

# the rain | keeps falling

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The marshlands of Mesopotamia were once so bountiful they are believed by some to have been the Biblical 'Garden of Eden' ... A place of astounding beauty, the marshes were overrun in the 1990s by the soldiers of Saddam Hussein, who wanted to punish the people as a reprisal for the Shi-ite rebellion at the end of the Gulf War. The rivers emptying into the marshes were dammed, canals constructed to restrict the flow, the reeds burned and its people attacked. Thousands were killed, and many more fled and much of the wetlands were turned into a dry, salt-encrusted wasteland.

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The force of disaster hit me in the heart when, as a young woman, I heard Bob Dylan sing 'Hard Rain'. The song elaborates an old American folk genre that works with question and answer. In the familiar songs of my childhood, the questions concerned how he managed to give his love a chicken that had no bones, or whether his darling could bake a cherry pie. The witness in 'Hard Rain' is no longer the naive Billy Boy. He is asked: where did you go, what did you see, and what will you do? Still today his answers impel themselves into us with terrible force and anguish.

In a voice stunned by violence, the young man reports on a multitude of forces that drag the world into catastrophe. In the 1960s I heard the social justice in the song. In 2004 the environmental issues ambush me. The song starts and ends in the dying world of trees and rivers. The poet's words in both domains of justice are eerily prophetic. They call across the music, and across the years, saying that a hard rain is coming. The words bear no story at all; they give us a series of compelling images, an account of impending calamity.

The artistry of the poet—Bob (Billy Boy) Dylan—offers sequences of reports that, like Walter Benjamin's storm from paradise, pile wreckage upon wreckage.

#### — DEATH WORK

Saddam Hussein's effort to kill the Iraqi wetlands was by no means the first time that the Garden of Eden had encountered death work. One of my favourite philosophers, Lev Shestov, offers an astonishingly provocative and unsettling analysis of the Garden of Eden. Shestov was born in 1866 in Russia, and was educated there. From 1895, he lived sometimes in Russia and sometimes in Germany or Switzerland. After the revolution he emigrated to Paris where he wrote and taught. As his work was translated into French he became a key figure in both religious and existential philosophy. He died in 1938.

Shestov's overall project works against a long tradition in the west that he summarises as 'Athens'. He contrasts it with 'Jerusalem'. The Athens tradition, from the ancients through Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz and Kant, seeks universal, necessary and immutable truths. It claims that these are the only truths worthy of being called knowledge. Shestov labels this knowledge system 'reason', and he wants to draw out the many and terrible implications of the rule of reason. Because life on earth is mutable, sustained in flux, transient, unpredictable and subject to death, reason rejects the passionate and vivid qualities of life; reason calls us to renounce our own selfhood; and reason calls us to 'renounce the world and that which is in the world'.<sup>2</sup> Shestov shows that reason, with its devotion to mind and the eternal, claims to resist death while actually promoting it.

Along with many scholars, Shestov draws inspiration from the Garden of Eden.<sup>3</sup> He identifies reason as the tree of knowledge. The temptation, he argues, is to seek a knowledge that would encompass everything; to be omniscient, like God.<sup>4</sup> There in the garden, the serpent spoke falsely to Eve, inviting her to taste the fruit and to seek to become like God. Two trees: one of life, the other of death disguised as reason. In Shestov's words, the tree of knowledge is choking the tree of life.<sup>5</sup> This death tree has held sway in the west over two or more millennia, claiming for itself the great merit of truth claims founded in certainty.<sup>6</sup> Shestov concludes: 'If it is necessary to choose between God who warns us against the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the serpent who extols these fruits to us, the educated European cannot hesitate; he will follow the serpent'.<sup>7</sup>

There is a good argument to be made that from an ecological perspective the west has been following the serpent for millennia. This point lies at the heart of Lynn White's classic 1967 study 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'.<sup>8</sup> White indicts the Judeo-Christian tradition for promoting a strong dualism between humans and nature, and thus for promoting an anthropocentrism that was used (if not intended) 'to justify our exploitation of nature'.<sup>9</sup> Recently, Carolyn Merchant connects the Garden of Eden even more specifically

with ecological practice, showing the disasters of trying to get back to the garden or to remake the world into an image of the garden.<sup>10</sup> The serpent still tempts: in Merchant's analysis he is inserting himself into suburbs and shopping malls. Death work is disguised not only as reason but also as the commonplace, the consumable and the desirable.

#### — DOUBLE DEATH

I have been working with a concept of double death.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Gregory Bateson's insights concerning entropy, and the disorganisation that starts to ramify with the loss of meta-patterns,<sup>12</sup> I explore some of the specific ways in which we become implicated in the death work around us. The analysis of double death brings thresholds and ethics into a frame of encounter. On the one hand, double death is a threshold process in which the work that promotes death starts to overwhelm the work that promotes life. On the other hand, double death presses us to take a stand: for life or for death. This choice is pressed upon us not because life and death are in themselves oppositional but because the work that amplifies death is destroying the capacity of life to bend death back into life. Increasingly, life is struggling or failing to hold death in balance; increasingly life is struggling to affirm and promote relationships that sustain life and death in their mutual integrity.

An example that gives flesh and blood to my abstractions can be drawn from my research in North Australia. As I discuss in *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Victoria River people talk about the components of the human person in ways that suggest at least two animating spirits (and I also express caution about the use of the term 'spirit').<sup>13</sup> One of them keeps returning from life to life, so that death becomes an interval leading on to transformation into new life. Often the genealogy of 'spirit' includes animals as well as humans—this life force moves through life forms and continues to bind death and life into the ongoing and emerging life of the place. The other 'spirit' returns to the country to become a nurturing presence. These are the dead countrymen who continue to live in country and to whom people appeal when they go hunting. This ecology of emerging life sets up recursive looping between life and death; country holds both, needs both and, most important, keeps returning death into life. The return is what holds motion in place, and in the dynamics of life and death, life is held in place because death is returned into place to emerge as more life.

Double death breaks up this dynamic, place-based recursivity. The first death is ordinary death; the second death is destruction of the capacity of life to transform death into more life. In the context of colonisation, double death involves both the death that was so wantonly inflicted upon people, and the further obliterations from which it may not be possible for death to be transformed. Languages obliterated and maybe gone forever, and clans or tribes eradicated and maybe gone forever are examples of double death.

Ecological violence performs much the same forms of obliteration. Thus, species are rendered locally or everywhere extinct, billabongs and springs are emptied of water, and soils are turned into scald areas. Salinity, desertification and acid sulfate soils stalk the land. This violence produces vast expanses where life founders. It amplifies death not only by killing pieces of living systems, but by diminishing the capacity of living systems to repair themselves. What can a living system do if huge parts of it are exterminated? Where are the thresholds beyond which death takes over from life? Surely we exceed those thresholds violently and massively in the conjoined processes of conquest and development? These amplified death processes are not always irreversible, but in many areas the thresholds are being exceeded.

Consider my teacher and mentor Jessie Wirrpa.<sup>14</sup> In Jessie's way of life and death, she has joined the other 'dead bodies' in her country, and, like them, is becoming part of the nourishing ecology of the place. In life she was a great hunter; in death she joins the ancestral providers. Double death puts her in double jeopardy. Since pastoralists started their violent settlement of the region the damage has been enormous. Jessie's ancestral group lost about ninety-seven per cent of its people in just a few decades, and their original language is effectively extinct. The tuber (*kayalarin*) that was the signifier of the group and their country is locally extinct. Now the life-sustaining rivers are rapidly deteriorating from erosion and invasions of noxious weeds. It is probable that in the near future riverine ecologies will collapse, and with that collapse the possibility for living people to go fishing and feed their families will be radically impaired, if not completely obliterated. For Jessie, then, there is an ongoing amplification: first her own death as a living person, then her obliteration as a nurturer within a flourishing country, and perhaps eventually the loss of all the ecological traces of the family's and their ancestors' lives. Like the Iraqi wetlands, once flourishing ecosystems are becoming wastelands.

The destruction of the Iraqi wetlands is a vile act of war. The description of the process, however, brings us home. Thousands dead, rivers dammed, the country turned into a salt-encrusted wasteland: it could be part of the Murray-Darling Basin, or many other regions of Australia including sections of the Ord-Victoria catchment. Hussein's deliberate warfare can be contrasted with Australia's more sporadic moments of direct violence and its extreme negligence in allowing country to fall into damage and loss. But whether rapid or slow, purposeful or negligent, the destruction of peoples and ecosystems is in many areas approaching or has already surpassed a threshold of reasonable recovery.

And still, the damage rolls on. As scholars we are vulnerable to being colonised by all this death; we may be caught up in reinscribing the legitimacy of death work by refusing to name and challenge its power. Our boundaries around what is sayable are part of the many

boundaries that make it so hard, and perhaps also dangerous, to see parallels between the ecological warfare conducted by others and our own colonial development. These boundaries have the potential either to excise a great range of experience and knowledge, or to drag it back into the familiar, thus depriving it of its own real power. Normative modernity's progressive emptying of the human capacity empathetically to cross boundaries is paralleled by the emptying of the living world's subjectively vibrant life forms. Social, intellectual, empathetic and ecological entropy go hand in hand. Drawing on the terms of 'Hard Rain', we can see that we are probably not the killers, but we may still have cause to conceal our faces.

#### — WORLD CRAZINESS

The tree of life: Shestov calls it faith (in God). It upholds much that reason is not. Against certainty, the tree of life gives us mystery. Against the eternal, the tree of life gives us time. Against immutability, it gives us a world in flux. And against detachment and submission of self, it beckons toward radical action. Shestov calls for what he calls 'God-craziness'.<sup>15</sup> I tend to read right past God in Shestov's work. It is his love of the world that excites me, and I pull his ideas into a path directed more explicitly toward this living world. This is the path of world-craziness—a commitment to the beauty and integrity of the living world.

When Dylan's questioner asks him what he will do now, he replies that he will go back out ... and keep on witnessing even if it kills him. Dylan embraces the pain and the desire, the complexity and the futility. He sings the bleakest and most powerful existential stand for witnessing that I have ever encountered. Drawn as I am to this boldly committed position, world-craziness seems to call us further, pulling us into consciousness of and commitment to the entanglements in the world of life and death. It promotes desire, I suggest, because it offers both call and response.

The Arnhem Land sage David Burrumarra was another great philosopher-poet who spoke about trees. He asked: 'What supernatural entity or entities allow "a tree to take water inside itself from the leaves and roots and to flourish? We know this is where the tree gets its water but we don't see it happening. We only hear about it. *Motj* is the water of life. It is our word for God."<sup>16</sup>

Burrumarra's term is variously translated as power, spirit, the sacred. His claim for power offers a ground that is no less crazy than Shestov's God or Dylan's existential stand in defence of the integrity of life and against its destruction. And still it seems to call us more provocatively. Far from the sweet world of cherry pies and babies without crying, a world-craziness dedicated to '*Motj*' demands that we encounter the world of suffering and rebellion, love that risks endless heartbreak and the gentleness of every fragile leaf and seed. Let me go back to the words of David Burrumarra. He tells us that *Motj* is power, that it is the flow of life

toward growth, of stories toward the real, of a person toward awareness ... That awareness could be a reciprocal encounter—between a world that desires life, and life that desires the world.

Burrumarra's evocative words speak to us in a time of disaster. In their subtle way they tell us that to kill the world is to desecrate all that there is. His teachings are well outside the Garden of Eden, as are we all.

These are our times. The rain has come.

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1. Synopsis of 'Return to Eden: The Marsh People of Iraq', *Foreign Correspondent*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 13 June 2004 <<http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2004/s1083768.htm>>, accessed 23 October 2004.
  2. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. B Martin, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1968, p. 65.
  3. For a recent, and very different, engagement with the Garden of Eden, see Freya Mathews, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2003.
  4. Lev Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation*, trans. B Martin, Ohio University Press, Athens, 1982, p. 59.
  5. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 66.
  6. This point is also made today by numerous feminist scholars; see in particular Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, London, 2002.
  7. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 165.
  8. Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, no. 155, 10 March 1967, pp. 1203–7.
  9. R Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*, Primavera Press, The Wilderness Society, Sydney, 1989, p. 89.
  10. Carol Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, Routledge, London, 2004.
  11. See, for example, Deborah Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004.
  12. P Harries-Jones, *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1995, pp. 169, 210.
  13. Deborah Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.
  14. See also Deborah Rose, 'Taking Notice', *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, no. 3, 1999, pp. 97–103, (special edition, 'Ecological Worldviews, Australian Perspectives', Freya Mathews, editor).
  15. Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation*, p. 87.
  16. David Burrumarra, with I McIntosh, 'Motj and the Nature of the Sacred', *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2002, p. 10.