NATURE WRITING PRIZE 2017 SHORTLISTED ESSAY

'On time, myth and consequence' by Georgina Woods

My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power reconstitute the world.

"Adrienne Rich, from "Natural Resources"

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, writers of place are grappling with the scale and pace of climate change and ambiguity about whether there's still time to do something about it. To write is to seek understanding and to do so in this century means reconciling ourselves with the loss and degradation that we hasten with every day. How to describe the terrible beauty of a perversely hot autumn, as the planet leaps a barrier and sprints into a hot dark future? In the Winter 2016 edition of *Overland*, Alison Croggon wrote about hope, working through despair at a changing world and the futility of writing as a vocation: "it is hard in times of crisis," she wrote, "to know that art is no consolation, that art solves nothing."[1] Though Croggon concludes with an affirmation of the importance of literature, this essay is an answer to the fear that art offers neither consolation nor solutions to our crises. Literature can do both, but to do so, we must write across times, as well as places.

The scale and pace of earth time has been too grand for most of us. For a rainforest fungus that arrives and dies within a day, the giant myrtle appears immortal and unchangeable. Such a fungus might write poetry in which the myrtle is a static and enduring backdrop to the drama of its own brief fling with life. But with global warming, the spectacle of change has been brought into a time perspective that a single human life span can conceive, and the comforting illusion of immutable environments has fallen away.

As we witness the warming, we begin to comprehend change intimately, though not for the first time. This is the second rapid disruption of our country in a relatively short period. In the myrtle's lifetime, an era of slow change has been dramatically

accelerated with the invasion and transformation of the country that was brought by my people. That change is still underway: its consequences are still unwrapping. In the aftermath of the first cataclysm of invasion, removal of forests and woodlands, enclosure of riversides and filling of wetlands, ripping up of pathways and disruption of story-lines and genealogies has continued. In my working life I engage in the environmentalist conceit of arresting change – saving the Regent honeyeater, stopping rising greenhouse gas emissions, capturing an old growth forest in a steady-state. I do this against the grain of my society which urges more and more consumption, at a faster and faster pace, and fears stillness and retraction. But as a writer, I feel the need for a broader perspective.

From my vantage point in the tempest, I write to overcome the arrhythmia of my people, turning to the records landscapes keep of the rhythms of the everyday nestled in the rhythms of the epoch.

Time recorded in place. I honour the time and change that has already created the landscapes and ecosystems I love on this continent. I acknowledge the destructive change my people have brought to the land and to Indigenous people. These slow and rapid destructions and creations can be read in condensed form in the landscapes around my home city, Newcastle, and the Hunter Valley beyond it. Like a writer, the land keeps a record of what has gone before and will lay down records of this century, too. If we can be expansive enough to allow our writing about place to encompass time, we can reconcile our role in bringing about destructive change and we can, in Adrienne Rich's words, "reconstitute the world," just as it is falling to pieces.

I have never seen the Pilbara, but think often of its billions of years being laid bare and beaten into steel. The colours of the Pilbara capture in place the Great Oxidation Event that made the atmosphere we're now pushing to cataclysm. Cyanobacteria are thought to be among the first living things to create oxygen as a by-product of photosynthesis. When the earthly and oceanic sinks for the oxygen they expelled became saturated, a rush of it swept into the atmosphere, leaving the red rust of exposed iron oxide in the Pilbara. Contrary to our fears, we are not the first species to create planet-scale change in the atmosphere. It was done by those blue microbes billions of years ago, bringing great disaster for life-forms for whom oxygen was toxic and setting the stage for the arrival of new creatures for whom it is essential.

Randolph Stow captures something of the lithography of time passing and place changing in Western Australia's red landscapes in his homage to the *Tao Te Ching*, "The Testament of Tourmaline":

> There is no going but returning.
> Do not resist; for Tao is a flooded river
> and your arms are frail.
>
> The red land risen from the ocean erodes, returns;
> the river runs earth-red,
> staining the open sea.[2]

Stow condenses vast time scales of change into this image of the red land rising from and returning to the sea. It is cyclical time embroidered in repetition and the symmetry of his images. Overlaid on this cyclical time is the linear movement of the river, part of the cycle but giving the impression of passing without returning. Our frail arms cannot contain such epic movements.

On the other side of the continent is a landscape I know very well, the Hunter Valley. The Hunter is a place of meeting and transition. In the south, it gathers water from the Goulburn River and Wollombi Brook, which spring from the salty sandstone escarpments of Wollemi and Yengo and their dry eucalypt forests and heaths. On the northern side, the blue-brown Paterson and Williams Rivers, Glennies Creek and the Hunter itself come down from wet sclerophyll forests, rainforest and pockets of montane wetlands on Barrington Tops' basalts. In the west, the Pages and Merriwa Rivers and a series of other tributaries draw from the Box-Gum woodlands of the Liverpool Range. The Hunter flows into the ocean at Newcastle, through a large and productive estuary.

The last time the earth was this warm, sudden sea-level rise in the Late Permian stopped up the broad river deltas of the Hunter, Bowen and Galilee Basins and flooded the marshy *Glossopteris* forests of Gondwana, sogging the dead leaves and trunks, laying down coal beds in pages of lithographic story-telling. We know Gondwana now by reading the recurrence of the *Glossopteris* in her former territories. The whole genus

perished during the Great Dying at the close of the Permian age, an extinction event that nearly wiped out life on earth. We tear up the pages of that history now and burn them like banned books, warming the sky again and summoning the sea back to its abandoned lands.

Not all of this story is buried. At Swansea Heads, south of Newcastle, you can walk on the remains of a *Glossopteris* forest, flattened 250 million years ago by the force of a volcano. Trunks of petrified trees lie among the rock pools, pointing westward to the sunset in solemn frieze. Living on the edge of the Hunter River at its mouth, I see these rock stories carried past me several times a day buried in the bellies of bulk carriers with names like *Sincere Pisces*, *Global Triumph* and *Corona Infinity*, attended by tugs like cherubs around Venus. We are coming around again to the warm times and the high water times. We are coming to the dying times. It helps to understand this change we bring about as a returning cycle of disruption, albeit a frighteningly swift one and one of our own making. It is the task of art, particularly writing, to develop and spread this understanding, and make a reckoning for our actions.

Henri Lefebvre characterised time as moving both cyclically and linearly, and posited that *arrhythmia* is produced as these shapes of time cut across and disrupt each other: “Great cyclical rhythms last for a period and restart: dawn, always new, often superb, inaugurates the return of the everyday. The antagonistic unity of relations between the cyclical and the linear sometimes gives rise to compromises, sometimes to disturbances.”[3] Cyclical time is mythic time. It is the time of the gods, who embody epic and inexorable natural forces. The gods’ stories are cycle stories: the earth’s revolutions, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the flexing and decay of power. To make sense of where we are and where we’re going, the place-time writing that we need is mythic, transcending the quotidian by quilting it into grand scales of eons we cannot fathom.

In an article for *Heat*, Indigenous novelist Alexis Wright described two principle questions she sought to answer in writing her novel *Carpentaria:* “firstly, how to understand the idea of Indigenous people living with the stories of all the times of this country, and secondly, how to write from this perspective…”[4] *Carpentaria* is the written in the spellbinding register of myth. It opens with a Dreaming story of the river where the action is set, followed by the more pitiable origin story of the colonialist town

Desperance that was built alongside the river as a port, but was left behind when the river changed course one flooding time. Wright's most recent novel *The Swan Book* extends her mastery of time narrative and is set in the future, in the roiling time of climate change – an endless present of the struggle for survival and memory. When I say "myth" I do not want to diminish Wright's narrative, just the opposite. We have taken to using the word "myth" as a shorthand for untruth, but I mean it another way, as a mode of storytelling that is not constrained by linear approaches to time. It is this conception that Wright describes in her essay when she calls *Carpentaria* "a novel capable of embracing all times." What strikes me reading Wright's novels is the failure of my own people to understand *consequence*. Mine is a people chasing cleverness at the expense of wisdom, at once heedless and fearful of time and the consequences of our actions. Perhaps it was not always this way. For hundreds of years we began stories with the mysterious phrase "Once upon a time…" which gestures to a mythic perspective that can sweep across time scales. It's a phrase that Wright uses in *Carpentaria*. Writing this way brings place into consequence, telling how the past became the present and how the present creates the future: *this will come to pass*.

Does it change the way we write about coal and climate change to know that the Awabakal people of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie have a Dreaming story about a volcano called *Kintiirabin*, "A long time ago when the Earth and Sea were different to today," that brought forth great darkness?
According to the story, people came from all directions to decide how to restore light, and the Elders decided that to bring back the light, they must cover the darkness, so the men, women and children of the area buried it with rocks, sand and bark, covering it up underground where it became the *nikkin*, coal. Even after burying it, the people feared, "that the ever-burning fires deep in the ground would release the darkness again."[5]

Harriet Riley's prize winning essay "Endlings: on love and extinction" draws comparison between our own dangerous times and the Permian Extinction, seeing a repeat of the runaway climate change, swift alteration of planetary conditions and near total extinction of life, from which it took earth millions of years to recover. These things have been before. This is how we ourselves came to be.

Riley explores the grief we're experiencing as we witness climate change accelerate

and see the damage it inflicts. She feels it as "a deep primal pain – a disturbance in the force"[6] and she is not alone. Climate grief resembles the longing that people experience when the landscape of their home is radically altered, described by geographical philosopher Glenn Albrecht and labelled by him *solastalgia.*[7] Glenn coined the term to name the experience of Hunter Valley communities living alongside the upturning of the land and creeks of the valley, the radical change brought about by large-scale open-cut coal mining. They were still home, still in the same place, but the place had changed and was lost to them, and they grieved for it.

Our understanding of the change our places are undergoing is both technical and intimate, but often fails to enter our collective psyche with the intensity of myth and story-telling. Writers of place can undertake this translation. In around 2012, I was in a foyer of the Commonwealth Department of Environment in Canberra. I was there to speak to them about one of the coal mines proposed for the Galilee Basin in Queensland, and the effect of the mine on nationally threatened wildlife and plants. While waiting, I picked up a report from the coffee table in front of me, about the risk to Australia's wildlife from climate change. I opened the report at random and read that Short-tailed shearwaters, the east coast's most abundant sea-bird and Australia's most abundant predator, are threatened by rising seas because of their habit of nesting close to the water line. I have spent hours of exquisite loneliness watching flocks of those birds from the rock platform behind the Newcastle Ocean Baths as they scraped the lips of waves, sat and skated on the surface and wheeled in mesmerising arcs one after another on the storm winds of my home coast. The prophecy of the ecological forecasters struck me with force. *This will come to pass*: there will come a time of absence, when those flocks exist only as memory and story.

To know that change is occurring and see more of it coming is a terrible gift. I can no longer write about Short-tailed shearwaters without foreknowledge. The task of writers is to communicate consequence without falling under the illusion of control, or into the dead-end of self-flagellation or, worse, finger-pointing. We can participate in efforts to prevent the worst of the damage and foster natural and social adaptation without indulging in the hubris that we can prevent change altogether. My home in *Mulubinba*, in Awabakal country, is on the shores of *Coquon*, the Hunter River, which lies between Awabakal and Worimi country.[8] *Coquon* is neither fixed nor eternal. It has been

blocked up by sea level rise. It has been silted and opened. The river has changed its course. Perhaps in time the river will leave this city stranded by changing course again. In the time that the Worimi and Awabakal people have been here, the sea has risen a long way, covering old walking paths with sand and cunjevoi. If we're to write time and rhythm into our stories and songs about place, if we're to pay adequate homage to the land, then we should open our imaginations to the epic perspective of the people who have lived tens of thousands of years of continuous cultural and spiritual lives here while these changes took place. And we must do this without repeating the theft and dispossession of land with theft of voice.

Most dramatically and recently, the lands and waters of the Awabakal and Worimi have been colonised, and I am a descendent of the migrants that followed the invasion, the floods that followed the tsunami. Its shoreline has been cleared, concreted and filled with the toxic residue of steel-making and fertiliser and explosive manufacture. Its myriad islands have been filled and cleared and turned into industrial badlands. I know too little of the lives of the Awabakal and Worimi people who three hundred years ago lived where I live. I imagine they would hardly recognise the place if brought here now. But would they? Perhaps they told their children stories that brought geological scale changes into the logic of one life and its cycles? In the same way, the Awabakal Dreaming looks backward at the volcano that made the darkness, perhaps they also had stories of what was to come, when the darkness was brought back to the surface. Professor John Maynard has written of the climactic changes through which Awabakal ancestors lived in this area as the seas rose, and of their manipulation of the landscape through fire. The Awabakal clans, according to Maynard, quarried stone and manufactured goods and weapons that could be traded to inland tribes. Through his knowledge of Awabakal history, Maynard is able to see the industrialisation of Newcastle, though it came with the devastating barbarity of invasion, as a re-establishment of a link with "its traditional Awabakal past."[9] To quote Wright again, "The Indigenous world is both ancient and modern, both colonial experience and contemporary reality, and the problem right now for us, is how to carry all the times when approaching the future."[10] I do not want to trespass on Awabakal knowledge, but even without that knowledge, I feel the mis-beat of arrhythmia in our lives on this country, and anguish at the change that has been wrought to the islands, sand spits and wetlands that once flourished with life in the place I call home.

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This place will change again. The sea will rise and claim more territory. It will cover the wetlands and smother the paperbarks. The reclaimed land that lies under Newcastle's three coal export terminals will be liberated and submerged into the estuary. The giant fell beast stacker-reclaimers whose wheels scoop mouthfuls of coal from piles of the darkness that was once upon a time buried by the men, women and children will sink and tilt and rust over, unused. In the bushland that fringes the coast from Swansea to Newcastle and north to Tomaree, fire will sweep through so often that the peachy twists of coastal smooth-barked *Angophora* and apple-green Spotted-gum will be replaced with heath. A record of this change will be left in the landscape, buried and hidden as the *Glossopteris* was. I know this will happen because these things have been foretold: inundation of coastal cities… increased bushfires…. radical alteration of ecosystems across the country. We have maps and detailed scenario stories outlining this prophecy, as we have for the shearwaters.

What we don't know is what will come after the disruption. In ten million years, when the turmoil has settled and biology shifts out of panic mode, what life and change comes then? This imagining, too, is a role for writers of place - to cast forward and tell stories of the time to come, when the cycle turns back to life again.

As Stow wrote in "The Testament of Tourmaline":

The loved land will not pass away
World has no life but transformation.

Nothing made selfless can decay.
The loved land will not pass away.

In that time, I dream of body-forms unimagined by zoologists. This era's phyla and classes of animal life will be written down in strata pages of the geological book. They will have been replaced by different and inventive ways of laying out a body-plan, regulating temperature, absorbing fuel, excreting waste and reproducing. I think about these creatures. How the intelligent among them might excitedly brush rock dust off the petrified forms of my beloved *Angophoras*, positing theories to explain how they came

to extinction so suddenly, taking clues from mineral deposits that indicate high levels of carbonic acid in the oceans, or suddenly more frequent fires that burned everything that had grown here in the very brief Holocene.

It seems too much to hope that our writing will survive till then to give them clues. The oldest artistic records we have now, painted caves in Arnhem land, are more than 28,000 years old. We have no way of knowing how old the story of *Kintiirabin* is. Our story-telling, we must presume, could not possibly last so long, let alone for the millions of years it will take for these genius new life forms to evolve. Instead, our writing about place and the land as it changes is written for each other, to sift time in place and find solace and understanding. To write in honour of consequence.

We've blazed here as briefly as a day-living fungus. In the time to come, the smear of our short period in the lithographic record will be so thin that it seems it could hardly do justice to the complexity and beauty that bloomed here so fleetingly. But it is all the justice that can be done.

References:

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[2] Randolph Stow, 1969. "From the Testament of Tourmaline" *A Counterfeit Silence*. 74.

[3] Henri Lefebvre, 2004. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*.

[4] Alexis Wright, 2006. "*On writing Carpentaria*" *Heat 13: Harper's Gold*.

[5] Laurel Williams, Louise Campbell and Craig Aspinall, 2001. "How Coal was Made" *Awabakal Dreaming Stories*. Aboriginal Multimedia Productions.

[6] Harriet Riley, 2016. "Endlings: On Love and Extinction." *Island* 146.

[7] Glenn Albrecht, 2005. "Solastalgia, a new concept in human health and identity," *Philosophy Activism Nature*

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10 Alexis Wright "*On writing Carpentaria*" *Heat 13: Harper's Gold*.