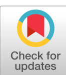

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ARTICLE

The Teachings of Mistle Thrush and Kingfisher

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Abstract
What would it be like to learn to live in and experience a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How can we learn to awarely participate in a world of communication and interaction, in which trees, crows and rivers may grace us with a response to our attention and our call? How do we learn not just to know this intellectually but 'proved upon our pulses', as John Keats put it. As artist and writer, we reflect on the contribution our practices can have to the ecological crisis of our times, drawing on living cosmos panpsychism and examples from our practice.

Keywords: living cosmos panpsychism; nature writing; climate change; arts; non dualism

Modern Western humans like ourselves are marinated in dualism. We learn to radically separate mind and body, male and female, subject and object and thus also humans and nature. As Val Plumwood shows us, such dualisms don't make a simple distinction, they create a dichotomy, a logical structure of otherness and negation which has the character of master/slave. One pole is valued, the other is inferior, part of a lower, different order defined negatively in relation to the upper (Plumwood, 1993). We are socialised into this Cartesian, dualist worldview and learn to experience ourselves as centres of subjectivity within an insentient world. Maybe we allow that some of the 'higher' creatures possess some form of consciousness, but these are exceptions within what Amitav Ghosh describes as a world seen as brutish (Ghosh, 2021). Our approach to this world is also representational – we learn to describe, to theorise, to make models, rather than to inhabit. As representational it is also specular: from our islands of consciousness we gaze out at a world of things about which, while we can intellectually understand, our heritage forbids us to encounter directly (Mathews, 2017a).

What would it be like to learn to live in and experience a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How can we learn to awarely participate in a world of communication and interaction, in which trees, crows and rivers may grace us with a response to our attention and our call? How do we learn not just to know this intellectually but 'proved upon our pulses', as John Keats put it (Keats, 1818; see Motion, 1997:254)? How do we relearn to '*Love, Feel, Hear, and Live with Places*', as the call for this special issue puts it? As writer and artist, we have drawn on the disciplines of our practice to offer extended and close attention to the more-than-human and are learning to recognise both subtle and dramatic responses. While there can be no direct translation from experience to finished artwork or writing, our public work aims at a poetic communication that echoes that of the sentient world.

Since this special issue is focussed on Indigenous philosophies, we wish to be clear that the Indigenous teachings of Western Europe are no longer directly available to us (except maybe

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in communities such as the Sami), although they continue to be expressed in nature-centred practices that animist scholar Graham Harvey refers to as Pagan and eco-Pagan (Harvey, 2017). However, as Gregory Bateson points out, there is a long undercurrent of Western thought which is fundamentally opposed to the dominant mechanistic (dualist or materialist) perspective. Bateson points to a very wide range of philosophic thinking, going back to Greece, and wriggling through the history of European thought (Bateson, 1972a). This line of thinking originated with the Pythagoreans, followed by the Gnostics, the alchemists, the romantics and in current times by deep ecologists and Gaia theorists (Harding, 2009). Our own work is part of this undercurrent, drawing primarily on Western traditions of art practice and living cosmos panpsychism (Mathews, 2003) (and to some extent on Taoist and Buddhist teaching (Hinton, 2022)). As David Skrbina shows in his review of panpsychism in the West, 'Panpsychism was the original—we might say *aboriginal*—conception of mind', is evident in the pre-Socratic philosophers of Ancient Greece, and continues as a dimension of Western thinking through the Renaissance to modern times. (Skrbina, 2003, 2005).

To mainstream Western thinking this perspective can appear both mystical and functionally irrelevant. Its origins are ignored or disparaged, its distinguished philosophical lineage usually unacknowledged and unrecognised, and it must struggle for acceptability. Often expressed through poetics rather than as logic (Bringhurst, 2008), this perspective provides for a re-enchantment of the world and an honouring of the rights of the more-than-human. It is important to reclaim this tradition, and so we locate our work, cautiously, as a contemporary expression of an Indigenous perspective.

We are aware that the dualist thinking that led the West to experience the world as brutish was the basis of colonial exploitation and genocide (Ghosh, 2021). There is much to answer for, much to learn from what we have ignored.

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We are artist (Sarah) and writer (Peter). We have looked each other in the face and asked, what are we doing making marks on paper, putting down words on the page this time of ecological catastrophe? We choose the word catastrophe with care: we might have used 'crisis,' but a crisis is a turning point, often used to refer to that point in illness when the patient may recover or not. There cannot, however, be a simple 'recovery' of planetary health; the changes that have been wrought to Earth's systems are too extensive and pervasive. A catastrophe, in contrast, is an overturning, a reversal. Whatever we do, the oil has been burned, the carbon is in the atmosphere, the ice is melted, the living world is impoverished – changes that must be understood not just as local losses but as a rupture in the Earth system as a whole (Hamilton, 2017).

If our art and writing have a place, to have any relevance at this time, how best can we understand that contribution? We write this essay together, as uncle and niece, writer and artist, because we believe that the arts can be a revelatory and imaginative force for helping us to see the natural world – and our place in it – differently; and that literature and visual arts working hand in hand, playing off each other's qualities, may have a particular contribution. This essay is one fruit of conversations and collaborations over many years (see also Reason & Gillespie, 2019, 2021).

From very early in art school, Sarah was uncomfortable with the notion that she was expected to 'express herself' through her art. Gradually, through training in Renaissance painting and later Buddhist practice, she realised that her art was not about self-expression, it was a practice that gives primacy to the natural world through close and loving attention. She currently works primarily with drawing and mezzotint, borrowing the Japanese term *Hosomi* to describe an emotional delicacy, attention and determination to overlook nothing. The practice is rooted in long periods outside with a sketchbook. It requires an emptying of the self, a stepping aside, a degree of modesty in order to make something more like a lens of oneself – the better to absorb the subtler depths of beauty and living presence to which we are so often blind. She tells of her encounter with a poplar tree in France (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Sketch of poplar tree.

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There was something about this tree that made me stop in the middle of a bridge on a country road and start to draw; such a magnificent tree deserved two pages in my sketchbook.

It was a damp day, but I sat in the drizzle and drew for an hour or two while swallows flew low all around me. I am quite slow, making small marks: big gestures may look good on the page, but they contain too much of me, don't give enough space to be sure that I am actually looking at what is there. When I had nearly done – and I struggle with how to express this in words – I felt the tree not as an object I was drawing but as a living, animate presence; as much an energetic, actual, presence as another person in front of me.

Did the tree somehow speak to me? No, it was just there all the time. But drawing this way helps me drop my self-centredness, my fullness of myself. I voluntarily enter its world. In the challenge of the practice, space opens for the energetic presence of the tree. As John Berger tells us, 'when the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree, one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming toward one.' (Berger, 2005)

There may be triggers or thresholds that help this transition: the way poplar leaves quiver on their stems in the breeze, showing their dark and light sides; the swallows flying so close – I don't think they touched me, but I could feel the air as they flew past my ear. These little shocks tell me to wake up; and fill me with joy.

All this left me with the sense of not being separate, not being different, being as changeable, as temporary, and as magnificent as the poplar tree.

Peter devoted the later years of his university career teaching and researching issues of sustainable organisations; he has a background in humanistic psychology and was apprenticed to a Medicine Wheel teacher. He cares for the small orchard he shares with his wife Elizabeth, experiencing this patch of suburban land as sacred space, and developing his relationships with the trees and meadow grass, alongside sparrows, blue tits, jackdaws, buzzards, even the occasional passing raven. Over recent years, he has undertaken two sailing pilgrimages in a small yacht around the western coasts of the British Isles, travelling at walking pace across the sea. Extended periods alone, responding to wind and waves, attending to the management of a small boat on long off-shore passages, or piloting close to rocky coasts, brought him close to the living presence of the world and to what he describes as 'moments of grace.' (Reason, 2014, 2017)

More recently he has engaged in a series of inquiries, both solo and with other human persons, drawing on the philosophy of panpsychism, asking "If we call to the world and her beings as sentient, might we receive a response?" Much of this work has been with Rivers, contributing to a larger, worldwide project, Voicing Rivers, that seeks to encounter Rivers across the globe as living, culturally engaged beings that hold stories, histories and animate spirits (Kurio & Reason, 2022; Wooltorton, Guimond, Reason, Poelina, & Horwitz, 2022); and to an ongoing series of inquiries sponsored in part at Schumacher College (Reason, Harding, Mathews, Weber, & Wooltorton, in preparation)

Ancient oak trees line the bank of the River Dart. I walk among them slowly, savouring each step, matching the pace of the river and the stillness of the summer evening. I stand aside, once as runners pound sweatily by, again for teenagers out partying – laughing, flirting, utterly absorbed with each other. Once they pass, the trees draw back my attention: their huge solid trunks; the leafy branches tumbling to the river; the reflection, dark, mysterious, on the water surface. I listen to the birdsong, to the insects buzzing around my head, to the occasional plops of animal movements in the river.

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After a mile or so, I find a companionable trunk to lean against and sit until late, watching the midsummer sun drop behind the wooded hillside. Walking back along the bank, remembering the animist maxim, 'The world is full of persons, only some of whom are human' (Harvey, 2017), I draw on an ancient meditation, acknowledging each tree in turn: "This is my brother, this is my sister; this is my brother, this is my sister". I have dropped deeply into the world of trees.

Still immersed, I return to the same spot early next morning, sit quietly, appreciating how the early light picks out the trees and landscape so differently from the evening. After an hour or so, hungry, attention wandering, I get to my feet to go for breakfast. Unexpectedly, and quite without my willing it, my attention is grasped by the next tree along the row. It's not that I am drawn to it as an object in the world: I am arrested by the presence of another living being, feel an affinity or kinship. I stand as if rooted to the spot myself, feeling a surge of surprised excitement at the encounter.

I scribble in my notebook.

This tree

this form

this place

this morning

this moment.

This man .... this tree.

The trunk rises, just so, at that particular angle to the vertical. The branches spread out in rhythmic curves. Leaves quiver in the light breeze. The whole tree stands there with poise, elegance, integrity, an expression of dignity. Sunlight falls slant, calling forth some features, while others retreat into shadow. Dead wood – including one sizeable branch – reaches out beyond the living, so the tree encompasses its own dying. When I walk up to the trunk and lean against it, I feel how huge and solid it is, how irrelevant my puny push. Far above my head the crown spreads against the morning sky, as if another country.

After a while, the tree releases me – and I walk back for breakfast.

It is quite possible, Peter reflects, to walk beneath trees immersed in human affairs – deep in conversation, jogging, dog walking – and so give them no more than a second glance. As William Blake complained, some people will see a tree as no more than 'a green thing that stands in the way'. But if one walks *with* them, rather than simply under them, this uncanny shift in perception can arise. A tree is a living body, made from the same stuff as we human persons, sharing much of what it takes to be alive. Indeed, trees are a more ancient life form than hominids. It should not be surprising that their gestures, their poetic self-expression – standing solid on the ground, reaching for light, responding to the wind – resonate with the gestures we human persons make with our own bodies. Andreas Weber suggests there is a *lingua franca* through which we recognise other embodied beings and read the world of organic meanings (Weber, 2017:124). Blake again, 'But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself'.

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We are all part of a community of life on Earth, wanting to know and be known.

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These two stories reflect a world, not of objects, but of living beings that declare their presence to us. If we are willing and appropriately attuned, we may engage in some mutual exchange, and they will reveal something of themselves in return. Such communication does not emanate only from the human side: the world is capable of – indeed actively seeks – reciprocal engagement with other beings, including our human selves. Of course, this doesn't take place in human language: as the Aboriginal elder pointed out to the white anthropologist, "The River doesn't speak English". The communication is necessarily *poetic*, conveying meaning in synchronous happenings through image and metaphor; not in words or concepts, but through material form in a symbolic language of *things*.

One might take this as 'merely' metaphorical, maybe disparage it as wish fulfilment or romantic conceit, the projection of meaning onto an insentient world. But the philosophy of living cosmos panpsychism would suggest differently.[1] Panpsychism resolves the dualism that haunts the western world by arguing that some kind of 'innerness' – mind, sentience, subjectivity, the will to self-realisation – is a fundamental aspect of matter, just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind. Thus all things, including the Earth, are integral to the fabric of the *living cosmos*, all of the same sentient cloth; the empirical world of classical physics is the outward appearance of a field of subjective presence, a presence that our philosophy, even our language, tends to erase. We humans are part of a world that has depth as well as structure: a communicative order, an order of meaning, unfolds alongside the causal, material order.

Philosopher Freya Mathews asks us to consider that the cosmos is One, a coherent field of mind-matter, which in its evolution differentiates into Many, self-realising and self-reflexive beings. Such beings – including the community of life on Earth – are best imagined as field-like ripples and folds in the fabric of the cosmos; embodied subjects, souls or intelligences which come and go, interpenetrate and communicate, as expressions of the cosmic One. The Many, as a community of subjects, reach out to each other in mutual contact and communication, co-creating a 'poetic ecology': the fundamental erotics of being touched by the world and touching it in return (Mathews, 2003, 2017b, 2019).

This radical panpsychic view counters the dualist story of human exceptionalism which has dominated Western culture that we sketched in our opening paragraphs: the world is made of separate things, objects of nature composed of inert matter operating according to causal laws that have no subjectivity, consciousness or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose, value or meaning. In this view we are either to believe that mind and physical reality are separate; or that, somehow, consciousness evolves out of insentient matter. Neither position is coherent. But the practical implication of this story is that humans, and humans alone, have the capacity for rational thought and action, for understanding and giving meaning to the world.

'As we think, so we live,' Alfred North Whitehead told us (1968). Or as Mathews puts it 'the presuppositions and beliefs we bring to our encounter with the world act as a kind of *invocation*—they call up reality under a particular aspect or aspects, so that this is the aspect that reality will reveal to us in the course of the encounter' (2009:1-7). The stories we tell, and how we tell them, are important. Facts and figures don't influence people directly, particularly if they are framed within an old narrative of human exceptionalism – all that science has told us about climate change over the past 30 years has had little impact. It is the *stories* we tell ourselves, the metaphors we draw on, that create our world. More than that, as Gregory Bateson argued, 'mere purposive rationality, unaided by phenomena such as art, religion, dream, and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life.' (Bateson, 1972b).

Whoever can change these pervasive narratives can change our core beliefs – for better or for worse. As climate activist Elizabeth Sawin put it, 'There are tipping points in the human heart and the collective consciousness that could be just as sudden and big as any in the earth system. Just because the IPCC isn't charged with documenting them does not mean they don't exist, latent, stirring to life.'[2] Visual art, prose, poetry, music, drama can all help provide space and imagination

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for new stories to emerge and artful means to express them. Both of us have come to believe that the creative arts have an essential place in a time of catastrophe. They can help both with grieving for what is lost and imagining new human possibilities.

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These reflections led us to the questions we posed at the start of this paper: "What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects?" And further "What, then, would art and creativity be like? Can artful practices be understood as a practice of invocation? And can our artful practices contribute to new narratives of human place on the planet?" And recognising that we cannot just think ourselves into new narratives, we turned to stories from our experience. Sarah walks each morning from her home in rural Devon:

With my head busy with everyday thoughts, I set out to walk: through the village, over a stile, across two large, open fields, and then down into an old, steep-sided meadow, a small paradise of flowers and gorse. On this particular early morning in March, the whole valley before me sparkled with a late frost.

Squeezing through a gap in the gorse, I was stopped in my tracks by crazy bird song. A very loud, melancholic song, rising above the stream and all the other chatter. A mistle thrush, high in a scrubby ash tree, was singing to the valley. His song seemed perfectly – and very loudly – to extend from the pale ash branches, through his speckled breast and out into the cold morning air. There was no walking by. I just stood, boots on the frosty ground and watched him for ages, singing out into the space. Nothing out of the ordinary happened; I just listened and watched, entranced by the song, and by the coldness.

Eventually, the thrush flew away, and I turned, elated, to continue my walk. At the moment my heel turned, a crow, which had presumably been in the hedge right behind me all the time, opened its wings and lifted into the wind. "Caw, Caw, Caw!" It really did feel as if it was laughing at me, kind of saying, "There, there, don't you see, we're here all the time! And you're here all the time and here you are!" I laughed out loud in response; "Ok, Ok! I get it!" At that moment a mass of relief flooded through me: I was no longer the centre of my own universe but rather held in that lovely valley, completely part of it. "See!" said the crow.

Peter takes up the story

There is a narrow peninsula of riverbank where the River Frome joins the River Avon at Freshford that I visited regularly during the summer of 2020. I am sure lots of local people go there, dog walkers in particular, but as the months unfolded, the place became increasingly significant for me.

My visits were part of a wider inquiry with five human colleagues and seven rivers (Kurio & Reason, 2022). We were explicitly exploring the practice of poetic engagement with rivers, seeking to encounter them, not as passive objects winding through the countryside, but as living, sentient beings, as River. We were asking ourselves – and the Rivers – if we called, if we invoked their living presence, might they offer a gesture in response. We soon realised that River included not only the flow of water between banks, but the whole community of beings: wind and weather, mud and rock, plants, insects, birds and animals; and the influence of humans over the ages.

Each time I visited, I would bow to the river, introduce myself by given, Medicine and Sacred names, and ask that we might converse together. I would open ceremonial space by calling to the four directions, and settle down for a while, opening myself to River with attentive love. After a while, I offered gifts: songs and chants, drumming, rainwater brought from my garden, a paper boat on which I had written a poem.

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Did River respond? Was the movement of wind through the trees, the fish jumping, the duck landing that particular moment, was that a gesture or a coincidence? It was not always easy to tell. That is, until I met Kingfisher.

It was the first day of my encounter with River as other-than-human person: a fine spring morning, full of life and movement, with cow parsley and willowherb abundant, trees their brightest and freshest green. The wind was blustery, with gusts drawing a rustling sound from the trees, dancing through the vegetation and covering the water surface in ruffled cat's paws; in the lulls, the clouds parted, the sun warmed my skin, the smell of earth rose to my nostrils. I settled myself in, just sitting quietly and attentively, choosing not yet to engage in any specific ceremonies or invocations, just appreciating the aliveness of a spring morning and the water flowing past me on both sides.

My attention was grasped as a bird flew across the river in front of me and landed on a slender willow branch just a couple of metres away. A mid-size bird, with a pinky orange breast ruffled in the breeze, giving a rather dishevelled appearance. Taken by surprise, I wondered, 'What kind of bird is this?' Staying only a moment before taking off, she circled in a wide arc and away up the river; now, the deep iridescent blue-green wings and low whirring flight revealed her as a kingfisher.

I was thrilled; who would not be? Yet, looking over my notes for that day six months later, I was taken aback to see the entry, 'not received any gestures in response to my invocation'. How could I have missed the poetic resonance of this shy bird flying so close? How could I have not seen this as a response to my call, just as I opened to the sentience of River and the beings that lived there? Surely, I could have seen this as a welcoming gesture, a recognition, even a moment of ordination?

After this first encounter, I frequently caught fleeting glimpses of iridescence as Kingfisher flew up or downstream, usually one, more rarely two. I soon realised that the place I was sitting quietly for hours at a time was in the middle of their territory. Yet there was a further significance to their appearance: the flights seemed part of a response from River. As the inquiry continued, and I became more comfortable with making intentional invocations to River as a living being, I began to notice how their appearance became synchronous with these invocations. A kingfisher became Kingfisher.

One morning later that summer – I had taken to the habit of visiting early, usually arriving just after dawn – River was so quiet, reflecting that silence of the world I love so much. Where the sky – a thin blue with dappled clouds – reflected in the water, there seemed a profundity, a depth of presence that drew my mind into it. As I sat, legs dangling over the bank, looking out over the water at the sun brightening behind the trees, I experienced a moment of joy – quiet, fleeting, but unmistakable. And at the same time, I noticed the noise from the nearby main road, and the contrails of a jet plane across the sky – such a contrast with the absence of mechanical noise during lockdown – so my joy was infused with a deep sadness at the damage our way of life brings to our world.

I scribbled some notes to help me remember this moment. Then, just as I look up – Kingfisher! No bright colours, but that unmistakeable low, whirring flight.

I had brought with me a bottle of water collected on a visit to the River Thames a few days earlier, as part of my preparations for a ceremony of invocation. Holding these contradictory feelings of joy and sadness, I stood to offer Water to River. As I did so, Kingfisher flashed past again.

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From the bank I spoke to River out loud and directly, invoking her living presence. I offered the Water and asked for teaching. Then I gently poured it in a stream, watching the twisting braids glisten in the low sunlight, the bubbles spreading out across the surface. As I looked up, Kingfisher flew from the mouth of the River Frome to my left, downriver and under the railway bridge; then a second Kingfisher crossed left to right across the Avon in front of me. Each flight seemed to draw a turquoise line across the surface. For a few moments, I felt myself in a different quality of presence: my internal chatter was stilled, the world seemed more subtly alive. Then all faded back to quiet persistence. Just as I noticed this change, Kingfisher flew back low across the water; a breeze ruffled the surface and my face; the sun brightened; the contrails had cleared, and the sky, now a deeper blue, was once again dappled with fair weather clouds.

Some months later I visited River with the specific intent of telling River about the larger inquiry to be initiated that day, with twenty-eight human persons around the planet invoking Rivers as sentient beings.[3] *I wanted to ask a blessing for this work.*

The field was well frosted when I arrived; birds were singing everywhere around me. When I reached my spot, a moorhen, disturbed by my arrival, took flight across the river, which prompted me to stand and wait before starting any ceremony or invocation, watching and listening. After maybe five minutes, Kingfisher flew across in front of me at head height and continued down the left bank and under the railway bridge.

I take this as a prompt to bow, introduce myself, call the four directions and settle down on the bank. I took out my flask and breakfast cake and offered some to River. All these actions intended to condition my mind toward a panpsychic perspective.

After a while, I stood, bowed and called my name again, and spoke to River. I thanked River for teachings over the years that had brought me to this point and told her of our inquiry. I made an offering – a bundle of dried flowers and twigs I had made with artist James Aldridge while walking the banks of the Wiltshire Avon – as a tangible token of human collaboration with Rivers.[4] *I threw the bundle out into the stream and watched as it slowly drifted downstream, under the railway bridge and out of sight. It seemed as if my gazing broadened my perception and drew me into the immediate presence of River.*

A wren flits through the undergrowth and sits for a while no more than a metre away – I have been sitting in insistent wren song all this time. Then two Kingfishers fly out of the Frome and across River toward the right bank, low over the water. They don't fly straight and sure as they usually do but seem to frolic together as a pair. Maybe they are courting. Then another follows behind and I catch sight of both orange breast and turquoise wing feathers. She seems about to land on a willow near me but changes her mind. After a while, as I get to my feet to close the ceremony, two more Kingfishers fly past.

Six Kingfisher flights in the space of a few moments. While the rational western mind may be reluctant to claim this as a direct response to my invocation, the synchronicity is compelling. Whatever explanation might be put on the whole experience, and in particular the flights of Kingfishers, I can only take it as a blessing.

As I got up to leave, Swan snorted, and Kingfisher flew by once more. I walked across the fields back into the taken-for-granted world, saying "Good morning!" to the early dogwalkers as I passed.

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Thomas Berry tells us, 'we are only talking to ourselves . . . we have broken the great conversation'; when we stop listening to the trees, the rivers, the birds, we are in trouble (Berry & Clarke, 1991:20). As artist and writer, we have both, over the years, through drawing and writing practices, opened ourselves to conversing with the world. When we do, we find, time and again, that the world is alive. It really does respond to us. Such responses are poetic; they may not contain literal information, but rather appear as ends-in-themselves, as an 'intimate attunement, an invitation to love . . . ' as Mathews puts it.

What does it take to be open to the poetic response of the world? There are practical things: spending the time, living through the boredom, quieting the self; some may find bowing, ceremony and gifts appropriate. Maybe above all the need to be open and loving, for 'being alive in an empathetic way is always a practice of love' (Weber, 2017:xiv). This love allows us to be permeable to the subjectivity of the other selves or the world. We need the imaginative capacity to be transformed by these encounters.

The kind of experiences we have reported here are both everyday as well as extraordinary. Mistle Thrush, Tree, River, Kingfisher are there all the time. They are not inert objects but communicative presences. We have to cross some threshold into their world, make a link through offering our own presence, quieting ego, openness, love, maybe through ceremony or with the aid of a 'messenger' like the swallows brushing Sarah's ear. But once we are open to it, we discover that the sentient world is full of such occasions of communication; and as soon as we start to observe the protocols again, the wider more-than-human community immediately responds, by turning up at our rituals or offering other 'signs' of their attention (Mathews, 2017b; see also Viveiros de Castro, 1998). There are also moments when the world seems more open to this transition – at dawn and dusk, when the weather changes. If we are awake to it, at such moments we will find that the quotidian *is also* shimmering.[5]

We are then obliged, as artists and writers, in whatever medium we work, to present those experiences to a wider world in a way that is both authentic and accessible; and which potentially draws our audience some way into our experience. Novelist Amitov Ghosh addressed this in his book *The Great Derangement* (2016) and returns to it in *The Nutmeg's Curse*:

This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, film makers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to non-humans. As with all the most important artistic endeavours in human history, this is a task that is at once aesthetic and political . . . it is now freighted with the most pressing moral urgency (Ghosh, 2021:204).

But of course, it is not really a matter of *restoring* agency of voice to non-humans, for they never lost it. Instead, it is we modern humans who have lost our capability to sense, feel, attune to such agency. It is our exiled capacities that must be re-stored and re-membered.

Our journals and sketchbooks tell one story, but honing the narrative, finding the art form to express these 'moments of grace' is to take another step, to offer our experience to a wider world. The challenge for the writer is that such moments, while often vivid, may also be fleeting, inchoate, confused. They are essentially prior to language. One may be left shaken, amazed, while also wondering, "Did that really happen?" One wants to honour the encounter with Mistle Thrush or Kingfisher, but not claim too much. The truth of such experiences is often evidenced in their unexpectedness, and in the profound joy that arises with them. One may be inclined to keep them hidden or kept private; they certainly demand a modesty, are not to be bandied around as evidence of enlightened superiority. And yet we can also see these as teaching stories, one way to reach out to a wider public. The panpsychic perspective of a sentient world open to engagement with us offers an intellectual framework that counters everyday dualism. Yet it is essential to hold the ideas lightly, not crush experience into their readymade template, but allow the encounters to speak for themselves. So, the writer must reach for a narrative that is sufficiently familiar to the reader to draw them in – taking a walk with one's mind preoccupied, sitting by a river – and weave in the more unusual, less taken-for-granted phenomena clearly and directly, without

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Figure 2. Grace & ash.

romanticising or overelaborating. For the plain directness of encounter is in itself an aspect of its veracity.

Sarah makes a parallel translation of experience into the wordless medium of visual art. As we reflected together on these questions in her studio, she drew attention to one large charcoal and watercolour drawing, saying "I feel this one goes with the idea of a 'shimmering world'" (Figure 2).

> *What I am reaching for in this drawing is that feeling, right at the end of my meeting the thrush and the crow; that, "Ah!" that intake of breath, gasp of joy, sense of relief that it's there, just that it's there. And that I am here to see it. The drawings need to vibrate, because as David Hinton puts it, the universe, existence tissue is alive, it rustles, it moves, is always changing (Hinton, 2016). I have to find a visual language, articulating in marks on paper that the universe, the everyday universe, is shimmering, trembling, rustling now.*

In a video presenting her work with the ancient medium mezzotint (Cleghorn, 2022), and in particular her Moth project (Gillespie, 2021), she says

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Working in this way with the copper, looking for the absences and the spaces between things, there are few opportunities to impose oneself, to splash gesture and ego. With the breath quietened, and the ego thus stilled by work, the moth emerges from darkness into light. The method itself holding meaning somewhere in its ability to speak both literally and poetically of the moths being neither present nor absent, but always both, here and not here.

Art is about so much more than the getting and spending of the world. Alice Oswald has written that a poem isn't always what happens in the words but is the trace that the words leave inside you as it vanishes. In this sense this patient material art is a deeply poetic medium, for it is an art of erosion, of pauses, and ultimately of vanishing.

The finished artwork aims at a poetic communication, a language of physicality, that echoes the poetic communication of the world. But there is not a direct translation from one such experience into a particular work; rather over time such experiences become foundational, informing and infusing both work in the field and the studio. The experiences become expressed through a skill that reaches back through the art tradition.

One must hone away at this, develop discipline to keep the ego out of it and to put down what you have seen. I was taught, from the age of seventeen, to take seriously the words of the Renaissance artist Cennini, who urges the artist to 'begin by decking yourselves with this attire: Enthusiasm, Reverence, Obedience, and Constancy.' (Cellini, 1960 (1933)). Unfashionable words, but I think that they are worth reflecting on – a touchstone in times of confusion.

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If we know we are not separate we are, perhaps, less willing to harm. We take Rachel Carson's injunction seriously, 'The more we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we will have for destruction'.[6] And we take that further, for as we experience the intimate response of the world and her beings to our overtures, we feel graced, even loved. Such experience re-arranges our whole sense of being: we feel we belong to the community of life, with deep feelings of gratitude and loyalty.

But what of the present catastrophe? Is there time and energy to rejoin the community of life on Earth? Some may argue that creative arts are a luxury, even a diversion from the essential actions that need to be taken to halt the damage and where possible reverse it. In response to such challenges, we would counter that there are many ways of contributing to the transformation that, we trust, is emerging. We need the direct action of Extinction Rebellion and the politics of the New Green Deal, just as we need the science of climate change, the emerging low carbon technologies, the reinvention of economics and production.

The arts' underlying strength is not to be literal and problem-solving, but to present image and metaphor and leave the viewer or listener to their own reflections. At their best, the arts don't tell, but rather create an atmosphere in which wisdom reveals itself. In this way, they may draw us away from the 'single vision' of the modernist worldview, helping shift the underlying assumptions at the heart of the stories that hold us in a culture of astonishing destructiveness.

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Notes

1 Philip Goff's *Galileo's Error* (Goff, 2019) provides a lucid introduction to panpsychist thought within the tradition of analytic philosophy. We draw on a rather different tradition which builds on Spinoza's thinking, as articulated by Freya Mathews.
2 Twitter post, August 2021.
3 This workshop was offered through Schumacher College at Dartington, Devon, in collaboration with Freya Mathews, Andreas Weber, Stephan Harding, and Sandra Wooltorton.
4 James Aldridge's Queer Rivers Project is at https://queerriver.com/about-the-project/.
5 We used the word 'shimmering' before we came across Deborah Bird Rose account; she writes 'I best learned about the shimmer of life from Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of Australia's Northern Territory (Rose, 2017:51).
6 From Carson's speech in acceptance of the National Book Award, 1963.

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