

JOHN BENNETT

*Real fables*

*Sunday April 7, 2013, Toormina, NSW.*



We gather by the playground for a rollcall by the volunteer guide. I look up, a Tawny Frogmouth looks down; our reciprocal gaze (or stare) is speechless. I take this photograph at the start of a koala hunt. How can humans connect with the wild and natural? Making these connections can slow the momentum of our ecological crisis. We are connected intimately to each other, to other biota and the planet. The fates of animals and humans are entwined, but through our social, cultural and even aesthetic concerns, we are failing the future. Cognitive scientists suggest we make rational decisions before conscious reasoning and emotional connections with nature and the wild place us at home. The problem is we don't live in the land with totems and Songlines that locate us within the fabric of creation and everyday life and death.

We were once intimate with animals and now gaze from behind windows, or through books and the media. Animals were the first elements we depicted in the depths of European caves and Australian overhangs going back over 40,000 years. How close can we get to animals, with or without E.O. Wilson's hypothesis of biophilia as our evolutionary trait? Can a naturalistic art that pays attention with affection and interest help connect us? Or keeping animals as pets? Or simply being in their presence?

Copernicus and Darwin only weakened anthropocentrism; we still use allegory (fables, animal characters as people) and personification (human qualities projected onto animals). We can't escape our human perspective, but should be aware of our limited understanding of animal behaviour/cognition.

I'd like to introduce four British nature writers, three of whom I read as a young boy at boarding school on the South Downs of England, and then suggest an alternative approach from an Australian perspective of ways to connect with the wild. My world was like theirs back then, with no guilt over the Empire, no sign of computers or social media, and no sense of a global ecological crisis. I played rugby and cricket, got beaten for poor marks in Latin, played in the woods, caught voles, newts and lizards. I read Gerald Durrell and wanted to become a naturalist until I read *On the Road* in my mid-teens. All three of these writers attempted to write from the perspective of an animal's universe; all were eccentric outsiders sharing Tom Buchanan's view that "Civilisation's going to pieces" (*The Great Gatsby*).

## *Henry Williamson*

In 1922, Henry Williamson rented a cottage in Georgeham, North Devon. WW1 had damaged him and the moors offered solitude and comfort. He lived alone, often slept rough and gathered a menagerie including an otter cub rescued after a farmer had shot his mother. He named him Tarka (meaning little water wanderer). Williamson would crawl with him, trying to enter the otter's world in Dark Hams Wood or Horsey Marsh. One day Tarka walked into a rabbit trap, panicked and ran. Williamson spent years searching the Rivers Taw and Torridge but never found Tarka. Published in 1927, *Tarka the Otter*, one of the first books written from the animal's point of view, became a best seller.

He followed Thoreau's advice for language "concentrated and nutty. Sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new, impression; sentences which suggest as many things and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct; to frame these, that is the art of writing" (*Journal*, Aug 22 1851). Williamson's style influenced Rachel Carson, one of the bravest and most important of environmental writers, and Ted Hughes described him as "one of the truest English poets of his generation".

Rousseau refigured the Fall, describing men as "happy slaves" living in "vile and deceptive uniformity", a thread sewn by writers as different as Thoreau and Adorno. He thought man was unique for his self-fashioning: "no-one has ever seen a people, once corrupted, return to virtue." Williamson was a fascist and fascists believe in order and uniformity for redemption from personal, social and economic difficulties. In 1935, he visited the Nuremberg congress and greatly admired the Hitler Youth movement. Auden thought he understood fascism from being a public schoolboy and recognising Nazis as "a mixture of gangsters and the sort of school prefect who is good at Corps." They were worse, finding animals in what were humans, spitting out *ungeziefer* (vermin) to describe Jews. Being a keen supporter of Oswald Mosley, even after the Second World War, took the gloss off Williamson's reputation and his conservation work.

He rejected offers from Disney to make a film of *Tarka* before choosing wildlife filmmaker David Cobham. Suffering from senile dementia, he died in 1977 the day Tarka was being killed for the film with a screenplay (packed with violence) by Gerald Durrell.

## *T.H. White*

White was Head of English at Stowe Public School in Buckinghamshire and fond of hunting and fishing. He kept owls and paid the boys to catch mice to feed them. He wrote: "I had two books on the training of the *falconidae* in one of which was a sentence which suddenly struck fire from my mind. The sentence was: 'She reverted to a feral state.' A longing came to my mind that I should be able to do this myself" (*The Goshawk*, 1951).

White became a full time writer after the success of an autobiography about country life (*England Have My Bones*, 1936). He practiced falconry, hunting and fishing while living in an old labourer's cottage at Stowe Ridings with books, owls and hawks – no running water or electricity: "Part of the joy was that now, for the first time in my life, I was absolutely free. Even if I only had a hundred pounds, I had no master, no property, no fetters . . . I was as free as a hawk" (*The Goshawk*). He was a bi-polar loner, homosexual and reportedly a sado-masochist who relished privacy and had no intimate friendships.

He bought a young goshawk, 'Gos', from Germany not knowing how to break him in beyond the old practice of denying sleep; together they became delirious and intimate with anger and attraction. White did not know that Goshawks are the most difficult raptor to dominate and train: "I did not know then that this was a common state of affairs with goshawks, that the best of them were always haunted by moods and mania" (*The Goshawk*).

He kept a daybook detailing his obsession, his patience, impatience and the stubborn spirit of the hawk. He worked these writings into *The Goshawk*: "To write something which was of enduring beauty, this was the ambition of every writer . . . It was not the beauty but the endurance, for endurance was beautiful. It was also all that we could do."

He underwent psychoanalysis and blamed his unhappy childhood in India for his isolation and alcohol dependence: "Life is such unutterable hell, solely because it is sometimes beautiful. If we could only be miserable all the time, if there could be no such things as love or beauty or faith or hope, if I could be absolutely certain that my love would never be returned, how much more simple life would be" (*The Troll*, 1975).

In 1939 White moved to Ireland to avoid the war and began his most famous book, the Arthurian fantasy *The Once and Future King* (1958), influenced by Thomas Malory and in turn influencing J. K. Rowling. Nature has become a fantasy. The Anglo idea of nature became informed by art and English landscape gardening, particularly Stowe as it happens.

Charles Bridgeman designed the famous garden (1713) where White had worked as formal French and Dutch styles were being replaced. William Kent later embellished the “poetic” garden with the Temple of British Worthies, filled with busts of heroes from Francis Bacon and Shakespeare. Capability Brown’s artful naturalism followed Kent, though his gently sloping Grecian Valley took two years of shifting earth.

Untamed English gardens became associated with political freedom and in the case of Stowe overt Whig political meaning. George Monbiot was a pupil at Stowe and reminds us a village was removed: “Kent and Brown constructed a paradise, in fact part of the grounds are called ‘The Elysian Fields’, but their classical wilderness was an artefact of social cleansing” (‘Gardens of Eden’, ABC RN, 14.09.2003).

William Gilpin conceived Picturesque while visiting Stowe in the 1740s. This fashion enticed people out into the countryside to see landscape as a sequence of changing vistas as if viewing paintings by Claude Lorrain. Emphasis on the eye and the mind alienates unique ecologies.

### *Gavin Maxwell*

Gavin Maxwell, Scottish grandson of the Duke of Northumberland, was educated at Stowe School. He never knew his father who died in WW1. As a boy he became an expert shot and worked with SOE (Special Operations Executive) during WW2. He tried his hand at exploration, shark fishing, being a naturalist and finally writer. He lived at times in an abandoned cottage (Highland forced clearances) on a friend’s estate at Sandaig on the Sound of Sleat opposite Skye. He started by hunting, describing in detail shooting a fox, but then immersed himself in the landscape from the animals’ points of view. He loved the wildcats in the chimney, wild geese overhead and dolphins in the sound.

In 1956 he explored the marshes of Southern Iraq with Wilfred Thesiger and his account of the travels ‘A Reed Shaken by the Wind’ was well received. Thesiger bought him an otter whom he took back to England. He was identified as an unknown sub-species of Smooth-coated Otter and named ‘Maxwell’s Otter’ thought to be now extinct. The Bible places the Garden of Eden near where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers split and soak wetlands and alluvial salt marshes before emptying into the Persian Gulf. It was home to human communities for five millennia. Saddam Hussein’s regime destroyed the Marsh Arabs’ way of

life (a pitiful one Maxwell thought) and an estimated 90% of the 20,000 square-kilometres of marsh described by the UN as "one of the world's greatest environmental disasters".

The otter 'Mijbil' was mischievous and energetic and ransacked his London flat, so Maxwell took him to the Highlands where Mijbil exhibited curiosity and displayed that universal instinct, playfulness. He had distinct preferences, like sleeping in bed head on a pillow. Maxwell was happiest alone with wildlife but shared his home with young men drawn to him and his conservation work. His overpowering egotism and possessiveness drove them away. He had an unconsummated relationship with the poet Kathleen Raine who adored him, but he was gay and probably bipolar. Angered by his homosexual affairs, she cursed the place and let the otter roam north when she'd been warned not to. A roadworker killed the otter and later when the house burnt down both attributed the misfortunes to her curse. Maxwell never mentioned her in his book, using her poetry for the title 'Ring of Bright Water', published in 1960 to great acclaim. The writing is prolix compared to Williamson but his passion for the wild landscape and the otters shines through, and the detailed sketches and photographs helped change the image of the otter. It was because of Maxwell's efforts that otters became protected. He would have despaired of this December 2012 headline, "2013 will decide whether the Scottish wildcat lives or dies: Highland tiger on its last legs following persecution by gamekeepers and interbreeding with domestic cats."

Animals have personalities and cannot be fully tamed. Maxwell shows new otters Edel, Teko, Mossy and Monday as having different personalities in a sequel to 'Ring of Bright Water', 'The Rocks Remain' (1963). Edel bit fingers off a fifteen year old assistant and the otters were caged. The last of the trilogy 'Raven Seek Thy Brother' (completed 1968) is a discursive revelation of the end of Maxwell's dream, mentioning the curse, a poltergeist, accidents, mismanagement and financial difficulties. He suffered writer's block, I can imagine how. Language is natural and constitutive in that rather than representing the world it builds on it, but being involved with an animal and entering the animal's orbit is far removed from sitting down at a desk with an empty thin sliver of tree to write on. Can writing, a technology that has meshed with our bodies and minds, be the basis for writer or reader to develop an understanding and ethical relationship with their environment? After all "Writing and reading are acts usually performed indoors, unachievable without long shifts of attention away from the natural environment." (Lawrence Buell, 'The Environmental Imagination, 1995). Wordsworth and Coleridge ('The Ancyent Marinere') admit animal otherness as a key to community, even if through violence ('Hart-Leap Well'). These three nature writers were

outsiders who provoke us with a tantalising world that refuses to treat animals as signs, symbols or metaphors, though the ethics are outdated.

What one should learn from artists – How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? . . . we want to be the poets of our life – first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters. (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882)

### *Grey Owl*

The last writer I will discuss is new to me. Grey Owl also depicted the world from other species perspectives. He worked the Canadian wilderness as fur trapper, wilderness guide and forest ranger. Wounded in WW1 he was shipped back and learnt from Ojibwa Indians of north-central Canada harvesting, trapping and hunting techniques and their culture. He lived with a young Iroquois girl Anahareo (Pony). After trapping an adult beaver he rescued two young beavers he'd just orphaned which triggered his love for beavers. "I had laid in wait for beaver and killed them with a club, and their resignation in the face of death was always disturbing; some of them had tried to shelter their heads from the blow with their hands. One, badly wounded with shot, had swam ashore within a few feet of me, and had lain there looking up at me so that I had boggled the execution most horribly. The incident had haunted me for days." ('Pilgrims of the Wild', 1934) In 1930, Parks Canada made a film about Grey Owl and his beaver conservation work. He had built his cabin around a beaver lodge and wrote 'Pilgrims of the Wild' believing in beavers as a symbol for vanishing Canadian wilderness and decline of "the capabilities and possibilities of the wild creatures involved." With its sketches and photographs of the young beavers, it sold well:

Yet, on reflection, it struck me as passing strange that we, representatives of two tribes who, above all others, had each in their day made the war-trail a thing of horror (an art, by the way, in which the whole world is at present busy in perfecting itself), should be wearing ourselves to a frazzle over the likes and dislikes of two miserable little creatures that were not, according to civilized standards, worth the powder to blow them to hell. ('Pilgrims of the Wild')

Grey Owl's use of 'capabilities' echoes Martha Nussbaum's Aristotelian approach to ethics, "there is waste and tragedy when a living creature has the innate or "basic" capability for some functions that are evaluated as important and good, but never gets the opportunity to perform those functions" ('Justice for Non-Human Animals', 2002). A life born into the world

should flourish in its abilities and capabilities. This is a useful naturalistic framework supporting the rights of all species.

Grey Owl successfully campaigned for nature conservation. 'Pilgrims of the Wild' was continually reprinted, but his alcoholism became problematic. He travelled to Europe lecturing to over a quarter of a million people. On his second tour, he gave a command performance at Buckingham Palace saluting the King in Ojibwa. "I come in peace, brother." When he died it was revealed that he was Archie Belaney, fascinated by Native Americans as a boy, and that he was a bigamist from Hastings, England. This cast rather a pall over his conservation work.

The four writers I've discussed were flawed, weird, inspiring characters who sought intimacy from wild animals. Their writings inspired others to appreciate and help conserve nature and perhaps even a re-imagining towards Ojibwa cosmology. Anthropologist A.I. Hallowell described the Ojibwa as considering animals, like the bear, as people- but without anthropomorphism, the intimacy of pets, or treating animals as children. Ojibwa relate to animals as creatures on the same level as themselves because they are capable of metamorphosis, of shape shifting. "The social relations between human beings and other-than-human persons are of cardinal importance in the worldview of the Great Lakes Ojibwa" ('Ojibwa Ontology, Behaviour, and World View', 1960). Aboriginal totems likewise offer intimacy with the wild. Bill Gammage writes, "totem is a life force stemming from and part of a creator ancestor. An emu man does not have emu as a mere symbol: he is emu, of the same soul and the same flesh. He must care for emu and its habitat, and it must care for him." ('The Biggest Estate on Earth', 2012)

Aged eight I saw Walt Disney's 'The Incredible Journey' about an epic journey home by two lost dogs and Tao the Siamese cat through the Canadian wilderness. When we got a cat I called her Tao. Tao was my last pet. I know people who treat pets as people and vice versa, but why own an animal? What kind of love requires dependence? Pets are commodities.



## *A koala*



On the koala hunt I look for birds as well. I'm no twitcher, but enjoy being in their presence, itself an index of environmental health. I consider myself relatively normal despite living in shorts, but Sean Dooley points out, "Even Keith Richards would not look cool with a pair of bins around his neck . . . [it] invites hostility as people think you are either a rabid Greenie or a pervert" ('The Big Twitch', 2005). Birds are individuals, some risk takers, some aggressive, some socialisers, some promiscuous. Montaigne noted: "Even among wild birds, songs are not equal to each other; all birds learn according to their own skills."

Our guide points out Tallowwood and Swamp Mahogany, the koalas' favourite food trees, then Wyn spots a young one having a quick scratch then moments later back to dozing high in a Bloodwood. Koalas are an example of Australia's unique fauna. Our guide explains they have a metre long appendix, eat over a kilo of leaves each night then sleep for up to nineteen hours. They regularly browse several trees in rotation, called home trees. He shows us a photograph of a truck piled high with koala skins (see below). An estimated 800,000 were killed that year (1927) in Queensland alone.

We've heard a male squealing like a speared pig in search of a mate in Jagun Nature Reserve that backs onto our garden and have seen some in the area, always alone. Australia has the worst mammal extinction rate of all and the future of koalas here in the Mid North Coast, with such fragmented habitat from development and so many cars and dogs, appears bleak. In serious decline in NSW and Queensland, populations thrive in Victoria and South Australia but are a different sub-species using different food trees. I have no desire to hold one, tame one or live with one, I just want them to survive in healthy populations.



A truck loaded with 3,600 koala skins collected in the Clermont area in one month, 1927. The John Oxley library.

## *Roos*

*Monday April 8*

I grew up in England reading the three British authors and later Gerald Durrell ('My Family and Other Animals', 1956). Any vague thoughts of a career were with wildlife. Nature is rich in obvious aesthetic values from sunsets to birdsong, but informed even scientific knowledge increases aesthetic appreciation by guiding our attention. I can attest to this from my bird-watching. Mark O'Connor in 'Wordsworth's House at Rydal' suggests that informed knowledge of nature also enables the large questions to be asked, "this / bright-eyed hook-nosed eighty-year-old/ starving for information."

Eighteenth-century thinkers wrestled with human/non-human animal distinctions. Jeremy Bentham asked if animals suffer. We now know they feel (Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy, 'When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals', 1995) and realise animals are individuals with unique behaviours and unique skills and personalities, but humans rarely observe them close enough to realise this fact. Desiring clear categories we are

disturbed by Chuang Chou dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. “Do we agree to presume that every murder, every transgression of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" concerns only man?” asks Derrida (‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’ , 2002)

Kangaroos are emblems of the uniqueness of Australian fauna. I photograph them in our garden, but keep my distance. I recognise some individuals, but they come and go, blur and have no names.



Jan Aldenhoven and Glen Carruthers’ documentary ‘Kangaroos - faces in the mob’ (1992) followed kangaroos for over two years, advised by academics who had researched the large mob for fifteen years. They showed that the marsupial’s remarkable reproductive system, often disparaged as primitive, is superbly adapted to Australian conditions. Carruthers explains, “We wanted to do two things: one was the normal in-depth behaviour of kangaroos, the other was in showing the individual differences. The latter is where it became hard.” To depict differences and individualise them, they felt they had to name them but used non-human names. They have been criticised for anthropomorphism and a normative stance, for example when contrasting good and bad mothers, yet, they attempt the animals’ viewpoint and the narration avoids dramatisation and omnipotence. Richard Mabey comments on a scene in David Attenborough's ‘The Life of Mammals’: “it seemed like a particularly surreal version of Alice in Wonderland.” (‘Biophobia’, 2003). Jane Goodall

gained a PhD in ethology while rebelling against her supervisors by naming the chimpanzees she studied, getting to know them as individuals.

Aesop's fables mention wolves frequently. In one the wolf and lamb drink peacefully together, in another the wolf prefers freedom and hunting, even if a poor living compared to the life of a dog, fed, chained and restricted. Wolves are under threat and still persecuted. Wolves howling in the Tatras Mountains carted memorable shivers down my spine. There are about 150,000 wolves left in the world and 400 million dogs, all descended from the wolf, nearly all with names, some bred to work, most bred to pander to human needs, whether aggression, needy doting, stupidity, or obedient companionship (Argos, Cerberus, Black Bob, Snowy, Timmy, Buck, Fang notwithstanding). Konrad Lorenz loved dogs but realised they were all emasculated substitutes for their ancestor, the wolf, having diminished brains, serious congenital defects from inbreeding and lacking the intelligence and independence that 'wild' engenders. Newborn dogs and wolves look similar, but a wolf skull takes twice as long as a dog's to develop. It is larger with sharper teeth and has a bigger brain to body ratio. Dogs are not as alert and attentive to the environment. You can tame a wolf by hand rearing a cub, but the offspring will be wild not domesticated. Jake Page writes, "To truly domesticate a plant or an animal you have to engineer it" ('Dogs: A Natural History', 2007). Evidence is clear, pedigree dogs have been engineered for genetic malformation and pain.

That mysterious evangelical self-mythologising artist Josef Beuys believed art could energise society and forge reconciliation with nature. For the performance 'I Like America and America Likes Me' (1974) Beuys, covered in felt, was transferred by ambulance from the Airport straight to a New York gallery where eight hours a day for three days, locked in with a coyote, he remained mostly hidden beneath his felt. Not much happened. The coyote is a sacred animal in Native American mythology, but this coyote was actually half-wolf/half-husky bored and indifferent to the allegory.

### *The alphabet*

*I am trying to teach you that this alphabet of 'natural objects' (soils and rivers, birds and beasts) spells out a story . . . Once you have learned to read the land, I have no fear of what you will do to it or, with it.*

– Aldo Leopold ('A Sand County Almanac', 1949)

We are usually outsiders inside looking out. Parking his car in Alaska, John Burnside met a fox, “accustomed/ as I was not/ to the rule of the tundra/ the logic of the wilderness that says/ where nothing seems to happen/ all the time/ what happens is the chance/ that something might” (‘Arctic Fox’, 2007). The wild is a civilised dream. Christopher McCandless read Thoreau then died aged 24 in Alaska of starvation. His final journal entry was “Beautiful Blueberries” with a torn page of Robinson Jeffers’s poem, “Death’s a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made/ Something more equal to centuries/ Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness,” with “I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all”, scrawled on the back.

Ted Hughes was a farmer and fisherman but his famous ‘The thought-fox’ is that common device - a poem about writing a poem. There is no fox and outside in darkness nothing has changed: ‘The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed.’ Hughes later commented, “So, you see, in some ways my fox is better than an ordinary fox. It will live for ever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me wherever I go. And I made it. And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words.” (‘Poetry in the Making’, 1967). The four writers would disagree. They show that genres like Eclogue, Georgic or Pastoral are out-of-date though all tend to the tragic. Joseph Meeker, argues tragedy is unhealthy, the genre emphasises egocentric individuals tending to dominate nature, whereas play and comedy are adaptive. (‘The Comedy of Survival’, 1972)

The Australian wild is Aboriginal, fire-stick farmed, hunted, gathered, danced and sung in over 270 languages whose presence and practices have been disrupted. The way to connect is not by taming the wild but learning place in a bioregional, ecological and communal way. Contemporary ecopoetics explores interconnections, celebrates and condemns from experiences and a political stance. It’s an urgent task, 12% of bird species and 25% of mammals are threatened with extinction this century. What is an appropriate response? Anger, sadness, work?

Poetry can spell out Leopold’s alphabet with its concerns and joys. The best poets get down close: “I dropt down on a thymy mole-hill or mossy eminence to survey the summer landscape.” (John Clare quoted by Richard Mabey from ‘The Autobiography’); “We need the tonic of wildness, - to wade sometimes in marshes . . . to smell the whispering sedge . . . We can never have enough of Nature.” (Thoreau, ‘Spring’) “No way to travel off the trail but to dive in: down on your hands and knees on the crunchy manzanita leafcover and crawl around between the trunks.” (Gary Snyder, ‘Crawling’). “A step down and you’re into it; a



wilderness swallows you up: ankle-, then knee-, then midriff- to-shoulder-deep in wetfooted understory, an overhead spruce-tamarack horizon hinting you'll never get out of here." (Amy Clampitt, 'The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews').

Alice Oswald, to whom I dedicate the following poem, is an English nature poet who crawls and lies on the Earth attempting immersion in the landscape.

## Invitation to Jagun

*for A.O.*

Last week in the British Library I asked you to Australia,  
you submitted fear of flying but it would make a change  
from lying at gravity's suggestion on cool Dartmoor earth.

You could walk out of our house straight into Jagun  
spread a dizzy balance on our old impoverished soils  
under towering Bloodwoods, Blackbutts and Turpentine.

Expect some discomfort from marauding ants, leeches  
and ticks, hungry and chewing at all angles, perhaps head  
for the roar of the Pacific washing up on Letterbox Beach,

relax on the hind dunes among the crab holes below Coastal Banksias  
and become intimate with the Black Cockatoos, noisy eaters  
shredding breakfast, burying you in sage-green flower spikes.

Our art collection hangs Hyacinth Orchids, flashy Painted  
Jezebels, the golden Regent Bowerbird and volatile Scarlet Honeyeater,  
but it is the haptic and aural that interest you – a White-throated

Treecreeper tapping lightly, the mercurial scatter of skinks, slewed  
rustle of a python, crisp scrunch of a goanna taking off up a tree –  
and the music of avian choirs of fantail, thornbill, whistler and wren.

Stay under night's roof, watch the Southern Cross abseil  
through the open architecture of the forest and sense  
the silent manoeuvres of Frogmouths, Boobooks and Gliders.

Thoreau was content with a flute, Homer and home-made cakes,  
but stay much longer and your language will become dishevelled,  
syntax will slough, verbs bounce and rusted nouns splutter.

If you sleep a deep sleep deft Wombat Berry, Arrow-head Vines,  
insistent sharp-thorned Sarsaparilla and with a bit of luck  
the threatened Cryptic Forest Twiner will parcel you tightly.

Gumbaynggirr time flies by the self-presence of Romantic poets,  
your skin will grow afresh, your cheeks will welcome the primary  
colonisers, smooth Blackwattle lichens that come in a choice

of green or ivory, foliose lichens will root Cats Eyes to the tips  
of your fingers and toes and feathery grey fruticose species  
will bodice your torso, all symptoms of a healthy world.

By now Jagun will be a new wood, its stumps and history mulch,  
its ground a palimpsest of psalms, a browse of leaf and stem  
its scripture, and our star sinking behind *Nungu Mirral* its benediction.

An old mystery, the Green Man may trace a songline from the Dart  
to Oyster Creek (I've just felt a wallaby running off thumping the bank).  
You showed I must touch more if this place is to become a coming home.

Notes:

Jagun is Gumbaynggirr for home. The poem is way too romanticised - lying on this ground could lead to snake bites, infected leech bites, Lyme disease, Barmah Forest virus, Ross River fever, Lyssavirus or Murray Valley Encephalitis. How to connect with the natural environment needs much more than imagination, but less than an all-consuming vocation.