

## Land of the Wet

*Rachel Hennessy*

The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains.

Henry Thoreau, *Walden: Life in the Woods*, 197.

When my daughter talks about travelling to Newcastle for Christmas, she throws in a ‘desperate’ desire to visit the wetlands.

‘The wetlands?’ I ask, confused by this request.

‘Yes,’ she replies. ‘The wetlands! I just love them.’

She is six years old and her last encounter with the Hunter Wetlands Centre was over a year ago. In the meantime, she has flown to Turkey, had a birthday in a “real” fairy garden and started at a new school, all places I would’ve expected to embed into her brain, as opposed to the reclaimed football field full of mosquitos my father had first dragged me to as a teenager. Already my daughter has her well-worn paths and I had not expected this space to call to her. The wetlands?

‘The wetlands,’ she reiterates.

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I sit in an un-air-conditioned car. Dad has pulled over our Datsun 180B to take a photo of another ‘swamp’ or ‘lagoon’ or ‘big pond’ or ‘muddy hole’, as we derisively call them. Random spots along the snaking roads between Canberra and Sydney, in the days before highways. Black bitumen shimmers its mirage-like energy and in the quiet between the rushing vehicles, we hear frogs fornicating. I wiggle, impatient, with my siblings, wondering how long Dad will take this time, how close he will get, whether he’ll risk his trousers on the barbed wire fences. The reflections do not catch me, as they so clearly do my father; reeds tripled in the mud, wise sentinels watching over a glut of birds calmly making a life. I am bored and want only the rush of the car’s moving on.

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As a human being, I have been a lousy animal. Scornful of Dad's magnificent pictures of swans, herons, ducks, magpie geese and ibises, unwilling to stop and listen to the throb of a landscape outside of the cocoon of a car; each journey being about the destination, not the passing through. My twenties were spent reading and writing fiction, the page my only garden, Literature the only bloom worth growing: my mind separated from the body in the physical world. When I finally conceded the fortress could not hold and began to, literally, "stop and smell the roses", I still couldn't see the attraction of my father's flooded plains. The dry quiet of the bush, the fresh wildness of snowy mountains, the majestic difference of the red desert, these landscapes I began to view with sympathy, empathy, even love. But wetlands? How does one learn to love a space that has no place for you? Where, if you venture in, you are sure to be bitten or sucked upon? Where you'll find the earth so wet there is no clear path for your feet?

When Henry Thoreau wrote about his ponds, they were clear surfaces to float upon. He could rhapsodise about their colour, shape and size, the ways in which they caught the light. Not mucky puddles to be trampled about in, wearing inadequate gumboots, following your father with his Canon SLR draped around his neck, slipping in the mud, gradually having your arms covered in small black marks, the calligraphy of leeches. Who could love such a landscape? Who would be 'desperate' to return to it?

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In 1983, the Newcastle City Council announced plans to fill the last remaining section of a once extensive wetland system between Shortland and Waratah West, part of the Hexham Swamp complex, to re-open the Lorna Street dump. At the same time, a plan was proposed to extend State Highway 23, a re-routing which would cut through a breeding area for black swans. The Newcastle wetlands had been progressively filled over the years, for everything from railway construction to a complex of football fields, but enough locals were able to value the soggy grounds for what they were, and successfully opposed the council's proposals for both the new road and the dump. They set up the Hunter Wetlands Group, which later became the Hunter Wetlands Trust, and founded a biological education and research centre still running today.

Most prominent of these individuals was Dr Max Maddock, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Newcastle, who originally leased part of the wetlands site to

graze his horses. On the wetland's website, his journey is titled 'An Accidental Passion' for it appears Maddock happened to notice four species of Egrets — Great, Intermediate, Little and Cattle — had established breeding colonies in trees on his site and came up with the idea of the centre, with egrets as one of its main features.

When I imagine Max Maddock, he is an eighteenth-century English landowner, strolling over his domain with a sense of entitlement, for what says "this is mine" more than letting loose your own equine animals into a paddock? He kicks through the mud in long black wellingtons, trips and, catching himself, looks up to see nests. Would he have immediately known the importance of what he saw? How long did it take him to recognise the difference between four different species of egrets or did he have to get an ornithologist in for that? Why is it there are people who see this way? If it had been someone else — someone like me in my younger days — would the wetlands be a rubbish disposal site by now, covered in mounds of human-created waste, drowning in flies? How do we change our perception of land as being valuable for what it is, rather than what it can give us?

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As a child I remember standing sheltered in a forest near the creek — my European-filled mind unable to romanticise the bush — and hoping, with an intense longing, for a unicorn to materialise. Our summer holidays were spent in a shack at Mossy Point, fondly nicknamed 'Mozzie Point' because of the enormous amount of such creatures who inhabited it, twenty minutes past Bateman's Bay on the east coast of Australia. An escape from land-locked Canberra, my parents gave us sun-burnt days at the beach, sandcastles and surfing mornings, fish'n'chip evenings, snorkelling and rock-pool explorations.

I search for special days — those that stand out from the general wash — and it shouldn't surprise me to find the creek at the centre of many of them. Lined with mangrove trees, it stank of the rotted wood peculiar to this ecosystem, the heavy lingering stench of what seemed like garbage-infused mud, with wet scurrying sounds as hermit crabs disappeared at the vibration of your thong-ed feet. The hum of the place stopping for a heartbeat — the question raised of danger and the answer given *Flee! Flee!* — before starting again with its pulse.

In a rowboat, we are often the only ones at the creek, my father again ahead of his time in recognising the wonder of a watery space forgotten behind rows of houses, accessible to us because of a relationship with one of the residents. We meander down the waterway, pulling the boat into random shores. I wish for a unicorn because the tall gums around me are

not beautiful enough in themselves: they need to be transformed into the magical, touched by the mythical, to be worthy. The silence holds possibility for only a small amount of time — a stream of sunlight offering the possibility of a visitation — before I become deeply afraid, and make my way back to my father.

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We pull monsters from the land of the wet. The beings from *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and *Curse of the Swamp Creature* step out fully formed and, comically now, wave their webbed hands around, emerging from the primordial soup as symbols of what these dark places can hold. The Aboriginal devil creature, sometimes called the Bunyip, is most often found in rivers, creeks and ponds. The billabong is haunted by the ghosts of our past whilst the creatures in *Alien* are covered in a sticky, disgusting ooze, reminiscent of the swamp. I don't have a definitive thesis, but one could make the link between the watery nature of the womb, its connection to bodily fluids, and the fear of the monstrous feminine Barbara Creed expounded on via Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject: that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules', that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (4). Here is one way to describe the foreign feel of these watery spaces, the ways in which they seem uncontainable, unknowable, and threatening.

We drain or fill these lands of water, seeking to re-establish our own footing, to transform them into something solid. By making use of these habitats — for farming, for transport, for mining, for waste disposal, for football fields — we re-imagine ourselves as the most important factor in the equation, a position human beings have taken for so long now our planet is groaning under the arrogance.

In the USA, there are "Swamp People" on TV who have their own kind of love for this territory, even if it seems to be expressed on motorised powerboats and with guns. In Australia, there are definitely "Wetlands People", those who don't shy away from the smell and the moisture, the mozzies, and the imaginary monsters. My father is one of them.

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It took a relationship break-up — not my own relationship, but a good friend's — to slow me down enough to begin to see the way my father does. The male half of the friendship arrives in Adelaide on a motorbike and, as timing would have it, decides to accompany me on a road-trip to Melbourne. There is no urgency — he is unemployed, I am a student — and we agree to take the roads-less-travelled, him on his two-wheels, me in four. The difference in

our endurance means I have to stop often, waiting for him to catch up, and find myself visiting places I had only ever driven past many times: a pink lake, Naracoorte caves and, most significantly, The Bool Lagoon.

A lagoon? A little voice whispers. Another one? Hadn't I seen enough of those in my childhood?

I arrive a good hour before my friend, the only car pulling up. After I turn off the engine, a thunderous quiet. If this were a schlock film, one of the horror flicks Creed examined, the creak of my door would be the harbinger of an eerie scene to come, for solitary women rarely fare well. But as I climb the dirt rise which marks off the carpark and stand, looking out over the vast stretch of water and reeds, a long wooden walkway snaking out below me, fear is not the emotion I experience. Afternoon sun lights up the ends of the grasses and the bird cries — throaty and shrill, familiar and unknown — signal my lack of aloneness. I amble along the boardwalk. Maybe it is because, ironically, I am able to do this without getting my feet damp, but walking on top of the surrounding waters on the seemingly endless path, I begin to understand my father's fascination.

It's too cliché to use the word 'epiphany', and if I'm honest, there is no single event that pushes me into a new perception and appreciation of the wetlands. But I can mark this moment at Bool Lagoon as a tipping point: stillness, the silence created by no-humans within earshot and the simultaneous awareness of bustling action. The flap of wings from a distant flock of herons, the quieter swish of black swans passing nearby, sporadic plops from surfacing turtles, shimmering skimmer of dragonflies and the cries of egrets, whatever species they are. These combine to erase me from the landscape, to let it be, without my need to give it a purpose or wonder at its reason for existing. The swamp, the lagoon, the big pond, the muddy hole — whatever you want to call it — is extraordinary. I stand quietly for a long time, taking no photos, my reverie only broken by the rumble of my friend's motorbike.

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The signing of the Convention on Wetlands took place in 1971 in the small Iranian town of Ramsar and has since then been known as the Ramsar Convention. The Ramsar Convention's broad aims are 'to halt the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain'. It holds the distinction of being the first modern treaty between nations aimed at conserving natural resources. The Ramsar Convention uses a broad definition of what it considers to be wetlands: 'all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats,

mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans’.

Australia has sixty-six Ramsar sites, that is, areas which have been included on the List of Wetlands of International Importance, including the Hunter Estuary Wetlands and Bool Lagoon. This adds up to 8.3 million hectares of land, as well as there being over 900 nationally important wetlands. Australia has the distinction of having designated the world’s first Wetland of International Importance: the Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory, which remains a model of conservation through joint management by the Arrarrkbi, the traditional owners, and the Parks and Wildlife Commission.

Whilst I aimed to re-view such places as worthy in themselves — to let them stand alone without human need to gain something from these habitats — to begin to understand their importance is to wonder how they could ever be filled up with garbage or dismissed as stinking mud-holes. As the Ramsar website puts it: ‘[wetlands] are indispensable for the countless benefits or “ecosystem services” that they provide humanity, ranging from freshwater supply, food and building materials, and biodiversity, to flood control, groundwater recharge, and climate change mitigation’. Wetlands provide buffers against sea level rises and storm surges, and reduce the impact of extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts and cyclones. Yet 64 per cent of the world’s wetlands have been lost in the last century and we continue to lose wetlands at the rate of 1 per cent per year, faster than the current rate of deforestation. There is worldwide awareness of the threat posed to our forests and oceans. Little attention is being paid to the lands in-between, vital environments often dismissed as conventionally un-beautiful or lacking in purpose.

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My daughter’s wish to visit the Newcastle wetlands at Christmas was not, unfortunately, fulfilled. We had to cancel our plans to travel north and, so, I looked around for alternatives in my hometown of Melbourne. I travelled to the Newell’s Paddock Urban Nature Park in Footscray where a small pond held ducks and lapwings, the feral rabbits chewing on its edges competing with the highway on one side and the train-line on the other.

On the day before Santa’s visit, we find a swampy part of Edwardes Lake in the suburb of Reservoir. Here, the mud smells and the trees are wrapped in spider’s webs. I watch my two girls sit on the edge of the creek, swinging their legs in the opaque brown water, themselves watched by a couple of bemused wood-ducks. My daughters don’t care if the water isn’t blue and reflective or picturesque enough to be painted. They aren’t judging

the scene as separate from themselves, wishing for the materialism of something other, like a unicorn. They throw sticks into the water and watch as they sink into the deep, unafraid, laughing at the level of each splash.

When I ask my daughter, as part of our family dinner ritual, ‘What was the best part of your day?’, she answers quickly: ‘Playing by the water’. I don’t know what it is that has made her different from me at such a young age. I’d like to take all the credit, but I suspect it is the influence of her educators — her grandfather included, whose creation of fishponds at his home in Newcastle continues his obsession with wetlands — and the ways in which many speak of these habitats, not as spaces to be used or grounds to be filled in and exploited, but as places to be or, in many cases, to not be.

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There are environments where we are not needed, but which we desperately need for our survival. The world-without-humans does not have to be the apocalyptic future. It can be spaces here on earth, today, where our presence is peripheral, perhaps different from ‘the wild’ as such, but where we are intensely not needed. I have learnt to love the wetlands and now try to find pockets of these types of habitats whenever I travel. When I find one, I feel reassured, knowing there are people in the area who have come to realise how beautiful these places are, how their protection speaks to a deeper understand of how humanity can walk on our earth. How we can look up, on the deck of the world, and see four types of egrets.

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