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Creative companionship as we face the apocalypse – an essay in conversation

Abstract:

This essay explores how a commitment to poetic collaboration, with daily writing and reading, changed the ways we perceived and lived our lives, particularly in light of living through the extremity of climate change (characterised by Australian bush fires and floods), and the isolation and stress caused by the pandemic. We explore collaboration, prose poetry and the creative process in the context of extremity, arguing that writerly collaboration can engender hope beyond the page. We discuss these topics in an essay-conversation format, moving back and forth between authors, building/ expanding/ thinking and re-thinking through matters of process in light of the poetic and the extreme. Some of our creative works from this time are also included.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Collaboration, extremity, prose poetry, creative process

Introduction

Between March 11 and April 11, 2022, we – Shady Cosgrove and Christine Howe – undertook a challenge to write and send each other a prose poem every day. Our mission was to document moments of hope and/or joy in a time characterised by extremities: climate catastrophe, war, economic rationalism and fear. We didn't always succeed – sometimes our pieces focused on the mundane rather than the transcendent – but we did find the commitment to daily writing and sharing changed the way we perceived and lived our lives. In this essay, we argue that writerly collaboration can engender hope beyond the page. For Shady, this meant treating writing as meditation, and for Christine, this meant finding new cultural metaphors to understand the extremities of climate change. Together, to unpack these arguments, we discuss collaboration, why prose poetry was the necessary vehicle for this collaboration, and the creative process. We explore these topics in an essay-conversation format, moving back and forth between authors, building/expanding/ thinking and re-thinking through matters of process in light of the poetic and the extreme. These sections are interspersed with prose poems written during this time.

Why collaborate and what do we mean by that?

Shady Cosgrove

In their 2022 essay “Creating new climate stories: Posthuman collaborative hope and optimism,” creative writing scholars Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews call on writers to “... reconsider not only the type of narratives being written, but how these narratives need to be written” (p. 8). That is, it is not enough to adjust voice, lens and theme – writers need to reconsider the very ways in which writing happens. Adjacent to, literary scholar Diana Brydon asks, “can literary experimentation offer routes toward forms of understanding beyond commodification?” (p. 43). As a writer in the academy, sometimes disheartened by the focus on profit over content in the creative industries, I was interested in how the writing process itself might question this commodification. Can we resist the notion that writing accrues meaning through ‘consumption’ and consider instead writing as opportunity for ‘connection’?

To contextualise, Christine and I began sharing writing during a bleak time. I was still anxious after the 2020 bush fires. I came down with Covid. The Illawarra – where we live – was facing floods and I was regularly checking the rising creek line down the corner from my house. When you're rerouting the trip to the grocery store because the street is flooding, you are navigating both climate change catastrophe and the banality of changing gears and checking Google maps for travel routes. Christine and I entered this project with the underlying assumption that finding hope and strategies for living through the climate crisis depended on rethinking larger structural issues associated with capitalism, consumption and notions of the humanist individual. Much work has been done on the link between climate change and capitalism (see Wright & Nyberg, 2015; Hamilton, 2015; Park, 2015; Pelling, Manuel-Navarrete & Redclift, 2011) and I wondered: what would it mean to reconsider process as per Brydon and Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews? Might collaboration with a

colleague offer one way to eschew the individualistic ‘self’ prioritised within capitalist structures? Creativity scholar Vera John-Steiner (2000) writes:

The notion of the solitary thinker still appeals to those molded by the Western belief in individualism. However, a careful scrutiny of how knowledge is constructed and artistic forms are shaped reveals a different reality. Generative ideas emerge from joint thinking, from significant conversations, and from sustained, shared struggles to achieve new insight by partners in thought. (p. 3)

To be clear, while Christine and I were sharing process – checking in with each other daily – we were not working on the same texts. The process was collaborative but the writing itself often was not. Having said that, reading Christine’s drafts affected my writing and we were frequently inspired to respond to each other’s works. Sometimes I was compelled by theme – for instance, Christine’s poem “Preppers” inspired my response “Flood” – but I was also intrigued by the way she used telling detail to ground a scene or a moment, and I then entered my writing with the goal of incorporating detail in complementary ways. As John-Steiner articulates, collaboration became a site providing “... a mutual zone of proximal development where participants can increase their repertory of cognitive and emotional expression” (p. 187).

Literary and writing theorists Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede note that “writing, at its best, is ‘epistemic’ – it creates knowledge rather than simply recording it” (p. 16). It was through writing I came to more deeply understand craft and my subjective lived experience, and draw connections that didn’t exist before drafting. Our prose poems were explicitly dialogic, and this duality de-centred my voice in useful ways – I was not alone, in a garret. In the way that meditation can include watching the self with non-judgemental observation, reading Christine’s work alongside mine helped me gain perspective on the writing self. In addition, sharing unfinished work provided opportunities for both generosity and connectedness, as well as inherent vulnerability. I remember thinking: I teach, this is my profession, what will Christine – a colleague – think of my writing? The role of vulnerability in creativity is fascinating (see theatre pedagogue Jeremy Dublin [2014] and education theorists Nicole Green, Cherry Stewart, and Brenda Wolodko [2018]) and could well be the topic for an essay in its own right. Suffice to say, it was central to our shared practice and trust proved critical to our collaboration.

Christine Howe

In their paper describing the experience of meeting together as an academic writing group, Beck, Dunn, Fisher, O’Sullivan and Sheridan (2008) suggest that collaborative writing not only encompasses co-authoring and workshopping, but also “knowledge-making”. While this project provided us with an opportunity to extend and hone our individual writing practices, it also deepened the writerly connections between us, which in turn led to new insights – in effect, the generation of new knowledge – new ways of conceptualising our belonging and our responsibilities in this time and place.

Thinking ‘together’ in this way provided us with one way of responding to the extreme weather events we experienced during and prior to our month of daily writing. Amitav Ghosh, Indian novelist, essayist and anthropologist, argues that climate change presents us with “the uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the nonhuman,” and that this encounter requires us to find new ways “to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era” (2016, p. 33). Likewise, Australian geographer Richard Howitt suggests that responding to climate change calls for us to:

learn to think anew – to think in ways that take seriously and actually respond to information, understanding and knowledges as if difference confronts us with the possibility of thinking differently. (2020)

While Howitt is referring specifically to the complexities of the risks climate change poses to Indigenous peoples, learning to “think anew” applies as much to the field of creative writing as to geography. Writing at the edge of the known allows for the possibility of a wide range of fields of research and knowledge systems to be brought into conversation. As such, the following paragraphs draw on the work of historians, novelists, geographers, First Nations knowledge holders, philosophers, poets, and natural history writers. Their work provides the context for a new metaphor that emerged during our collaboration – a metaphor that articulates a particular way of writing and living during this time of extremes.

German historian Philipp Blom suggests that “Twenty-first-century climate change makes it a matter of urgency to rethink once more our cultural metaphors, as well as humanity’s place within the greater scheme of things” (2019, p. 271). In a similar vein, Ghosh describes the climate crisis as also “a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (2016, p. 9). Howitt describes the link between colonial expansion and this crisis of culture in these words:

For too long, the long and terrible shadow of the linear narratives of settler-colonial conquest that underwrite the superiority and inevitability of imperial power and corporate ascendancy have muted – and even silenced – more modest narratives of connection, belonging and accountability. (2020)

From a First Nations perspective, colonial narratives continue to do damage to Country:

Country has also been impacted by colonisation; the health and wellbeing of trees, animals, insects, birds and all the things that constitute Country have also been and continue to be detrimentally influenced by colonial knowledge systems and practices. (Arnold, Atchison & McKnight, 2021)

As our writing project continued, in the aftermath of the Black Summer bushfires and in the midst of torrential rainfall, I began to ask: What might a new cultural metaphor look like, in this time and place? A metaphor that draws on connection, belonging and accountability rather than imperial power and corporate ascendancy?

The metaphor outlined below begins in the form of a story: a story about my relationships with family and place, followed by an account of writing collaboratively with Shady. Following Howitt's point that a range of measures are needed to address the "existential risk" generated by anthropogenic climate change, including nurturing "modes of becoming that reconnect people-to-people, people-to-environment and people-to-cosmos relationships" (2020), I have chosen this form of knowledge-sharing because it demonstrates how my thinking developed in the context of these relationships with people and with place.

The story begins with my daughter going pebble hunting with me. Often, we walk separately among the wash of stones along the tideline of our local beach, and choose ones that stand out: a quartz stripe, a perfect speckled egg. Before we return them, we show each other what we've found, and exclaim over their strangeness and their familiarity. The pebbles are a marker of both place and relationship: they mark this beach, and are marked by it, as they tumble against reef, rock shelf and each other. The prose poems Shady and I wrote became the poetic equivalent of these pebbles. Each day, we paused for long enough to choose a moment or an idea to focus our attention on, then honed it into a metamorphic word-rock with its own shape, colour and weight. And then we opened our palms – "Here, look what I've found!", we said, as we sent these pebble-poems to each other.

Together, our sixty prose poems form a cairn of sorts: a marker of time and place. American natural history writer David Williams suggests that cairns – piles of stones that act as boundary or trail markers, memorials or burial sites – "communicate in a timeless language. Their layered meanings may not be transparent to people who aren't local, but they still tell the visitor, you are here, you are not alone" (2012, p. 11). Each poem we gathered individually is now in relationship with fifty-nine others – each unique in shape, texture and size, but all subject to similar atmospheric pressures, given that they were written in roughly the same geographical and temporal location. Together, they provide a record of our thought processes and experiences – the sediment of our thinking, volcanic moments of insight, poems formed under the pressure of a constant daily deadline. This pile of poems marks a particular historical moment, as experienced in a particular place, and therefore has its own character – but it also serves as a marker for a shared path. Borrowing from the Williams quote above, our rocky collection says to the visitor-reader: "you are here, you are not alone".

According to American philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (2003, p. 5). In this sense, our small poem-cairn acts as one metaphor for how we might engage with each other as we face the extremities of climate change. Irish poet John O'Donohue uses the metaphor of the double-faced Roman god Janus, the god of doorways, archways and beginnings, to understand the way words work: "Words are like the god Janus, they face outwards and inwards at once" (1997, p. 14). The act of writing these poems and sending them to Shady was both a movement inward (I knelt down, I paid attention to the glimpse of an idea, I shaped the words I found into a poem) and a gesture outward (I handed this poem over, it became part of a conversation – a record of our interaction). These poems clink against each other: they form a wonderful, precarious pyramid. At the time of writing, they

spoke of us, and to us. Now, what we have built together stands as a homely monument: a pile of moments gathered and stacked together. It looks inward – all those stones in conversation with each other – and also outward: one of the many markers of our collective journey as we all try to build new ways of understanding the cataclysmic changes we are currently living through. This metaphor says: it is not enough to look only inward; it is not enough to look only outward. Standing on the threshold of an unpredictable future, this moment calls for us to look both ways at once.

Preppers
(C Howe)

We've been prepping. Last night, we spread out designs for a fireproof bunker, a nuclear shelter and an ark (all equipped with plague-proof PPE), and held a family meeting. Which to build first? The ark won, although the nuclear threat still hangs like a chandelier overhead. We went to bed with a new sense of purpose: tomorrow, we'd begin shaping timber, sewing sails. But when we woke, the rain had stopped, and a clean autumn westerly was sweeping over the escarpment. I remember you, I thought, as I sprang out of bed, from years ago! Now, after weeks/months/years of sadness, trees are speaking to each other of sunlight and chlorophyll, mosses lie satiated beneath fence posts, and even though new storm clouds are gathering over the ocean, the plans for the ark have – whoops! – slipped off the table, and the dog and I – we've gone walking.

Flood
(S Cosgrove)

The weather app shows more news will be falling. At least thirty-five millimetres of headline – case numbers, foreign aggression, stock market – and that's before lunch. A river of information now runs down your street, the yard is submerged in reports and interviews, and you're sandbagging the front door.

Why prose poetry: advantages of form

Shady Cosgrove

Prose poetry provided a useful form for this project for multiple reasons – from a logistical standpoint, it meant we could commit to longer or shorter pieces as time constraints required. On a more profound level, the form is open to metaphor in ways that proved complementary to reckoning with the daily effects of climate change. Linguist Raymond Gibbs Jr says, “Metaphor is not simply an ornamental aspect of language, but a fundamental scheme by which people conceptualize the world” (p. 3). That is, metaphor is not decorative, it is methodological, a way of viewing. As Christine and I were challenging ourselves to reconsider the methodology of our writing process, it was important to use a form that reflected this nuance.

Australian poets Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington suggest that prose poetry recognises the metaphoric and metonymic as aspects that belong to more generalised ways of speaking. The form

understands that what we see is a considerable part of what we know, but that what we see is unreliable; thus, it gives us many shifting images, as if we are looking through a complex album of highly suggestive photographs, never quite able to pin down the images. (Atherton & Hetherington, 2020, p. 247)

The metaphoric is accessible and expressive, but it is an unreliable expression that simultaneously shows and hides what it sees. This unreliability seemed pertinent to our experiences regarding the shifting climate. Daily life itself had become unreliable and shifting – using a form that enabled us to explore that in our creative work was important. As a short story writer and novelist more generally, this change also impacted the way I wrote. Much of my writing during this month was “in metaphor,” which then also affected the way I remembered lived events. For instance, in the prose poem below, “The Jungs were invited to dinner,” I remember waiting in the drive-through line for Covid testing and the vantage is two-fold: I am both observer and observed. This idea of observing ourselves is important if we think back to Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews because the writer must be aware of their patterns and ways of thinking if they are to change the ways they engage in creative process. The poetic then becomes metaphor for the act of writing as well as the lived experience.

Prose poetry also proved an important form for this project because of the way it uses absence on the page. Essayist and poet Elisa Gabbert (2022, p. 1) says, “Verse, by forcing more white space on the page, is constantly reminding you of what’s not there ... that absence of language, provides no clues. But it doesn’t communicate nothing – rather it communicates *nothing*. It speaks void, it telegraphs mystery ...”. Prose poetry often appears as textual blocks on the page, forcing the pause of white space between one poem and the next. This idea of communicating *nothing*, of allowing blank space to speak void, was important for me as I grappled with the too-much, too-big silence of climate change.

Christine Howe

The Oxford Dictionary defines “extremity” as “the furthest point or limit of something”; and “the degree to which something is extreme” (2015). Prose poetry sits simultaneously at the extreme edge of poetry and the extreme edge of prose. As a result, a prose poem arises from a constant negotiation between the two. Gomerioi poet Alison Whittaker suggests that “the fire of poetry is fundamentally relational” (2020, p. xi). This relationality applies to writer and reader, but in the case of prose poetry, it also relates to the interaction between the forms themselves. As I was writing prose poems and sending them to Shady, I realised that navigating the relationship between prose and poetry required listening for the voice of both forms in the one piece. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why prose poetry proved to be such a useful form for this project: balancing this relationship invited both experimentation and openness, as well as providing flexibility in terms of length.

Atherton and Hetherington note that prose poetry is a particularly useful form for expressing the meaning hidden in the everyday. They suggest that, “Prose poetry speaks of how the poetic belongs to all circumstances, and of how the common language of prose may be used to dig it out” (2020, p. 10). The poems I wrote daily and shared with Shady became an opportunity for me to give voice to the often hidden, initially wordless sensations that accompanied me through my days. For example, “Turner X Munch,” written on Saturday the 2nd of April 2022, took shape in response to the Lismore floods, and the relentless rain and storms that had battered the south coast for so long they’d come to feel almost as oppressive as the Black Summer fires.

Turner X Munch
(C Howe)

This morning I was blown through a landscape that felt like a cross between paintings by William Turner and Edvard Munch. Slate grey sky over a heaving ocean. Brown, lukewarm whitewash slipping up denuded dunes. Globbs of foam floating far above debris-strewn sand, carried by a wind whipping spray from tremendous waves. How to feel joy when the face of the earth is contorted in a silent, agonised scream?

The Jungs were invited to dinner
(S Cosgrove)

but Wolf-girl in her gingham dress won’t stop with the tantrums. She starts on the ground, fist-paws banging against floorboards. Then she’s up and running in circles. It’s the howling I can’t stand; what will the neighbours think? I cancelled tonight’s party, said we were sick, who knows, maybe we are. We went through the drive-through for PCR tests and she relaxed in the car, hung her head out the window. But back home she started pacing the hallways: wanting to be fed, let out – how am I supposed to know? Sometimes I want to grab her by the snout and shake, but that just makes everything worse. The only thing that helps is when I rest a hand on her neck and remind her to breathe. Just breathe – we’re together, I’m looking after you. We’ll be okay.

The creative process; the lived and the written

Shady Cosgrove

Identity and autobiography are inextricably linked, and self-narration so commonplace it is often taken for granted. As autobiography theorist Paul John Eakin asserts:

autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. We don’t, though, tend to give much thought to this process of self-narration precisely because, after years of practice, we do it so well. (p. 31)

This project forced my attention to self-narration and what moments I wanted to articulate for Christine, as well as the interface between the personal and the political. Sometimes I felt uncomfortable with how often the domestic and mundane appeared in my work, and sometimes I felt like writing itself was difficult to justify in light of impending climate crisis. However, as psychologists Oatley and Djikic (2017) remind us:

Literary writing involves externalization of mind onto paper or computer screen ... Among the arts, this kind of writing may come closest in structure and content to everyday consciousness; this has enabled writers and readers to explore the workings of minds in interactions with others ... With the exception of conversation, nothing may have been as important in understanding ourselves and others as works of creative writing (abstract).

Literary writing helps us understand ourselves, and understanding ourselves is key to affecting our current trajectory in light of climate change. And when my own literary contributions felt inadequate or so small as to be meaningless, I was inspired by writer Jean Rhys, who told biographer and friend David Plante (Gornick, 1983):

All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky. And then there are mere trickles, like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don't matter. The lake matters. You must keep feeding the lake.

I also found counsel in Dana Levin's poem "Appointment," where she writes of an experience with a shaman chiropractor:

Jensen cracked my recalcitrant neck and I felt, finally, that I was fully facing the can't-see of the future –

...

He said, Can you let yourself be completely rewired –

He said, This is what the earth is doing, we have to get ready –

He said, Something primordial eons ago ended up in you, so it could say something.
(p. 10)

Instead of dismissing the personal and the scribed, or letting the overwhelm of climate change paralyse, Levin, Rhys, Oatley and Djikic inspired me to commit to the writerly act and consider what this neural rewiring might mean for the earth. What does it even mean, the earth rewiring itself? How can we get ready for this tectonic rewiring? And if something primordial has ended up in me, what might this ancient matter have to say? Considering this – the idea I am more than an individualist notion of self – felt open and hopeful instead of egoist and ever-failing. And that search for hope was one of the initial purposes that inspired this project, connecting with Hennessey, Cothren and Matthews when they state: "We are not working from a Romantic tradition; rather, we wish to consider connectedness, sharedness and the process, not only the product" (Hennessey, Cothren & Matthews, p. 9).

However, by committing to daily writing with Christine, I was aware that every morning, as I awoke, there was already something on my to-do list that echoed the capitalist need to

account for time and assert productivity. This hyperawareness seemed antithetical to the project of documenting moments of joy, especially in the context of eschewing economic rationalism. Could the literary operate outside of these constraints? Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews note:

Our experience of fiction as a commercial complex is a cog in the machine of the human destruction of Terra, and the imagined stories and written language-based communication contribute to the systems that cause, generate and obstruct solutions to “the Problem”. (p. 7)

How can one separate writing, creativity and collaboration from the industrial medium that operates within capitalistic frameworks? Was it possible for Christine and me to question the commercial and economically rational from within a tertiary structure that espouses ERA statements and research points?

One strategy I employed was to adopt a writing mindfulness. Education and business academics Vera Woloshyn, Snežana Obradović-Ratković, Karen Julien, Jody-Lynn Rebek and Ayse Pinar Sen (2022) note that practising mindfulness (‘practising’ here harking back to Antonia Pont’s 2021 work in *A Philosophy of Practising*) can promote detachment and critical thinking as well as help build an awareness of (instead of identifying with) thoughts and emotions, and that this can be useful when engaged with group writing projects. “With a calm mind, writers can silence the inner critic, minimise distractions, reflect on writing goals, and write mindfully” (p. 1137). For me, this mindfulness rested in the idea the brain can only consider one thing at a time. While committing to my daily deadline, I also consciously forgot about the pressures of production. I focused, instead, on the very aspect of writing that I had been searching for more generally: joy. Rebek used similar strategies: “I often came to writing with the intention of production, focused on the product. I learned that a focus solely on the outcome can lead me to feel overwhelmed. Instead, with meditation, I transfer my focus to enjoying the process” (p. 1140). Or, as writer Neil Gaiman says, of writing:

There are no rules. Only: Can you do this with confidence? ... Can you do it with joy? If you can, you could write a short story that’s an essay on sixteenth century mapmaking, and everything would go, “Oh my god, what a delightful short story.” It’s because you enjoy yourself. You can put things in rhyme, you can create footnotes, sometimes I even just have my characters talk in iambic pentameter—you do it all because you want to. More than anything else, I just love random fucking joy. Doing things because you can. Taking pleasure in it. (p. 326)

Christine Howe

Australian writer Kate Holden’s recently published essay in *Meanjin*, “Is it just me?” describes the loneliness of living through our current era, defined as it is by epic crises, the news of which comes to us often in the solitary action of scrolling through newsfeeds. She writes, “I ingest awfulness one event after another alongside all my friends and acquaintances but we do it in parallel, untouching and lonely” (2022, pp. 74-75). This project enabled me to reflect on the crises we are living through on a daily basis with another writer. Rather than

living our lives in parallel, they intersected through a medium of communication that enabled us to pay a different kind of attention to particular moments in our lives. Atherton and Hetherington suggest that, “Prose poetry offers to express what we know beyond the daily posts on social media and the prosaic mundanities of ordinary self-narration. It continually promises to transform our perceptions” (2020, p. 248).

When I committed to writing and sending Shady a prose poem every day for a month – including weekends – I didn’t anticipate that this process would alter how I experienced my lived day-to-day. Walking the dog, washing up, reminding my daughter to do her music practice, teaching, cooking, walking to work – in each of these daily routines, I paid more attention not just to the events themselves, but also to the way I was interpreting these events. Irish poet John O’Donohue describes words as “oblique mirrors” that offer “glimpses of meaning, belonging and shelter. Behind their bright surfaces is the dark and the silence” (1997, p. 14). I began to choose words in my daily writing that held something of the “dark and the silence” behind their “bright surfaces,” words that not only arose from the shape of my days, but that had the capacity to give shape to my days.

I could have chosen other moments, or ideas, from the multitude I waded through each day, but these were the ones that caught my attention. American writer and artist Jenny Odell suggests that “patterns of attention – what we choose to notice and what we do not – are how we render reality for ourselves” (Odell 2019, p. xxiii). In this way, the daily act of writing began to shape the way I perceived my life. If I hadn’t been accountable to Shady, I wouldn’t have written most of these poems. It was the fact that we had committed to sending each other a poem every day that meant I snuck in writing time between doing the dishes and reading to my daughter, or between teaching and answering emails. As Odell notes, “In an endless cycle where communication is stunted and time is money, there are few moments to slip away and fewer ways to find each other” (2019, p. x). This project gave me the structure and motivation to do both.

Emergency Broadcast (C Howe)

If you live east of the Great Dividing Range and have not yet implemented your emergency evacuation plan, LEAVE NOW. If you stay, your children will develop permanently shrivelled fingertips. Your socks will cultivate mould. New forms of moss will emerge in the folds of your ears and between your toes. Eventually, the mud in your yard will claim you. Your feet will sink into the clay, ferns will gather on the lee side of your knees, stag horns will adorn your shoulders and vines will twine around your torso and your neck. You will start to smell like nutrient-rich humus. Eventually, hundreds of thousands of years into the future, your liquified bones will be mined, refined, and pumped into an Emergency Vehicle carrying your distant descendants to still higher ground.

Covid Dreaming (S Cosgrove)

Covid came on me: an infection of spirit. First, I could hear it in my blood—Bengal tigers running through my veins. Take-home tests, even PCRs, all negative but still, that internal weight of feline haunch. Relief when the positive text message pinged in the middle of the night, and the virus, as though spurred on by acknowledgement came in bursts, angry flowers in my chest, then resting, until it lodged in my throat like a coin. I couldn't swallow, couldn't speak for myself except to shout but no one listens to a shouting woman. Now I'm dizzy and hungry but uninterested in eating, as if the effort of food and joy is just too much on a planet that is itself suffering an infection of spirit.

In conclusion

While each of our poems is its own discrete entity, they were written in the context of a relationship with each other and with place (including the strange, violent reshaping of climate patterns we are both subject to and participants in). In *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, Tyson Yunkaporta describes taking a group of young Aboriginal students in Western Australia walking on Country with Dr Noel Nannup, a local Elder, storyteller and cultural guide. Yunkaporta describes Dr Nannup's process as, "seeing the overall shape of the connections between things. Look beyond the things and focus on the connections between them. Then look beyond the connections and see the patterns they make" (2019, p. 89). If we look beyond the poems we wrote to the connections between them, and then beyond those connections to the patterns they create, we see that they speak of – and emerge from – relationships between both people and place. Perhaps the act of opening our hands to each other, and the conversation that emerged as we offered up small, patterned glimpses into our days, might reveal just as much about where to locate hope and joy in this time and place as the poems themselves.

Tea break
(S Cosgrove)

We take turns diving into the teapot. I'm wearing a retro swimsuit and a bathing cap. You're in Hawaiian boardshorts. I stand with toes lined up on the ceramic lip, back curved, arms outstretched. The water's high so there's not much time before I'll hit surface, but I'm careful anyways, building nerve. Of course you can't help yourself, you run up along the porcelain handle and leap—arms wrapped around legs, head tucked—drenching me with English Afternoon.

Ducks
(C Howe)

There's a duck standing on top of a tree stump. The stump, which has multiple amputated limbs, is at least three times as high as I am. It looks like a sculpture – silver-grey bark, curving lines, hard edges. On the cut-off branch below the duck there's a flash of red and green: a pair of king parrots. Now there are two more ducks, standing tall and serene on another branch. One dead tree, two parrots, three ducks. One late afternoon sky threaded with wisps of cloud. One man, over on the hill amid

verdant, waist-high grass, playing the guitar. Two voices behind me on the path. She laughs. I picture them holding hands. He says he has a thousand conversations running through his head and doesn't know which one to choose.

Note

“Tea Break” was previously published in *Play* (2023) Ed Cassandra Atherton. Spineless Wonders, Strawberry Hills.

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