell write:

Cultural problems, to our minds, are addressed through stories ... [which] reveal and acknowledge as important those aspects of the Anthropocene that won't be visible in the strata a thousand years from now: grief, hope, trauma, generosity, courage, politics, failures, successes and the determination of those finding their way through.

(7)

Fagan differs in her focus on experimentalism in poetic language, rather than prose. But there is a determination in Fagan's poetics which seeks a new and all-encompassing language to heal wounds of the past, and pave the way toward an acceptable future.

For Aboriginal people, story-telling as a mode of healing and consciousness-formation has always been foundational to culture. In "Goolarabooloo Foreign Policy" in *Living with the Anthropocene*, Stephen Muecke describes celebrated Nyigina Elder Paddy Roe, who held "office under his old tamarind tree" and told stories to developers, who came to his land, seeking to destroy it (336). These developers would listen to Paddy's meandering words, before taking their leave of his Country, "feeling better informed and feeling better about Country the way it was" (Muecke 336). Fagan's emphasis on poetic consciousness formation in *First Light* echoes in the wake of an Indigenous Australian tradition, of peaceful use of language in story-telling, to inform, explore and alter consciousness.

Non-Indigenous Australians must now take responsibility for listening to, responding to and incorporating knowledges from Aboriginal tradition into contemporary ecological practice. As Bill Neidjie muses in *Story About Feeling*: "White-European got to be listen this culture/ and this story/ because important one this" (171). The collection *First Light* has shown itself to be rich in an attentiveness toward a diversity of voices, across the human and non-human worlds. It responds – humbly and thoughtfully – to pressing issues regarding

colonialism and ecology, through an exciting and experimental poetics which relishes in play with form. With its directional aspect toward “a different language,/ a new balm” (74), Fagan envisions a renewed outlook in language, which works toward a just and sustainable future, “hope resting with invention” (97).

After reading and re-reading Kate Fagan’s *First Light*, I was struck by the nature of the collection as vigorously experimental, while underpinned by a serene and philosophical appreciation of language at work. Fagan appears to be unafraid of pushing boundaries, of playing with wit, performative voice and allusion, with a keen eye to social and ecological justice. And yet there is an element of *measurement* in her poems which renders them decidedly elegant, however bold.

The following creative component of this thesis comprises my own poetry collection, *Earthworks*. The poems in this sequence resonate with Fagan’s work, in that they are guided by an appreciation of interconnectedness across earth, an affinity with plants and animals, an intellectualism, and importantly, a penchant for play: to make light of the strangeness of life, while testing the formal aspects of the poetry in addressing issues of climactic and social importance. Both works consider the complexities and hypocrisies of living in urban and semi-rural settings, while acutely aware of sensitivity in surrounding nature.

*Earthworks* is made up of three sections: “Echo”, which depicts an inheritance of colonialism in Australian daily life; “Ego”, which comprises 26 poems from A to Z composed through a performative and interior voice; and “Elemental”, which explores a meditative sense of responsibility to the land, for past, present and future generations. Fagan’s work – and my own – seek to create *both* humour and refinement in poetry, all the while believing in the seriousness of the project; in poetry as a vital and experimental mode of thought, which might contribute to a reformed and exciting world.

# **EARTH WORKS**

## **ECHO**

*resounding*

*footsteps*

*sound*

It's so bright the moon  
like a giant lamp  
we're inside of it

.

The sun rises  
below the horizon

The source of tomorrow  
sits bold like egg, along the hairline

Cracks and fissures  
cross the scalp  
navigating the ocean bed

Where the tectonic plates shift,  
the ravine spits histories, plays, legislation

and poems.

The players all take  
to the microbial stage, rubbing shoulders  
swiftly multiplied

The blue whale  
groans and rumbles  
as it glides toward the equator

A mass of meat, skin, blubber and organs  
and fifty years playing in the clear warm water

.

The earth is a sphere of warring

Those marauding ships  
rigged up  
by buccaneers

Named to conquer,  
cut and kill –

The people suffer.

Some creatures shrink  
to fossil, underfoot

Some grow and grow, like cacti

A human rootstalk network  
flourishing  
new growth

The 60,000 year long dream

will not be blitzed  
by invasion.

.

The ocean still tells *that* story.



Of cresting sails and  
boots on sand  
land folk staring, uneasy.

Cities sewn and shot  
like patchwork,  
fences hitched up,  
trunks collapsed one by one...

Some passerines  
burrow  
their eggs in the sedge  
It's harder to hide a human

.

In the office,  
the solicitor takes calls

In the city,  
classes cajole and marching

The craggy mounts of grey rock,  
bare bums,  
once forested by liana vines

The tarmac  
where we travel  
on song lines  
The islands stocking  
mothers and cattle...

It's all bare now, soil  
laugh about it,  
folk drivin' white utes  
arms crooked at the sill,

Smokin' and laughin' about it.

.

The storm cracks and the mountains disappear  
behind a vaporous mist

lightning booms and the birds  
flock upward  
screaming

I run from room to room –

In the morning, kids cycle  
nonchalant  
to the beach

old folk tend to their perfect roses

and teenagers sip on cans of drink  
gleaming

like nothing came before this

.

It's so bright the sun  
so difficult to look  
at it  
face on

## **EGO**

*Antipodean*

*Brassica*

*Calendar*

**A**udrey and I were huddled  
in a mound  
on the daybed (wood and cushions)  
Audrey smoking  
Well, are you coming  
Joet demanded  
clutching Henny Penny  
lovely fat old bird  
unwell though, sporadic  
and morose clucking  
Few onlookers  
Cassie, sage burning  
Audrey dusted off  
her calloused hands  
swiftly, short and robust  
marched to Joet  
the log (where the sacrifice  
was to happen)  
Held the chook  
firm and loving  
around feathered breast  
head and beak  
hanging  
to one side  
All held breath  
Audrey spoke  
Henny Penny old bird  
goodbye darling  
you've been great  
the pain will disappear, soon  
Resigned brown eyes

comb and wattle  
gently flapped  
in marsh breeze  
Audrey paused  
a moment still  
then her hands worked  
in one swift twist  
Crrack, neck broke  
in figure eight  
the hen's neck flipped  
dead  
A minor melancholy  
on Audrey's face  
All breathed out  
as she carried the hen  
to her resting place  
a dug-out hole  
behind the kale  
patch  
I never saw  
such strong hands  
wired with sinew  
kitchen burns  
ribbons of muscle  
up the forearms  
who played catgut  
in the late afternoons  
Life giver  
and death

**B**ecause I said so, darling.

That's no reason  
to do something, is it?  
and I've got my own  
work...

ba-bop badum  
badup badarup brum badarum

rain makes on tin roof  
bedroom rosehip  
hibiscus and

What important work is *that*?

Clay-breaking,  
not to mention  
putting together  
again

I find reason in the garden  
cutting sand with compost  
mud with gypsum

It's just like my father always said about walking

Locate a spring  
drink spring-water

before Mount Franklin throws the dough in

..

he never chased money  
money chased him

dig



**D**on't poison

'till you know it's a weed,

eco is all

if you want it to be... wait

I dig the yard

twill loam and sand

drill pictures, vacuum,

hammer in, baste vegetables

vinegar, roast loin

install the washer, press linen

stack wood

& burn

you're like the kelpie of work-dogs

if only poetry was practical

it is, it's in the land

**E**astern Koel, bird I learned to love

under the new 'tude...

gorging mulberries – green glass

that glossy sheen and red round eye

hopping on spring foliage.

Leave some for me? No, I don't think so.

Spotted the gal, watch out, Ko-els about!

Brown speckled with a yellow gullet

hiding her egg in a honeyeater's nest.

Those smaller wattle-birds, spent

a frantic search for food

to satisfy the nagging youngster

who, now grossly large, migrated north in winter.

Doesn't seem fair now, does it, cuckoo

we all like fruit, besides the carnivores

**F**ull and wasted

that's the kind of life

I'd like to live

whatever I do,

it'll be performative

Plant lavender with a flourish for dramaturgy

Now my eye bends to the watery image

reflecting up at me

a career for the lineation of water

**G**eorge blitzed the Camphor Laurel out back

splinters of wood in mountain soil, shade-free, a veritable scrap-yard!

*Pesky Weeds* I called them, an invasive species,

reassuring myself at the gaping vista

(meanwhile, walkers gawped, peering through our windows)

Well, it's a shame about the family of bower birds

Jane, the neighbour tut tutted, consternation, rocking her orange-headed baby on her hip, Dorian

By the way, d'you mind if the hubby climbs up on your shed? There's a piece

flapping in the wind

When Audrey came over and looked out, she said, gee

this is a bit of a battle scene

## Happy

en plein adventure, when  
thinking is impossible

throw keys, water, oil in car  
go bush, no sandals –

a correlation between nature  
and artefact

graphite, *macchina fotografica*, yoga mat

afterward the ego returns

what is ethical  
how to buzzword

dirt on my face and *maestra* quizzical

*you're an artist*

*you're wondering if there's a point to your work*

I heard Audrey's voice echo  
through the phone line  
*what do you want [ from me ]*

Echoing and echoing  
days of muscular rock  
knotted back, frozen claws

Embedded in desire  
some kind of royal  
unfulfilled yearning, the tease

Asserting myself to hook you in  
dependence, demands...  
I feel I am the weaker person

I heard myself shouting  
damned and ashamed, well  
despite appearances, I am capable

Of checking my colonial instinct

Jack, the first bean struck  
unfurling from the pod  
with gusto  
Across the country  
    shouts for gas  
rang out  
Energy abundant  
    on the lockout  
those sacred trees  
Cut cut cut –  
Plant them fast, then, Jack  
    inevitable growth  
expansion hack  
Take the bamboo rods  
    longitudinally  
prioritise  
trigger-happy

**K**now what it means to feel

“a man and his drill” now  
satisfaction of swivel  
notch in, screw...

Grains and twisting  
woody membrane  
to build something  
for the cure

Build –  
start small,  
make a box and grow  
that box will hold  
the broad beans, now  
those cacti will thrive  
in nutrition-less soil

The castle is for big egos, man  
but your labyrinth is for God<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The final couplet of this poem references Amanda Lohrey, *The Labyrinth*, pp. 175.



Left to his own devices  
if there's a way, fox will find it  
A foot-long patch where the wire  
was higher in the ground  
Fox dug under, scrambled  
and tail up like hound  
snuck the pen of  
duck-bum and chicken  
Honk waddling  
'round the edge  
in dust-cloud and damp  
mother-duck panicking  
honk honk but bum-down  
and all those little eggs beneath  
Mum had just felt  
the first beaks tapping  
Fox lunged and killed  
the drake first, sinking  
canines in plumage and bone,  
threw the roast  
against the wire fence  
no distraction  
Mum came next, and all  
those yellow ducklings'  
heads were torn off  
as they emerged  
from their shells  
Fox jimmied  
the locks of the hen-house  
With no dog around  
fox had time, determination

a russet flash  
there's nowhere to go  
in a chook pen. Unfortunately  
only one chook was left,  
the other strangled  
by Audrey yesterday  
Fox pounced on lonely Bellina  
A flurry of feathers, teeth  
sunk in bird, there were  
no more animals  
in the animal pen  
Fox scurried away, satisfied  
When dog came back from holiday  
he was relieved  
of all doggy duties

**M**onday shopping for wafers, nuts

bananas, a chicken with its feathers all plucked

It's scary when you go into the shopping centre  
that's when I'm most scared

rolling separately up the escalator  
like parsons, self-contained and dirty-looking

It's your fault, how dare you come near

I saved the pope's nose  
gave it to the rat after dinner

**N**o one likes learning

when the parsley's gone to seed

all stringy and beat

but hey – at least there's seed

that's something to talk about

recycling wetting cardboard

activating urine

I don't know what I want

to be when I'm older

keep planting, king parrot

the female is less showy –

what of it

October Joet was leaving to Tasmania  
so she threw a party in the river house

a log cabin built on stone and moss  
each space seemed added as an afterthought

a tree dwelling, cloistered  
by trunks and ferns, plate-eyed possums

and parrots, red and green, staring curiously.  
Joet knows how to throw a party

a few snacks, desserts and eskies of cold beer  
fat smoking joints and ketamine

Gabby commanded the dance floor.  
I WANT EVERYBODY OUT HERE

boogying and bopping  
I CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON YOU TWO

upstairs, Joet propagated  
clusters of home-grown mushrooms

we had a lot to drink  
which I don't like to think about

a couple of beers from yesterday's dinner  
another two pale ales with too much hops

Jamison and ice, Aaron's disgusting chardy  
Henkel and bottles of gin and soda

Thank god I didn't open the wine

Audrey, who dislikes bright light  
sometime after midnight mumbled

about the fairy bulbs glaring on the balcony.  
I found a realm of craft brown paper

made makeshift shades  
while the on-lookers wowed and ummed

later I found myself mid-discussion  
on the similarities between flamenco and trap music

the origins of the Semitic alphabet  
the architecture of the Arabian kingdom of Sicilia

when it was about time to sleep  
Katie and Frankie turned up

pre-dawn, from a night of spinning  
funk records in town

so we all clambered up to the sandstone cave  
to make fire

can we all just get our shit together  
and FUNK and be kind, c'mon, Akira yelled.

The fire wouldn't blow, a lack of oxygen  
so a group endeavour to ignite ensued

I removed log after log, huffing breath  
and burnt my arms before thinking

to prop the ring up with wood,  
usher the air under. The sun rose.

Audrey and I slept in our favourite nook  
cosseted beneath the windows

where branches pushed and the sun streamed in  
quite painfully actually.

In the morning on her way out  
Benny poked her head in

I couldn't go back to sleep  
I had a blinding headache, the shakes, more

How was your night? she asked  
affectionately

I grinned back, it was great  
but I regret everything.

**P**erhaps your observation skills

are good – the counsellor said –

in fact, I am amazed

at your observational skills.

You clearly provide

a strong support for your brother

and resonate, for your mother,

your father

I just wonder

how much we hear

of your own voice?

Sugar why buy land when I can walk out

and take it?



## Queue poem

where my voice is supposed to emerge,  
a small poem, a small  
internal performance

I drive to Dee Why

when the weather's fine,  
blended with the power  
of organic cotton  
peer into the seawater and spy two bluebottles  
swimmers in toxic motion

Cockatoos fly over in a pack of eleven

before the sky breaks

cockatoos fly over

*What's them shapes down there? Cajoling*

*Who gives a fuck?*

Flying eleven

## **R**emoving blackberries

is a game of life,  
you've got to learn  
to pace yourself or burn out,  
step lightly or plummet  
in swamp  
cut and pull  
woody stems  
(not too many or be spiked),  
don't get egotistical, now  
clean the muck  
off your saw, WD40  
*Why didn't anybody tell me  
life was this easy?*

I cleared a quagmire and found  
nothing growing beneath  
got swallowed by a sinkhole  
no one blinked an eyelid

**S**eated languidly by the lake,  
two bodies. It's late

Long purr of the swamp  
croaks and chatter  
powerful owl  
readying to strike

In your crouched body, an angular trunk  
fine bones of sparrow  
eyes

Emerald is my birthstone.

That night, as the duck's longing clack  
bounced out  
Our chests were steeped  
in reeds of pain

It's a relief to remember, my darling

Let what exists continue to sustain

The problem is  
no dog knows how lucky he is  
A muzzle full of sand,  
trembling whiskers  
salivating chops  
and bound on homeward  
or laze in the sun  
and we'll follow  
the arc  
Such a prince!  
We all rub  
and adore you,  
a family of plants  
and animals, certainly  
It isn't a life of bruised ribs  
yellin', raisin the wrist  
blood of the loyal  
in black wet nostrils  
But you don't know that,  
guzzle your dinner  
boy you'll be  
lonely later, we won't  
leave you  
boy  
It's just a visitor  
you don't know  
how lucky  
you are

**U**p in the branches,  
leaf crown at dusk

The sun makes a fire in the wetlands

hop, skip, nudge

touch

(I won't mention kissing)

Two wrens chirruping,  
light-footed on the bark

This is where we begin

**V**aliantly

the ducks ski up lake,  
river-planes on black

This is their Sargasso Sea

On land they are fat and ambling.

Good intentioned but a bit imbalanced  
like a cast-iron pot  
got a wobble on him

I'd never seen anything like it, but...  
you know me, seeing but we do not see.

As it turns out, the world is so queer

**W**e each have our own history

(face in the firelight flickering)

looking over across the bon

to your sadness silhouetted in rose and cream

The tide sucks up from the sand and surges

atrioventricular

Just to observe and not to interfere:

the smoking log,

lack of oxygen

be patient. It will burn

**X**

(like scoring the poppy)



**Y**es, life is moving but slow

between the city

and the mountain

I get a car tan,

the west is rezoned

an aerotropolis,

flight machine buzzards,

no cows.

In winter, I wear the hat

indoors now

ice blizzard means

run outside,

yellow crested robin

still arrives

in conversation,

hey bob! there's whiteness

everywhere

and at the summit

there's snow

## Zoological

I see you.

I am sick of not seeing you.

Mustelid, does it feel like this, jealous?

Take carrot times two

When it comes down to it,  
all beings are vulnerable  
each one exposed to suffering and joy

Such possibility!  
entangled in the act of writing  
Staying in  
hot coffee, warm jumpers  
spraying cool water on the thirsty garden

A feeling I seek in loving.

That is the opposite to antagonism

The days pass more sweetly with you here  
cicadas more excited than ever  
weather changes from pouring rain  
to loud and warm

The cicada finally emerges  
on the mulberry tree  
but dead

seven years underground  
seven years poorly spent

When I die, my stomach  
remaining hot after all else

## **ELEMENTAL**

*flesh of earth*

*breath in air*

*fire of stomach*

*water flowing through my legs*

## EARTH

It's wet when it's good.

Dry bounty – not much  
take for it out here, ay guvner?

Not much, wouldn't put  
a fuckn penny on it.

Wouldn't stick  
a plant in it. Wouldn't dig  
a hole lay down  
n die in it.

Corn where the yams  
were shucked.

Dry bristles of the bush  
meant shit and guilt.

Earth the flesh and stuff  
you're made of –  
the stuff you won't admit.

.

Shit and guilt, did I mention?

Nowadays, out bush  
down track  
you'll find a bunch  
of loo paper.

Yep, everywhere  
the white stuff  
remnants

paper planes folded,  
crash landed in scrub.

.

Still, there's beauty in rock. Layers  
tangelo in the mystery of under-hang sacredness

You traverse that land with open ears and eyes  
barefoot, whatever

Place your knees on the turtle's back  
grains in skin tremble deafening silence

.

And the grass tree grows  
*gulgadya*... learned  
in Dharug tongue,  
slowly... real fuckin' slow...

A thoughtful head on it  
big head of hair  
encasing itself in the coals  
guarded –

reverberating  
millennia, millennia

That resin spear  
flung itself toward the sun

whenever the flames  
slithered near...

Now I see you walk  
among them, your child  
in the balance  
crossing the stream

I listen to the burble, listening...

.

Someone fell off, climbing that old meeting place  
the rock tableland without no cloth

People been passing through here for thousands of years  
It's not a place to get stuck

## AIR

When the warm air filters through  
the window, when the warm air, stirred up  
on soil outside when the warm air  
of lemon and nutmeg, currants  
cinnamon – when, seated at my desk  
on the leather chair, a pile of pungent  
and oily orange peel curling beside  
stirs up and gently pools  
along the walls of the weatherboards,  
when the ringtail possum scrabbles  
with its claws in the grey bare almond  
tree outside, tilting chair and  
turning my neck to see, the possum  
tail dropping suspended in oh, mouth  
open, pausing to look in oh, pink mouth  
and oh of glassy and round eye  
When the streetlight coldly illuminates  
the snails, oozing onto the taut, fresh  
beans, hoo roo of the owl  
hoo roo and the crackling  
feel of the lamp-lit room, faded  
red carpet and crisp white  
coverlet, stacks of messily  
arranged books, when the warm air  
tips over, in sliding fashion  
the weighted scale to dawn –  
When the cigarette stub is cold  
and twisted in ceramic, veneer



of the desk is cold and the lifted veil  
sits coolly on fir, green oaks  
and the distant, shaggy eucalypts  
When the sun shoots through  
and the red wattle bird, fits its beak  
methodically in dew, and I watching  
lean toward...

.

I've climbed up and levelled  
with termite's nest.  
Clinging to the weathered trunk,  
cloud-gazing and weeds  
incumbent through window –  
What more  
could you want? Water.  
Ain't no goin'ta piss up here, hold it  
or piss like a possum on gumnuts!  
I was bright eyed  
and frozen in torch light  
river of fabric  
dried leaf on tree tops sway.

.

In the morning  
when the sun is risen, the trees  
are still shifting in air  
Salt borne dripping  
while you are asleep, or  
slowly rousing  
The light crackles on the dry

underfoot, as I step  
carefully, collect the wood  
The sun is half moon  
and in its suspense  
the beautiful hours are passing

.

I immediately want  
to translate it in song  
Funny  
hopping on arrowhead, lichen  
swinging limb-ward back to camp

It's eerie lakeside, quiet  
Grey smoulder  
on far-side  
Smoke-haired couple shepherding mullet  
A reprieve from the song of cicadas

My skin feels pale  
and language  
is salty at the edges

.

It's a very precarious lean and propel  
standing on a wobbly table  
it's too dark  
Gail  
Do I really have to climb up there again?  
uh oh, the neighbour's coming

## FIRE

The river filled up with smoke today,  
long white dragon slid over  
the strait to belay  
upon the water

Chug-alug of the tug boats  
pattered at the rotting weir  
and the teatree burnt  
kissed the kayaker  
    pausing for breath

some grey interim  
cautious change

Bubbling beneath the river surface  
incredulous, the seasonal rift  
gave a polite wave  
This way, this way  
    you find nothing else said

but drink a late brew tea  
on the fibro shack porch

It's a new moon but strangely bright  
looking across the steel bridge  
to the orange glow  
of street lights  
Waiting

.

I stopped caring about the treated logs  
they burn better in my house,  
toxins and oil

Throw them on  
like an animal's striped coat

Which is the stripe?  
Which is the coat?

.

Leaping down the sandstone escarpment  
with you, wasn't poetry

The leafless mirage of a valley burned  
fire is not a joke

On the way up, puffing and tyrannical  
fishbone fern and sundown glow

In your eyes, such devastation  
guffawing smoke over the highway

No going forward or sideways

As the landowner said, one year later  
It all changed on December 21<sup>st</sup>

.

It's that time of year again  
purple sky  
so much forgotten, walking

and the fresh green growth  
sprouts iridescent  
on charred memory

Disbelief, how the place  
has changed  
the fire came roaring, up valley

refusing to leave  
perched on hand  
a single man  
with pump spray

maybe we'll never see the end of this

But the waterferns  
have flourished, seedlings  
plush like carpet

Staring wide-eyed at the meandering creek

## WATER

Rain cascades for days, no end

This was life on the mountain:

grey, foggy, damp

Driving out – centrifugal – from the city

sky loosened and the cycle

rotated more easily

wet, wet.

Basil, parsley, mint

marigolds, drinking thirstily

psychedelic radishes

with rings of growth

the soil clumped and when

the cliff of the mountain was soaked

it broke.

.

No-one was prepared.

Track closed,

peaches

on Tanya's tree swollen twice-sized

Following  
a tide of drought deaths,  
on the river  
down plain  
the department panicked  
and 60,000 Murray cod were bred, and released –

Darling

.

Gushing,  
flowing like a celebration

kegs of beer, on the tide  
boppin' past

Marrickville city in swollen flood.

After years  
barebones  
spongy but growing outward

the ribs caressed the lungs.

Blame it  
on the lack  
of virgin forests  
pastoral indecency  
irrigation theft

the body pillaged and waylaid...

Today we will drink,  
tomorrow, hunger

.

Why did Europeans  
build homes  
without rain  
collection?

In Sydney Cove,  
mud cottages  
and water  
streaming loosely  
down big bank

Well, we'll drink  
liquor instead, thieves  
suck it like you stole it

Drink in the great emptiness

.

Climbing, up  
through the leaking swamp  
I made it  
it's just now dusk

Faded  
the disappearing lives



of daylight

return me to my breath

Chapped

about the industry

but persuasion to continue

water fire

air earth

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