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Footprints on the Edge

Abstract:

This collaborative essay, which sits at the nexus of creative writing, nature writing and animal studies, seeks to explore the question of how we might live ethically and joyfully in the context of anthropogenic climate change. Engaging with the fields of creative non-fiction, philosophy, memoir and literature review, the essay asks how we might address this question together, as writers, thinkers, artists, and living beings alongside many others, both human and more-than-human. The authors explore their relationship with the ocean, animals and each other, combining walking and writing as part of the same process. Here, walking serves as a pivotal immersive writing process as well as a creative tool. Alongside sharing ways of thinking, the essay argues the importance of acknowledging oneself as a writer situated in a particular place and time.



Biographical note:

Dr Christine Howe is a writer and academic who teaches at the University of Wollongong. Her first novel, 'Song in the Dark', was published by Penguin, and her short stories, poetry, lyric essays and scholarly works have appeared in journals such as the *Island*, the *Griffith Review*, *TEXT* and *Cordite*.

Dr Friederike Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis is a visual artist and writer. Her short stories, sci-fi stories, eco tales and eco poems engage in the discourse around the Anthropocene. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in anthologies, journals and magazines, including *The Heroines* anthology (Neo Perennial Press), *Oceans* (Black Hare Press) and the *Griffith Review*. Her art is held in private collections.



Keywords:

Nature writing, Climate change, Walking, Collaboration



Introduction

This is a collaborative essay, a conversation between two writers wrestling with the complexities of living ethically and joyfully in the context of anthropogenic climate change. We exchanged the vignettes below via email throughout a four-month Covid lockdown in 2021, responding to each other's ideas and to our individual experiences of walking along the strip of coast between the Illawarra escarpment and the Pacific Ocean. As in other conversational essays that employ walking as an integral part of the writing process (see for example Trofimova & Nicholls, 2018), we found that walking not only guided our writing, it also prompted us to describe the places we walked through in a way that invited each other into our personal experience of place. The essay is a record of our shared thinking, shaped by memories and ideas that may never have been articulated if we had been writing alone. We acknowledge the influence of Dharawal Country on our thinking, relating, listening and writing, and thank Elders past and present for their continuing care of Country.



Bluebottle – 16 July 2021 (Friederike)

We were to meet here on our weekly walks on the beach to contemplate the oceans and what they mean to us and to the world. Instead, as a result of the current lockdown, I walk on Wollongong's South Beach, near the lighthouse on my own, knowing you will do the same, at a different day, time and hour, on a different stretch of the Illawarra coastline. Every now and then, I stop and dig my feet into the cool sand before the horizon. The vastness of the sky blue is mirrored in the sapphire waves that churn up white sand. There is a sense of connectedness between sky, ocean and the Wodi-Wodi/Dharawal land I stand on as the waves wash over my feet.

A brilliant, inflated bluebottle lies full-length, outside the reach of the wave on glistening wet sand that has soaked up the high tide of the morning. The creature that appears as one is a colonial organism, a siphonophore made up of many zooids bound together. The trailing tentacle in the water helps to anchor the body when – like a sail – it is blown by the wind across the surface of the ocean; on land the Prussian-blue metre-long tentacle looks like a piece of thrown-away yarn: all tangled up – useless. The iridescent gas-filled body, an irregular blistered bottle, shimmers in the afternoon sun. I stop for a fascinated moment: not to touch, only to observe. Just as I have observed bushfire smoke climbing from behind the mountains, trees bending in gale-force winds, or the dead puffer fish washed ashore the other day, in the very same spot as warm bikini-clad bodies stretched out a summer ago.

The coruscating bluebottle may have been looking for a feed: small crustaceans or molluscs. The grainy sand below it and the warm sun rays above scrape at its skin. My anthropomorphising of a colonial organism that I recognise as a bluebottle seems out of place, yet I want to bear witness to its suffering even if I can't hear cries of pain or even know if it "feels". David Brooks argues that,

[a]nthropomorphism', is central to what we call empathy, and since empathy is fundamental to compassion, in the denial of anthropomorphism is that repression of

empathy which is fundamental to the horrific abuse of animals which has always scarred this civilization (and almost every other civilization I can think of). (2020, 26)

Small Worlds – 23 July 2021 (Christine)

The sky isn't blue this morning – it's a wash and tumble of early-morning grey, a sunrise just before rain. I'm walking north – spinifex, low-growing wattle, tea tree and banksias to my left, green-grey ocean to my right. I'm throwing the ball for our dog, watching as he speeds away, then jumps and twists, all four feet off the ground. The water foaming around my ankles is warmer than the sand. Overhead, there's a vast cloud, pearl-grey, that looks as though it's been pulled from one end of the sky to the other. Behind me, the beach curves around to meet cafes, other socially distanced walkers, bikers, surfers – and then further south, the Continental pool, the small lighthouse balanced on the break-wall at the opening to the harbour, and the larger lighthouse standing tall on the top of the grassy headland at the end of South Beach.

You're behind me – both temporally and spatially – walking along South Beach days ago, giving your empathetic attention to a bluebottle, all those blues mirroring each other: the brilliance of sky, sea, and trailing, iridescent stinger. I love that you stopped to consider the bluebottle, that you found a world, a philosophy, in a small, beached balloon.

As I walk, I'm aware of entering other peoples' air space – whose breath do I walk through? How far can a virus spread? Where has your breath, from days ago, gone? Am I breathing in your outbreath, diluted? Will you breathe mine, the next time you walk along the sand?

The smoke from Australia's 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires stained the alps of Aotearoa and continued on to South America (Nguyen et al., 2021). Perhaps the residue of that planetary outbreath, the ash of dense, old-growth forests, is still present in the rhythmic give and take of my own breathing – even now.

Breath – 29 July 2021 (Friederike)

The wind's picked up since your walk last week. It bends the yellow flowers on the bitou bush and plays the long blades of the dune grass like a whistle; a sudden gust rams into the oncoming wave like a bully, knocking the spray off the incoming set. Then another and another. The sea swooshes and tumbles, pounding the sand beneath it.

I'm the only human as far as I can see. I, too, wonder how much "breath matter" I walk through when I walk past someone. Virus aside though, I like the idea of possibly catching some of the essence of your thoughts in a residual outbreath that may linger in the sand your feet touched, that now crunches under my sneakers.

The German word for breathing is *atmen*. It probably shares the same root with atmosphere – (Greek: *atmos* = vapor) and with the Sanskrit word *Atma* + essence, breath, soul. The smoke of the 2019 bush fires – that circumnavigated the world and claimed the lives of billions of animals and more plants – "breathed" new life into climate action, as the whole world was

watching. I, like so many, had problems breathing during those months. My lungs, filled with the essence of those lost, have never felt the same since.

Sorrow – 2 August 2021 (Christine)

So we move from salty ocean, to sky, to breath, to fire, and back to salty water: the flow of shed and unshed tears.

I often cry as I walk along the sand in the mornings – this morning the cold breeze made my nose run and my eyes water – but sometimes I cry for other reasons: the momentary beauty of a golden, hazy sky; the knowledge that the coastal wattle and melaleucas, bent low by the southerly winds, are still here after hundreds of years of colonisation; the realisation that whales, dolphins, cormorants, sea eagles and funny, beach-going galahs, are all doing their best to survive, despite the warming of the ocean and the horror of ubiquitous plastic waste. They don't have the luxury of giving up.

I've been reading *Fathoms: the world in the whale*, by Australian essayist Rebecca Giggs (2020). I thought I knew about whales, and whaling, and the way the world's oceans are being affected by human waste, but I didn't realise that toxins can accumulate in a whale's body to the point where the whale itself is more toxic than its environment. I didn't realise the implications of this for marine ecosystems where dead whales are like ancient, fallen trees in old growth forests: food for literally millions of organisms, which slowly provide a source of nourishment step by step up the food chain.

I don't know how to move into the grief of what we have done, and continue to do, without simultaneously succumbing to despair. I'm one person among billions, one collection of cells constantly splitting and dying, one consumer of plastic goods wrapped in plastic packaging, one body weeping as the bright westerly wind sweeps in the dawn.

Polluted Bodies – 6 August 2021 (Friederike)

I was about seven or eight when I saw the sea for the first time. The North Sea in Egmond aan Zee in the Netherlands is nothing like the Pacific Ocean, but I remember how the wind drove tears into my eyes and everything tasted salty. I wondered then if the sea held our tears: if this was where the tears went when they evaporated from our faces. Not just human tears, either – the tears of all animals.

I came across a similarly devastating story about the albatross. These giants of the sky who use the wind to preserve their energy, these majestic travellers who once were shot for sport, these bringers of hope out in the open sea – nowadays feed their hungry young plastic until they starve to death.

It's not only plastic pollution that affects marine life – noise pollution also has a significant impact. When I read that groups of northern right whales have reportedly been seen hiding behind rock formations during seismic air-gunning used to find oil and gas deep under the

ocean floor (ScienceDaily, 2016), I cried. These blasts of loud pules of compressed air into the water column and deep into the seabed, injure whales, sea turtles, and other marine life. And noise travels four times faster under water than on land. Humans don't listen.

Sometimes I wonder if a ray of hope in all this despair is nothing more than a band aid. And yet, hope is the anchor that keeps me from drifting. Without hope, I have nothing to keep me afloat under this heavy weight of complicity.

Debris – 9 August 2021 (Christine)

In her essay “Hvalsalen”, Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie describes being invited to the Bergen Natural History Museum’s Whale Hall while whale skeletons, which had been hanging from the ceiling for generations, were being cleaned by a team of conservationists. She describes how it felt to sit under a humpback’s spine, helping to clean a sei whale’s rib bone:

All across the hall, the crowd of whales waited for their treatment, huge and otherworldly. Not otherworldly. Actually, of this world, as they had been for a very long time, long before we appeared. I turned the rib in my hands, stroked it with the sponge. Shame and shame. (2012, pp. 114-115)

Your piece reminded me of the mix of beauty, awe, shame and complicity that runs through Jamie’s essay. Complicity weighs me down too.

I wonder whether taking small actions helps to counter the dead weight of shame? I remember walking along the northern end of North Beach after a flood, several years ago – debris was piled knee-high along the opening of the lagoon, stretching right back along the beach. Corroded plastic bottles, plastic bags, car tyres, even a couch, were tangled up in driftwood and seaweed. We wheeled a bin onto the sand and began to fill it up with plastic. It was overcast, not quite spitting rain, and slowly other beach-goers began to help us collect cans, chip packets, chocolate wrappers, takeaway containers, bottle caps. I knew most of it had already been swept out to sea, but we kept stooping and collecting.

Maybe hope lies in agency, in the capacity to see and understand the effects of our collective folly, and take some kind of action to address it? Some days I think this, and others I feel like I’m carrying the weight of all this waste close to my chest, with nowhere to put it down.

Herd Behaviour – 10 August 2021 (Friederike)

I think that’s what it is: hope does lie in agency. Your wheeling a bin to the beach, which inspired others to join you in cleaning up the rubbish is remarkable but not surprising. Humans are good at herd behaviour. The problem is that not all human herd behaviour is good.

When Steve and I go for our weekly walks on the beach, we bring a bag to collect plastic. Between the golf course and the breakwater, we collect mostly broken pieces from water bottles, tennis balls, strings and ropes. This is the part of the shore where people walk with their dogs – only a few people swim here in summer. At the north end, between and around the flags, I expect to find more thongs and bottles of sun lotion.

Recently, in an essay I wrote on oceans and islands (Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, 2022), I wondered what will happen to the 65 billion gloves currently used every month, or the face masks that amount to 129 billion a month. That's 3 million face masks used per minute (Parker, 2021). The image of a delicate seahorse dragging a mask through the water off northern Greece floated across social media this year; unsurprisingly, the photographer, Nikos Samaras, was nominated for the Ocean Photography Award 2021 (Martin, 2021). At the time of writing that essay back in France, I came across discarded PPE masks in a beech forest. I remember wondering how long would it take for masks to pile up on our beaches?

I found a PPE mask disintegrating near the sand dunes last Sunday. Herd behaviour is neither inherently good or bad. But either way, it does have impact.

Masks – 20 August 2021 (Christine)

A few years back, I remember lamenting the fact that hardly any of my students seemed interested in climate change – or even seemed to know much about it. Now, so many are writing about their own personal experiences of a changing climate, their fear of an apocalyptic future, their observations of what is happening to the world around them. Last week, one student wrote about a discarded disposable face mask, and the potential for that mask to end up in the ocean.

Last night I dreamed I was in a crowded terminal, or perhaps a hospital, waiting for something. My daughter and husband were with me. None of us were wearing masks. No-one else was wearing a mask either. I realised halfway through the dream that the person standing next to my daughter, leaning over, collecting something, talking to someone, had Covid. Why am I not wearing a mask, I thought – why does my daughter not have a mask – why is there someone with Covid here, among all these people, and why is *no one* wearing a mask?

What a paradox: that something as flimsy as a surgical mask offers personal protection, but on a vast scale, contributes to the slow poisoning of our entire planet.

Footprints – 23 August 2021 (Friederike)

Today, wearing a mask on leaving the house became mandatory for everyone in NSW. I'm glad we have the choice not to wear the disposable ones and, like a range of car models, we can choose one that suits us best: from reusable cotton masks that colour-match our outfit to shielded and glasses-wearing-friendly ventilated ones – people have shown amazing creativity and innovative thinking.

Masks are powerful. My sister, a music teacher in Germany, told me a few months ago that due to social distancing and public mask wearing she and her family came through the winter without a cold or flu for the first time in her life.

The PPE mask is becoming the symbol of an era: not only for its visibility or its health benefits, but for its reach into social and political spaces. Masks have become a tangible vehicle for

divisive discourse around freedom, rights and entitlement: under the 45th US President masks became symbols of political affiliation. Masks can be the stuff of nightmares.

For humans, living life has consequences. At the same time, living a life of consequence is a choice. Weighing up small, everyday acts may not off-set all the selfishness that is human existence, but doing a little better each day might get us a little closer to a recovering earth.

We all leave footprints. When I flew over to care for my sick mother in France earlier this year, my carbon footprint caused by one flight alone was well above 4.87 metric tons of CO₂. Because I was only one of 12 passengers, this is a debt I'll never repay in my lifetime of using solar energy and walking or cycling instead of driving. Only in the sand are footprints washed away without trace.

Red-capped Plovers – 26 August 2021 (Christine)

One of the things I've always loved about camping is the satisfaction of packing away the tent, quenching the final embers of the campfire, then standing back and looking at the site, flattened grass the only evidence of my presence. Walking lightly, leaving as little trace as possible, has its own reward.

Years ago, Duncan and I camped on a tiny beach in a national park. To get there, we walked through spotted gums and burrawangs, following directions from a family friend – an almost-track up and over the ridge, across a dry creek bed, and out into a cove protected by rocky outcrops to the north and south. The sand was perfectly smooth but for hair-thin plover footprints and larger imprints left by wallabies. That afternoon, as we set up a tarp among the spinifex, we were interrupted by two tiny red-capped plovers racing each other from the dunes to the shore, their tiny legs blurred in motion. When we woke in the morning, one of the plovers was settled into a sandy nest half a metre from my nose. No wonder they'd been trying to draw our attention towards the shore the day before: if we'd pitched our tarp an arm's width to the left, we would have crushed her eggs.

The joy I feel in leaving a place as close to how I found it as possible, and my desire to make a difference to a world suffering from resource extraction, injustice and over-consumption pulls me in two directions. Here is another paradox: on the one hand, I love leaving no imprint; on the other, I want my life to matter, to contribute to changing things for the better. But what if my personal footprint is only a tiny part of a much bigger story?

Paradox – 28 August 2021 (Friederike)

Living with that paradox of walking lightly and making it count at the same time, to me, is the basis to living a life of consequence; living life as a writer, artist and musician. It is so we can create wonder and possibilities that lead to solutions and moments of joy, but more importantly, mindfulness. Alternatively, not living with that paradox – that is, being unaware of a bigger picture we all create together as humans – wouldn't that mean apathy would take over?

Yesterday on the beach, Steve and I stopped and watched a seagull dive into the ocean before we continued on our walk. In the background a yellow tug boat piloted a cargo ship out of Port Kembla harbour. When we walked back, a wet seagull was preening its soaked feathers on the beach and stretching its wings across the breeze, unperturbed by our approach. Was its catch satisfying? Steve thought it looked skinny; I thought it looked content, smug even, the way it didn't seem to care about my walking up to it as I was taking photos. There was something else odd about it: it stood there alone with no colony in sight. Maybe there was more going on than met the eye? Was the bird alone because it chose solitude or did it fall out with the pack, the family? Was it lonely? All these questions feel too human, too much like a projection of me, imagining being a bird.

How can we interact with animals in a way that is not based on our own assumptions, on primarily our perspective? Maybe it's our ability to empathise, to imagine what it feels like to walk in someone else's footsteps? When I watched *My Octopus Teacher* on Netflix last year, I was indescribably moved by the humanity of the little octopus. What if we need to learn to listen to animals and the non-human world, to tell the bigger story? Carl Safina, ecologist and biologist says:

[Animals] are as much of this planet as are we. And what's happening with them is of enormous concern. I'm doing what I can, and along with many, many colleagues in my profession of being an ecologist and a conservationist, trying to maintain the living diversity of this planet and the beauty. I think that an action is right when it adds compassion and beauty to the world, and it's wrong when it adds pain and ugliness. (2020)

As we left the beach, a colony of gulls in the sky headed down the beach. Coincidentally perhaps, or maybe because they spotted one of theirs.

Chickens – 10 September 2021 (Christine)

I love your question, "What if we need to learn to listen to animals and the non-human world, to tell the bigger story?" I've been reading two books that address this idea in different ways: Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory*, and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. On the opening page of *The Overstory* is this line: "*The tree is saying things, in words before words*" (2018, 3). Likewise, Kimmerer suggests that if we pay attention, we will hear what the land is teaching us: "The rush of waterfalls and the silence of mosses have the last word" (2020, 222).

Last year, we welcomed two hens to our backyard. One morning a few months ago, I watched one of them race from the chicken coop towards our back door, marvelling at how vibrant and purposeful she was. Her scaly legs propelled her down the slope, her feathered bottom waddling from side to side as she picked up pace. Our new puppy was eating his breakfast by the back step. Too late, I realised she was hurtling towards his bowl. In that still, suspended moment between realisation and response, there was a yelp, a scuffle, a panicked squawk, and by the time I arrived, the puppy was back to crunching biscuits with sharp little teeth and the hen was huddled on the ground, eyes closed, beak sunk against her chest. I reached for her – I should have known she would head straight for the prime morning food source – and held her close.

There was a tiny puncture mark above her right eye, and the lid was swollen shut. She had retreated into herself, drawing all her energy inwards. She felt weightless, feather-light. I thought she would die.

She didn't. She made a full recovery. She didn't expend any unnecessary energy, while her body was recovering from the shock. She lay still and quiet in my arms, then in the nesting box, then under a tree, until she could finally move, half-blind, running sideways for a week or two until her eye finally healed. She reminded me of myself, recovering from the shock of last year's bushfires, the shock of Covid, navigating the slow-moving avalanche of climate change. From her, I am learning the importance of rest, retreat, regathering and recovery. [1]

Small, Quiet Things – 13 September 2021 (Friederike)

The chicken that almost dared too much. What a captivating story about the intricacies of co-habitation and interspecies living. I never understood why in the English vernacular, the chicken is a symbol of cowardice. In France, the chicken is a national symbol. In sports, the “Gallic rooster” is the unofficial mascot. Considering their size and weight, chickens seem very brave and curious. Sadly, sometimes their daring comes at a cost.

I heard Robin Wall Kimmerer speak with Tara June Winch on a podcast a few days ago, where they talked about scientific and Indigenous ways of knowing nature (Kimmerer & Winch, 2020). The essay collection you read came up. It may be a coincidence that you mentioned her, too, in the same week. What I find fascinating about her book on the natural and cultural history of mosses is that they are all worlds unto themselves and yet they underpin the world we live in. Just like fungi, mosses and often trees are too far outside our daily imagination and consideration.

Last year, I started reading Merlin Sheldrake's book, *Entangled Life* (2020), an astounding book about how fungi have shaped human history through bread, wine, and life-saving medicine like penicillin among many. He argues that fungi will shape our future, and not only as plant-based meat. He describes them as organisms with unmatched super-powers that, for example, can digest crude oil, explosives, pesticides – even plastic.

Paying attention to the small, quiet things around us seems to become more crucial as we are trying to figure out how to save species, ecosystems, earth. Fungi are everywhere and in everything, plants, animals and humans included. What is curious is that, as a species, they belong to neither the animal nor the plant kingdom. Although fungi, on a molecular level, are closer to animals than plants, they are their own kingdom. Isn't it funny how an organism like a fungus can upset a whole scientific system? In fact, as we begin to learn more about fungi and their world, the way we have viewed and ordered the world since the Enlightenment by separating all and everything into rigid dichotomies, is in the process of being contested at its core.

We pirouette back to the voices of those who might tell the bigger story. Recognising ourselves in the suffering of a chicken is a way to listen to language that is other than our own, but same nonetheless.

Whales – 11 October 2021 (Christine)

I love the idea of listening to the voices of those who might tell the bigger story – the rumble of the ocean, the almost inaudible gurgling of water being drawn up through a tree trunk towards the leaves, the croaking of frogs in our locked-down backyard in the twilight.

A few years ago, my parents sailed up the east coast, from Sydney to Cairns. One of the things they loved most about this trip was the sound of whales breathing as they surfaced near the boat. On one occasion, my dad was playing his recorder when a family of whales appeared. He played for a long time, composing a song for (and with) the whales, as they swam alongside (Howe & Gaze, 2009). Each time I hear this story, I become aware that I'm holding my breath: to have such animals, right beside you – the flash of wonder, the instinctive desire to quiet any movement so as not to scare them away, so you can drink in their nearness. But my dad couldn't hold his breath: he was playing the recorder – a necessary out-breath! As he played, and the whales lingered, he wondered whether they were listening. A mammoth audience, right next to the hull. In my mind's eye I can see him standing there, playing one of the most momentous concerts of his life. Breathing out a song while simultaneously, metaphorically, holding his breath. At this point in the story, my dad usually bursts into an incredulous, disappointed laugh, and says, "And then I played a wrong note!" Sure enough, the whales descended into the tropical waters, and swam away. That was the end of the concert. I wonder whether the whales were paying as much attention to my dad's song as he was paying to them?

Diving Under – 12 October 2021 (Friederike)

I too, held my breath as I was reading your story about your father and the whale co-writing a song! How magical this sharing of a moment must have been for your father. I keep thinking of how their song changed into a kind of song your dad keeps "singing" to you, his children and grandchildren. Because songs and stories speak to the same – the heart.

Your father's composing with the whale reminded me of an article I read a while ago about a musician who decoded humpback calls as song. It was a transcript of an NPR program about musician and biologist Katy Payne, who came by the first recordings of humpback whales in the sixties (2015). Payne, a researcher in acoustic biology at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and her husband Roger, were the first scientists to realise that the intricate and eerie calls of some humpback whales are actually songs, which other male whales memorise and sing. Apparently, some parts of a group's song gradually change over time too as the whales listen to each other, maybe like epic poems, and together take up variations that eventually become a new tune. When another scientist, Christopher Clarke, joined them, he played the guitar to the whales, and new sounds emerged from the deep (Payne, 2015).

I wonder if the whales still sing that song they and your father made together? And if variations of it are still being sung? Also, I wonder, if this changed the whales' perception of us, humans? I like the idea of whales thinking kindlier of our species.

Rumi's words have a way of staying with me: "You've been walking the ocean's edge, holding up your robes to keep them dry. You must dive naked under, and deeper under, a thousand times deeper!" I have been thinking of what those words really mean to me, especially now that I have immersed myself into finding out about noise pollution and underwater soundscapes.

The waves on the empty beach lap around my knees. The water is cold and I take a deep breath. I let the water take me in. For now, until I find the courage to dive naked and deeper, I will just keep swimming. And now and again, I will dive, for as long as I can hold my breath.

Notes

[1] Part of this vignette (*Chickens – 10 September 2021*) was included in the collaborative project edited by Joshua Lobb (2023), 'The language of birds: writers listen', *Journal of Creative Arts*, <https://unlikely.net.au/birds-and-language/the-language-of-birds>

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