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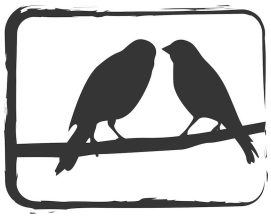

Burrows and Burrs: A Perceptual History

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ABSTRACT Knowledge has no proper homeland. It is scattered among disciplines and genres. A novel is filled with events, described in a particular manner, which might be translated into objects of scientific worth. Science makes new discoveries that find their way back into literature. Philosophy questions starting points and adds nuance to grey areas between disciplines. Science contributes to philosophy's repertoire of relevant ideas. This article is an effort to account for the dynamism and complexity of the relationship that exists between differing kinds of knowledge. It uses an essayistic form of narration to pull together contrasting examples that suggest hard and fast distinctions between subject and object tend to provoke misleadingly abstract descriptions of place. The specific place under investigation is a farming property in rural New South Wales. It has played a significant part in the author's perceptual history. Burrs and burrows are two of its key features.

Humans use forms of documentation to reflect on the peculiar ways in which a place persists as an emotional and cognitive entity. The relationship between the documents we create, our internal experience and a specific place, is characteristically dynamic and changeful. That is, what we compose in order to speak of a place is an actual working out of *what that place is*. Not because writing a poem or a story immediately alters the environment in the manner of soil erosion or drought, as though writing were a kind of magical, omnipotent force. Rather, documents interact with different kinds of agency among which humans, with their variously capricious and stubborn ideas, are exemplary. They change what we notice, how we communicate what we notice, and how we think of ourselves as beings that notice. They in part determine the institution of yet-to-come forms of documentation and the kinds of things with which we are likely to acquaint ourselves.

Barley Patch is Gerald Murnane's first book after a break from writing of around twenty years.[1] In part, the book is an account of why Murnane made the decision to put down the pen for such a long period. It is an investigation into the question of writing ('why write?') through the act of writing. Subsequently, the author unfolds, in great detail, the landscape of his mind and the evolution of certain, highly personal mythological presences and scenes, derived and shaped during occasions of vocational preoccupation. For Murnane, sitting down to write becomes an event during which he examines the contents and, perhaps more interestingly in this case, the form, of his mind. Murnane stresses throughout, that although the events he details only take place in the fictive world to which the author commits himself (and

[1] Gerald Murnane, *Barley Patch* (Sydney: Giramondo, 2009).

presumably in the minds of subsequent readers), they (the events in question) are nonetheless not the products of his imagination. He calls them "mental entities."[2] I presume Murnane's quibble here is with the idea that imagined events are necessarily the product of something (a writer's mind) whereas real or factual events simply *are*. What Murnane recommends is that the complex and sometimes oddly cold renderings of this author-figure's mental landscape are no more or less fabricated than any other artefact to which humans appeal for readings of the real.

Murnane's work of fiction is of relevance in the present context because it provides a distinctive insight into how a place or series of places exist as fictional or mental entities (according to the book's logic 'mental' and 'fictional' are happily synonymous). Murnane's interest is in what a fictive place is; how it evolves, what it is drawn from, what it connects to, and dare I say, its inherent truthfulness as a mode of experience. Of course all works of fiction do this to some degree, but in Murnane's case this seems a patent objective. While I do not refer to his work again over the course of this article, I follow his sentiments by attempting to account for the sense by which an environment persists within the human mind, asking what the human mind does to a place, and what a place does to the human mind, such that both intermix and retain specificity. I trawl through and cull from significant mythological presences that live on in the mind of a certain author, and attempt to link specific happenings and tendencies with relevant concepts and reference points in a variety of disciplines: in current scientific investigations, the philosophy of science, literature and poetry. An investigation into differing forms of documentation, and the idea that these differing forms of documentation all share in a world-making capacity, is the implicit and constitutive methodological proposition from which this exercise derives its impetus.

Burrs and Thistles

Having grown up on a farm in Central West New South Wales, I've always been keenly aware of the presence of what we here in Australia variously call burrs or thistles. A vernacular definition of this variety of plant life would be, 'weeds with sharp bits.' However, burrs and thistles actually name different things; the word burr describes a prickly and detachable seed case or flowerhead, the mode of transport for the plant's progeny, whereas a thistle is a specific kind of plant that tends to have a spiky stem, the Scotch thistle (*Onopordum acathannthium*) being the most well known of these.

As a child with no particular interest in botany I became acquainted with thistles because they are the kind of plants that cause pain, and the ones my father enlisted me to spend hours chipping out of the ground or spraying. Unlike other plants encountered on the farm, burrs have a habit of broaching the integrity of the human form by passing through the skin. I recall much time spent bent over a foot or attending to a reddened hand, searching for the elusive tip of a Saffron thistle (*Carthamus lanatus*) or a Cathead (*Tribulus terrestris*). I similarly recall my mother bellowing at my dad during lunch or dinnertime, or in social situations generally, if he had become unduly ensconced in the activity of burr retrieval rather than conversation. A peculiar intimacy develops from these ritualistic efforts of having to fish burrs out of the body. Such activities are not without residue in terms of the personal

[2] Murnane, *Barley Patch*, 8.

mythologies we consciously and unconsciously construct and which provide for us a sense of meaning in relation to our habitats.

Perhaps also for the curiously minded child thistles and burrs are interesting because they constitute something of an anomaly. Burrs and thistles are not meant to be where they are, and for that reason are worthy of the sympathies of children, much like dirt and litter and other misplaced things in which they delight. Burrs and thistles are in this sense travellers, if they are not meant to be where they are, they must have wandered or been ferried from somewhere else. Indeed, like all plants, thistles have evolved such that they might be able to move, despite appearing to be defined by their fixity. For this reason, their specific forms are sculpted from the needs and textures of other things, in the words of Xie Lingyun, a Chinese poet writing about the majesty of trees, more than a millennium and a half ago, "they seek their particular requirements, having their own specificities."[3]

The seed of the Bathurst burr (*Xanthium spinosum*), also appropriately named Spiny Cocklebur and Prickly Burweed, strikes me as a particularly good example of the ingeniousness of nature when it comes to designing elegant objects—though you may have a hard time convincing a farmer that there is anything elegant about a Bathurst burr. My use of the word 'elegant' here relates to the idea of something being well made for a specific purpose. The seeds of the Bathurst burr, which are about one and a half centimetres long, are covered in tiny, brownish-orange, hooked spines, shaped something like walking sticks. They are without doubt the forerunners of the hook-and-loop fastener invented by Swiss electrical engineer George de Mestral, which would later come to be branded as Velcro.[4] The ease with which a Bathurst burr becomes embedded in a piece of cloth never ceases to amaze. I am tempted to describe the apparently delicate little hooks as aggressive, malicious, and purposeful, in a manner we tend to reserve for things that are more obviously active in their behaviour. This is never more evident than during shearing, when sheep, whose wool plays the other component of Velcro in a similarly perfect fashion, are invariably found to be the carriers of countless little burrs. These significantly reduce the quality and value of the wool, in terms of the money obtained from its sale. It is for this reason that, during late summer, missions to eradicate this burr seemed particularly militant, although perhaps not as militant as my dad would've liked.

In addition to these armoured burrs, Bathurst burrs also feature menacingly sharp spikes that taper gracefully to the most minimal of points. I recall absent-mindedly turning one of these prickles over in my mouth, having separated it from the cluster in which they usually come. Inevitably, my tongue managed to swivel in such a way so as to confuse itself with the wrong end of the prickle, and I still possess a vivid sense of the ease with which it passed through the comparatively spongy muscle, inflicting an intense and long-lasting variety of pain. More than simply being sharp, the prickles of Bathurst burrs exemplify a particular kind of

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[3] Xie Lingyn, cited in Mark Elvin, "Chinese Poems of Forests and Trees," in *Australia's Ever-changing Forests V: Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference on Australian Forest History*, ed. John Dargavel, Denise Gaughwin and Brenda Libbis (Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, ANU & the Australian Forestry History Society Inc, 2002), 3-14.

[4] See the *Oxford English Dictionary* for a definition of Velcro. I thought I should follow up my vaguely serious hunch that some burr-related event was involved in the invention of Velcro, and indeed, de Mestral came up with the idea for his hook-and-loop fastener after a hunting trip with his dog in the Swiss Alps. De Mestral examined the burr heads that continued to attach themselves to his pants and his dog's fur under a microscope and decided that manufactured Velcro might 'catch on' too. Joe Schwartz, *Dr. Joe and What You Didn't Know: 99 Questions About the Chemistry of Everyday Life* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003), 178-179.

sharpness, seemingly geared to exact the maximum amount of penetration from the minimal amount of force.

Organised by the Particular

I sympathised with the presence of thistles and burrs due to their anomalousness. I also derived pleasure from their presence because they provided me with instances whereby I could take pleasure in the event of identification. Burrs were the first plants that incited and confirmed desires to do with naming. In addition to the specificity of each plant, there was a system of references that imperceptibly connected the different things I was likely to encounter. It wasn't that my perceptual experience was then reduced to this already cohesive taxonomy. Rather, the idea of taxonomy excited my own myth making and ordering compulsions, which made use of, but in some sense transcended, the narratives and names I inherited.

Burrs and thistles were also the variety of plant life that to me seemed most human. I don't believe this was a flat-out anthropomorphic anthropocentricism: the most important things are the things most like me because I'm the most important. Instead, thistles and burrs enabled me to appreciate that each distinguishable thing was the consequence and creator of a narrative. In the words of mathematician turned metaphysician Alfred North Whitehead, who is arguing for an essentially aesthetic conception of nature: "We have only to transfer to the very texture of realisation itself that value which we recognise so readily in terms of human life."[5] The intricacy and complexity of human experience exemplifies what is common to other forms of life and the non-living processes on which living forms depend. A healthy dose of anthropomorphism is desirable in a metaphysics in which humans are considered to be exemplary rather than exceptional forms of life.

Spotting a congregation of star thistles (*Centaurea calcitrapa*) growing in the exposed dirt at the base of a strainer post, in this sense becomes an event that—in its "very texture"—tells the story of how *those* thistles came to be growing in *that* particular spot, near *that* scarred terracotta earth, by *that* splintering White-box fence post, eaten into by *that* noose of barbed wire, connected to *that* ever-so-slowly sagging fence, strung up by *those* dead ancestors, whose hold on the land still retains traces of dubiousness from its initial acquisition.

Poisonous Plants: Potency and Perception

Burrs and thistles occupy an overlapping yet distinct category from another variety of plant life that was significant in my childhood mythology, that of the poisonous plant. Deadly nightshade, Hemlock, Poison Ivy, Tree of Heaven, White Cedar berries and Oleander were principal among the poisonous plants that I can at some stage recall being warned away from—Stinging Nettles represent an interesting crossover between the two. The way we perceive poisonous plants contrasts with the way we perceive thistles and burrs because their dangerousness is *in potentia*, and for that reason they are more sinister. Thistles and burrs are blatantly dangerous, their power to hurt is externally manifest and this defines the way we form ideas about and respond to their presence. Poisonous plants on the other hand are more obscure in their capacity to harm, both in the sense that their toxicity is not visible as such, and because they tend to affect our similarly invisible insides. Even when a poisonous plant can be identified as poisonous its power remains implicated in its capacity to hide its power. We have

[5] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 116.

an active awareness of this covert power and it invokes a different set of mythological responses to those suggested by thistles and burrs. Thistles and burrs lead to scratchings, pricks and infections that are generally visible—even in the form of a red lump or a persistent sore that hides a broken-off thistle tip—whereas poisonous plants tend to lead to convulsions, respiratory and gastric difficulties, hallucinations, nausea and vomiting.

I recall in particular the poisonousness of Deadly Nightshade, perhaps because the purple berries were a memorable way to register this idea. Additionally, more than the other poisonous plants of which I was warned, Deadly Nightshade temped you to eat it. My understanding of the plant's toxicity became somewhat confused when on a primary school trip to Menindee in North Western New South Wales, an Indigenous woman there, who taught us about the bush tucker in the region, said the berries were in fact edible and I witnessed her eat one.[6] I could not bring myself to follow suit, and my tentativeness is preserved to this day as I find the plant is among those listed as toxic in the "Garden plants poisonous to people" index composed by Steven and Annie Johnson in 2006.[7] According to this publication, all parts of the plant are poisonous, and depending on how much is eaten one can expect to experience nausea, dilated pupils, uncoordinated movements, and cardiovascular and respiratory difficulties.

Although I will not treat the subject in any detail here, I do wish to earmark the extent to which my conception of a landscape and the vegetation changed once I came to regard it as an immanent food source. I found the idea of bush tucker particularly liberating, no doubt for what it offered my child self in terms of autonomy from the parental food source and the sense of adventure that came with a search and discovery. I recall in particular the day the aforementioned Indigenous lady, Mrs Carmichael is what I think we might have called her, came to our primary school prior to the Menindee excursion and informed us that the buds of a plant which layered our soccer field could be consumed. No game of soccer on that pitch was ever the same again; I was continually kneeling down to pick and nibble at these buds, utterly pleased with my ingenuity, even though they tasted like wood.

Box Gum Grassy Woodlands

As part of the Environmental Stewardship program, scientists from the Australian National University (ANU) have set up a site on 'Coorah' monitoring an area of land identified as an "environmental asset of high public value"—to use the language of the *Caring for our Country: Information Booklet*—known as Box Gum Grassy Woodland (BGGW).[8] The program aims to work with landholders to assist in the regeneration of what was once a wide-spread ecological community, but now, due largely to the pressures of industrial agriculture, has been reduced to four percent of its previous size. In reading through the booklet and comprehending the trajectory of the project, I was immediately struck by the list of endangered species: "ten plants, four birds, two reptiles, two insects and one mammal."[9] What I bore witness to in that flash of recognition was my desire to compose a story in which these nineteen as yet to be identified

[6] 'Bush tucker' is Australian English for 'bush food'. It refers to edible, native plants.

[7] Steven and Annie Johnson, "Garden Plants Poisonous to People" (*NSW Department of Primary Industries,* Prime Fact 359: November 2006).

[8] Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, "Box Gum Grassy Woodland Project" (Canberra, ACT: Information Booklet, 2009), 1.

[9] Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, "Box Gum Grassy Woodland Project," 1.

characters lived out their lives in a kind of post-apocalyptic scenario. I was given what my child's imagination subsisted on in its mythology of thistles; a context in which the idea of fortuitousness (perhaps paradoxical fortuitousness because being endangered is also unfortunate) and specificity might develop. This list of animal and plant life was apprehended not as an abstract record, or not only, but also as a journey, albeit at this stage a journey almost wholly lacking any specific detail. In addition to the near immediate sense of a journey that accompanied my comprehension, was the idea that these animals would occupy different habitats and that this would inform their specific characters; the lizard in the tree would be a different character to a lizard under the rock, it would be introduced, to whatever audience, through the environment that accompanied its perceptible arrival—the environment and its occupant spoke of each other in togetherness. The greater environment in which the specific environments were connected was structured in my head as a kind of stage, and each of the species had a part to play, and something like lines to deliver or noise to make, in order to become manifest.

In writing this now, I feel that my ideas concerning the environments of these unnamed creatures are informed by two significant intertexts, one of which I know intimately, the other barely at all. The first is Franz Kafka's story "The Burrow" and the efforts of that story's protagonist, presumably a mole of some kind, to explain the literary logic of its burrow to the reader.[10] What specifically stands out in this story is Kafka's ability to transfer to the reader a feeling of a dimly perceived system of almost impossible intricacy. It is of course significant also that he is writing from the perspective of an animal—with whom Kafka often seems to share more sympathy than with humans. What Kafka articulates so well, and what I think is of value in coming to understand the habitats of creatures, is the sense of a world that is organised according to the perceptual and expressive capacity of its occupant. We might not understand the logic of the protagonist's burrow, but we sense that some kind of logic, perhaps a greater logic, exists because of it. "But you do not know me if you think I am afraid", says the animal near the beginning of the story,

> or that I built my burrow simply out of fear. At a distance from some thousand paces from this hole lies, covered by a movable layer of moss, the real entrance to the burrow; it is secured safely as anything in this world can be secured; yet someone could step on the moss or break through it, and then my burrow would lie open, and anybody who liked—please note, however, that quite uncommon abilities would also be required—could make his way in and destroy everything for good.[11]

So begin the contradictory speculations that seem to both protect and trap the animal of "The Burrow." No one in the story, not the animal, the presumed reader, or the writer, will come to know exactly why things are the way they are, but nonetheless the animal remains astoundingly articulate within its habitat.[12]

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[10] Franz Kafka, "The Burrow," in *Kafka: Collected Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), 467-503.

[11] Kafka, "The Burrow," 467.

[12] Bruno Latour, champion of Science Studies and Actor-Network Theory, uses the word 'articulation' to describe the different kinds of connections among human and non-human entities. In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour writes, "Instead of being the privilege of the human mind surrounded by mute things, articulation becomes a very

The notion of an immanent threat is an operative element within the account the animal gives of its world, which perhaps recalls something of the child's fascination with exemplars of danger in the earlier part of this article. The congruence here is due to the fact that perception in both instances is informed by affect, what I described earlier as an internal registering of potency both as part of the external world and part of oneself.

The second intertext relates to the concept of an '*Umwelt*', coined by the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll in his "little monograph", entitled, "A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds", which I recall metonymically as a tick on a branch. Here von Uexküll describes the world of the tick (*Ixodes ricinus*), and of creatures generally, as analogous to a "soap bubble"; the world of a creature, conceived as such, is "filled with perceptions that it alone knows."[13] Von Uexküll accounts for the things that matter to the tick, among which trees, mammals, other ticks, blood, warmth, butyric acid, hair and eggs are included. According to von Uexküll's account, all animals will experience time and space differently, the tick, for example, can wait eighteen years for its next meal, which means, of course, that its world is shaped in light of the possibility of this waiting. "The first task of *Umwelt* research" writes von Uexküll, "is to identify each animal's perceptual cues among all stimuli in its environment and to build up the animal's specific world with them."[14] Some things matter to some animals, like the butyric acid that the tick smells so it knows when a mammal is near, other things don't, and their worlds or '*Umwelt*', will be constructed accordingly.

Box Gum Grassy Woodlands are principally identifiable by the prominence of either Blakely's red gum, Yellow box or White box. The idea of the Stewardship program is to encourage farmers to observe different agricultural practices on select portions of land with the view to increasing biodiversity, and returning (though the idea of a 'return' has problematic connotations) the environment to a state that is more harmonious with the long history of the country. On 27 March 2012 I accompanied a group of three scientists from the ANU Fenner School of Environment and Society to the monitoring site on 'Coorah' in a part of the property known to our family as Riley's (Riley's Shed, Riley's Cultivation, and Riley's Grass are the names of the individuated paddocks of this region—names that no doubt betray the family's value system in terms of what the land expresses). The scientists checked two different sites they marked out on the property, one a control site, still being grazed by stock, and another site that is subject to a strictly limited amount of grazing. Three evenly spaced star posts arranged in a row mark each site. Because this particular group hadn't been to our property before they used a map and kept a keen lookout for the posts.

The way the scientists inhabit the landscape has its own peculiarities; they visit these blocks of land fleetingly and purposefully, they engage with their surrounds in an attentive and articulate manner, they know how this particular site and its specifics relates to sites spread across the three large eastern states of Australia. Despite their interest in measurement and the brevity of their stay, the scientists evidently have a connection with the landscape they study, their techniques, knowledge and equipment does not result in a disconnection from what they

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common property of propositions, in which many kinds of entities can participate." Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 142.

[13] Jakob von Uexküll and Georg Kriszat, "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," trans. Claire M. Schiller, *Semiotica* 8 (1992): 319-91 (319).

[14] Von Uexküll, "A Stroll": 326.

observe; if anything it does the opposite, they extend and preserve the presence of entities I do not notice. They come here for different reasons to the farmer or the farmer's son, who have pretensions to ownership. And yet, walking among the grasses with the scientists, dad and I look with them, we occupy, for a while, the reasons they have created through arriving here and checking, with their tape measures and datasheets and techniques for regulating perception. Although I do not see through their eyes, I witness them pacing out areas, retracing steps, jotting, pointing. Attentiveness seems necessarily built into the material and embodied techniques they employ.

The scientists are required to appeal to different methods of measurement in order to gauge the activity in the area: previous groups have placed artificial substrates in the grass (terracotta tiles, corrugated iron, and wooden sleepers) that act as potential housing for reptiles, under which we find only the larvae of Christmas beetles (*Anoplognathus*), ancient yet futuristic centipedes, scurrying ants, and a mouse which leaps into a nearby tussock. Apparently late autumn is better for reptile sightings because at that time of year there are fewer places for these animals to obtain the heat they depend upon, and therefore fewer places to look in order to find them. In this sense the ectotherm lives in a significantly different micro-world to the group of humans who lift the tin to check for their presence.[15]

The methods of the scientists seem both crude and advanced, they use their hands, framing parts of vertical space in order to check the density of branches, and they pace out invisible rectangles, areas that are then combed for different grass species. They invoke books, take photographs, and keep samples of plants they are unable to immediately identify. They count the presence of fallen logs and tree trunks that might provide habitats for birds, insects and reptiles.

It amazes me how on first glance a patch of grass remains relatively non-descript, but as one looks closer, and begins to distinguish different kinds of grass, more and more grasses continue to appear. There is something vaguely dizzying about perception in this sense. It is perhaps familiar to us in dreams, in a more concentrated form; when the act of looking coincides with there being more to look at, when digging always leads to more digging, and when seeing something at a distance means we are, in a sense, located at that point which bears witness to our looking, dispersed through the entire scene. In the ecstasy of discovery we feel somehow that we create what we find, which is something the history of science teaches

[15] The French philosopher of science Michel Serres comments on the related difference between homeothermic and poikilothermic creatures: "Homoiothermy is a similar example of homeorrhesis. In a certain sense, the poikilothermal, or cold-blooded, organism is better adapted to the environment. The homoiothernial organism, of more recent date in the history of evolution, is more fragile. It is probably condemned to a niche adjusted for relatively stable temperature intervals. In fact, it produces them as often as possible. Bees had already discovered this process for their hives. Hence the homoiothermal organism is much more dependent than other species on the environment, on its own species, and on the Other or Others. This is especially true when its offspring—and this is the case for a human infant—has not received at birth a perfect set of homoiothermal equipment. The homoiothermal organism generates the need for communication. It is, in energy or thermal needs, analogous to what will be common speech, in terms of signals and information. I imagine that one of the first forms of behavior, like one of the first signals, may be reduced to this: 'keep me warm.' The homoiothermal organism initiates touch and contact, erotic communication, and language. It is a homeology." Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy,* ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell, (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 76, fn. 6.

us to forget.[16] And yet it seems more realistic to account for that element within perception that both provokes us to look further and seems to characterise the excessive forms of the things we look at. I look, in part, so as to feel that the event of my looking testifies to a creative presence that compels me to look. It is difficult to understand such relations in terms of cause and effect.

One of the scientists speaks of how before white settlement there would have been great seas of kangaroo grass (*Themeda australis*), a native perennial, which can grow as high as a metre and half. It's an odd way to conceive of the landscape when one is used to the contrast between low grasses, bare of trees, and established woodland. I imagine navigating through seas of grass that crowd in on my vision, and the extent to which these grasses would catch the winds, their enveloping whisper, at once dry and soft, and the even more magnificent sweetness of their smell, which is still pervasive as we pace through the resurgent red grass. Grasslands seem more delicate than woods, more exposed, yet easier to think of as non-specific. Grass is trampled and brushed this way and that. A great plain of seemingly undifferentiated grass on closer inspections begins to divide into dizzying difference, with insects buzzing and crawling in-between tussocks, and plants twisted among each other in layers and networks, a fact remarked upon by the Australia poet Martin Harrison, in his poem "A Patch of Grass":

> … verdant or shadowed. A
> green re-mapped by swirls of firetails
> on a seed-search. In such
> a half-seeing of the world, it's the bird's-
> eye view which makes the tangle into a
> fixed space for words, adding
> once more that hint of pale
> rainy blue, shimmering beneath
> the network of grasses[17]

The same scientist tells us of how he harvested a small amount of kangaroo grass with a whipper snipper, just before it went to seed, and scattered it at another site, and how for three years nothing happened, and then, all of a sudden (an expression to which one inevitably finds themselves appealing when accounting for the different time scales created by other things—things which are also events) the grass decided to germinate. I think of the hungry tick, and how long some things persist as dormant versions of themselves, in a sense travelling forward in time; the presence of both rapid and complete transformation, and great periods in which nothing seems to change. To be aware of such things while wandering among the grasses is to wander amid the presence of differing and multiplicitous histories.

As we move from the control site to the test site my dad directs the party to a thistle he's not before seen on the property. Immediately, I feel myself drawn to the anomalousness of this thing, isolated, puffy and grotesque, translucent green illuminated by the fading light, spewing its mist of seeds, already ornamental or emblematic somehow. It stands alone amid

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[16] Latour attempts to capture the sense by which Louis Pasteur is lead by the "propensity of things" in his discovery of the microbe in a lactic acid ferment. He borrows the expression from the sinologist Francois Jullien. Bruno Latour, "Do Scientific Objects Have a History: Pasteur and Whitehead in a Bath of Lactic Acid," *Common Knowledge* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 76-91.

[17] Martin Harrison, "A Patch of Grass," *Wild Bees* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2008), 55-57.

the chaotic parting of grasses. Once the Bathurst burrs, now almost synonymous with the landscape, would have appeared similarly isolated and exotic, thus there seems something foreboding about the tiny dark seeds embedded within the cotton-like spume that escapes from one of the thistle's green pods. This, as dad and I later discover, is known variously as Swan Plant, Cotton-bush, wild cotton-bush, narrow leaved cotton-bush, duck bush, arghel, (*Gomphocarpus fruiticosa*), or most revealingly and most poetically, I believe, balloon cotton.[18] It is native to Africa and would have most likely arrived here in the fleece or hoof of some animal.

In addition to the balloon cotton, and the increased presence of the native perennial red grass, there is an abundance of Variable Glycine (*Glycine tabacina*), an inconspicuous legume entwined among the tussocks of other grasses. According to *Plants of Western New South Wales*, the taproot of this plant tastes of liquorice and was chewed by Indigenous people.[19] At this point—that is, the point of writing—I recall the article, "How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies", by the French philosopher and pioneer of Science Studies, Bruno Latour.[20] Latour describes the process by which 'noses' in the perfume industry are trained to become more variously affected by smells through the use of an odour kit. According to Latour, prior to using the kit the untrained noses are "unable to differentiate much more than 'sweet' and 'fetid'" but with the assistance of the expertly arranged odours and with technical training, they "discriminate more and more subtle differences", "able to tell [each smell] apart from one another, even when they are masked by or mixed with others."[21] He remarks,

> It is not by accident that the person is called 'a nose' as if, through practice, she had acquired an organ that defined her ability to detect chemical and other differences. Through the training session, she learned to have a nose that allowed her to inhabit a (richly differentiated odoriferous) world. Thus body parts are progressively acquired at the same time as 'world counter-parts' are being registered in a new way. Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium and a sensitive world.[22]

The human organism in this instance does not simply perceive a world through which it wanders or with which it becomes acquainted. Rather, the human organism comes to inhabit an increasingly complex world according to the perceptual agencies of the things that compose its experience and its capacity to connect with these things. I think of the Indigenous inhabitants of the land through which we wander and the extent to which they must have inhabited a "richly differentiated odoriferous" world, according to their knowledge of plants as food sources, materials, medicines, and as partners in rituals. In a sense each plant might be considered as comparable to the odour kit described by Latour; a carefully arranged manifestation of cosmological history through which we learn to become affected in specific

[18] G. M. Cunningham *et al.*, *Plants of Western New South Wales* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 1992), 554.

[19] Cunningham *et al.*, 394.

[20] Bruno Latour, "How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body & Society* 10 (London: Sage Publications, 2004): 205-229.

[21] Latour, "How to Talk about the Body?": 207.

[22] Latour, "How to Talk about the Body?": 207.

and multiple ways. I think of the plants we learn to identify as coming to be occupants of our '*umwelt*' or personal mythology, and how as a steward, as scientist, poet or as a farmer, we come to occupy theirs.

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