

Mothering the anthropocene

Entropic satire in Richard Flanagan's *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*

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So it remains that earth does well deserve
The name of mother which we give to her,
Since from the earth all things have been created.

Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*¹

The worst returns to laughter.

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*²

As many of the essays in this collection attest, Garrett Hardin's theorizing in 1968 of the "tragedy of the commons" has become a conceptual sediment on which contemporary cultural thought often builds its own reckoning of carbon modernity's shifts in polity, economy, and history. While the bulk of the critique of Hardin's argument has focused on its narrow sociobiological conception of instrumental reason driven by a desire for individual profit and reinforcing, as Stephanie LeMenager writes, "a late-twentieth-century US hegemony wherein privatization seems to be the best solution to misuse,"³ no less suggestive in Hardin's case against the mismanaged commons has been his twinned use of genre, namely tragedy and parable. In the alliance of parable's bid for moral universalism with tragedy's economy of doom, "The Tragedy of the Commons" ignores the complex cultural histories of commoning (e.g. Indigenous practices of land stewardship) at the same time as it disregards the tenacity of literary history as a narrative commons, with tragedy's place in the civic structures of the Greek *polis* offering possibly the strongest case in point.⁴ Yoked to "formulaic assumptions about generic, genetic,

1. Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Ian Johnstone, Book 5, Verses 794–96.

2. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 4 Scene 1.

3. Stephanie LeMenager, "The Commons," in *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 15.

4. Simon Goldhill, "Generalizing About Tragedy," in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 54.

economic, and environmental logics,”⁵ Hardin’s deployment of tragedy and parable remaps the literary commons as a “disinheritance plot,” drawing together, as Rob Nixon shows, “notions of narrative, property, and strategic intent,”⁶ which mark the ecopolitical imaginary of many of the narratives which Adam Trexler has recently assembled under the aegis of “Anthropocene fictions.”

The salience Trexler attributes to narrative form, genre, and tropology in accounts of the current climate emergency channels the broad ecocritical interest in how narrative templates and aesthetic modes shape and validate our sense of what is natural, just, and common (both shared and recurrent), calling attention to the ways in which environmental collapse “remakes basic narrative operations,” refigures social interactions, and “mutates the ecological systems that underpin any novel’s world.”⁷ Jennifer Wenzel’s critique of the “quarantines of the imagination” similarly highlights narrative capacity to nudge our feelings about “natureculture conjoinings”⁸ and stage new “ecologies of the possible,”⁹ which, by calling into question our habitual modes of thought, can provide more rewarding readings of human-nonhuman entanglements in planetary plenitude and precarity. Nor is the cultural labour of storytelling limited to fictional frames. As Ursula K. Heise notes, environmentalist writers, too, “have skillfully mobilized literary and aesthetic concepts and genres such as the sublime, the picturesque, pastoral, apocalyptic narrative, and ... ‘toxic discourse’ about polluted landscapes and deformed bodies”¹⁰ so as to heighten our sense of nature’s vulnerability to the assaults of carbon modernity. The morphology of affect embedded in generic structures, spanning from naïve hope to stoic pessimism to disaster humour, offers heuristic tools to reflect on how “an aesthetic structure of affective expectation”¹¹ can bring strangers together into what Lauren Berlant calls “intimate publics,”¹² whose “scenes of collectively witnessed survival can provide

5. Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Genre, and ‘The Tragedy of the Commons,’” *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 597.

6. Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Genre,” 594.

7. Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 233.

8. Jennifer Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 9.

9. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “The Sea Above,” in *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 108.

10. Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7.

11. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

12. Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 5.

a grounding for new social relations.”¹³ Seen this way, the narrative organization of planetwide imperatives in crisis discourse generates a visceral sense of the (un)common, to which we find ourselves bound through “obligations and practices of worlding and care.”¹⁴ Thus, before I proceed to examine how different literary modes are employed to narrate environmental collapse in Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan’s novel *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, let me first consider some of the broader implications of our thinking about “planetary commons”¹⁵ and environmental subjectivity in relation to genre as a cultural filter that organizes ideas about creative begetting, kinship, and metamorphosis.

The ruptures in planetary commons, which originate in the social pressures on ecosystems and geologic processes that constitute the Anthropocene, raise both the ethical and ecological stakes of what Wai Chee Dimock calls “literature as a crisis-responsive art form,”¹⁶ whose narrative choices can both mask and magnify the risks of social exclusion attendant upon “homogeniz[ing] the world as disaster.”¹⁷ Berlant’s and Kathryn Yusoff’s thinking about the commons as a socially striated structure of political subjectivity works well to highlight the incoherence of the concept and its implications for our understanding of the species agency of humans in regard to both social and geologic formations. As Yusoff explains, “The parochial claims to universalism are made in the name of sharing an environmental condition, when time and again this is a condition that is never shared equally and targets communities as recipients, but not necessarily agents of change.”¹⁸ For Berlant, too, the twin ruptures in carbon modernity’s ecological and social reproduction of life solicit a renewed attention to the infrastructures of governance, through which contemporary subjects are expected to organize their endurance of precarity by forfeiting difference in favour of similitude under the guise of common sense. In contrast to the idea of the commons as “pure abstraction or compulsive repair that collapses what’s better into what feels better,” Berlant’s account reconceives the commons as an action concept, which produces subjectivity and belonging as genres of “affective practical

13. Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, “Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,” *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 181.

14. Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 409.

15. Kathryn Yusoff, “Politics of the Anthropocene: Formation of the Commons as a Geologic Process,” *Antipode* 50, no. 1 (2018): 256.

16. Wai Chee Dimock, *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 9.

17. Berlant, “The Commons,” 406.

18. Yusoff, “Politics of the Anthropocene,” 259.

being”¹⁹ attuned to the queer relationalities of broken and reparative links in geo-social formations. Arguably, in highlighting the agency of visceral bonds forged across boundaries of difference, this view of the commons revalorizes the ethics of kinship in regard to the social distribution of care and harm and offers a more capacious epistemology for managing the geologic debts of contemporary greenhouse culture.

No less significant are the implications which the social grammar of the commons in the Anthropocene bears for language as a hermeneutic site of struggle and solidarity. Indigenous philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte’s thinking about kinship as a modality of time grounded in the “bonds of mutual caretaking and mutual guardianship”²⁰ is pertinent here. The logic of interdependence and responsibility inherent in “kinship time” refigures climate change accounts into records of ruptured reciprocities, thus also reinterpreting ecological peril and urgency as the ethical imperatives of multispecies relationality rather than linear duration. In the upshot of “kinship time” Whyte sounds a call for formal innovation in aesthetic structures which would highlight the ontological implications of “being in common” in the contingencies of “slow violence,”²¹ colonial legacies, environmental racism, mass extinction events, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, toxicity, and a host of other eco-social phenomena. Focused through the dialectic of *common/uncommon*, my reading of the figural correlations between social decline and biospheric collapse in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* also offers a close consideration of the kinship underpinnings of the novel’s narrative patterns. At issue here is the use of the trope of the mother and the medium of satire, both of which trouble the work of literary history as a cultural commons and our social attachments to what is familiar (and what is family) as a domestic scale of contemporary biopolitics. Thinking motherhood as a foundational relation of commonality, the novel follows its satirical impulse to cash out on the ecological cost of parental pedagogies, pithily summed up by Philip Larkin in his poem “This Be the Verse,” which is subtly glossed over by Flanagan: “They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do. / They fill you with the faults they had / And add some extra, just for you.”²²

19. Berlant, “The Commons,” 399.

20. Kyle Powys Whyte, “Time as Kinship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 42.

21. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.

22. Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 142.

Parental figures ground the social register of environmental emergency in many Anthropocene fictions, with mothers invariably acting as affective centres of survival ethics, as in Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness*²³ or Robbie Arnott's *The Rain Heron*.²⁴ Even when they are absent, as in Richard Powers's *Bewilderment*²⁵ or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*,²⁶ mothers hold a structurally highlighted position as sources of material and emotional sustenance, which speaks to the long-standing cultural association of women, and mothers in particular, with nonhuman nature in western thought. Inherent in this intellectual shorthand is the dualism of man/woman, which, as Val Plumwood shows in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, positions humans outside of biospheric processes and treats the environment as "a limitless provider without needs of its own."²⁷ In ecofeminist terms, this conceptual structure of domination defines human subjectivity in opposition to the environment and sanctions "assumptions not only of gender supremacy, but also of class, race and species supremacy."²⁸ Given how female bodies, to use Adrienne Rich's words, have been categorized as "both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life,"²⁹ it is unsurprising that so many discursive mediations of ecological disruption rely on the affective labour of the mother trope. A silenced figure of the environment, the mother remains the background against which social life measures its value. Heise's reference to the Bolivian constitution, which invokes the figures of "Mother Earth" and "the 'Pachamama' of indigenous cosmologies," is one example of how motherhood metaphors can subsidize the political promises to "diminish poverty and ecological degradation,"³⁰ while at the same time reinforcing instrumental reasoning about the maternal commons as a standing reserve. Emmanuele Coccia's metaphysical argument that motherhood is a cosmic fact, "a geological and planetary function," in virtue of which "the living being itself is the symbol of the entire Earth"³¹ may be another. Though unlinked from social destiny or biological determinism, here too motherhood re-emerges as Gaia, a plan-

23. Dianne Cook, *The New Wilderness* (London: Oneworld, 2021).

24. Robbie Arnott, *The Rain Heron* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020).

25. Richard Powers, *Bewilderment* (London: Hutchinson Heinemann, 2021).

26. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2009).

27. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 21.

28. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 28.

29. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 285.

30. Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 16.

31. Emmanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), 36.

etary commons, in which distinctions of scale and species collapse into a shared phenomenology of life as the ongoing metamorphosis known as evolution.

The tropological drift of the maternal in relation to ecologically destructive events amplifies the conceptual rifts in the way that different feminist epistemologies position women's agency with regard to environmental politics and ethics. While most feminist theory, as Stacy Alaimo writes, "has worked to disentangle woman from nature," the theorizing of gender, as distinct from biological sex, often ends up reinstating the image of nature as "the repository of essentialism and stasis"³² and the binaries of mind/body and subject/object that are indexed to it. This may explain why Carolyn Merchant's historical analysis of women's social roles as "planetary caretakers and green cleaners" in her feminist "ethic of earthcare"³³ does not square easily with Catriona Sandilands's reservations about "motherhood environmentalism," which, she argues, perpetuates the assumptions that "women's awareness can be explained away by their apparently obvious epistemic grounding in specific private relations to natural events, or to threateningly unnatural ones."³⁴ In Sandilands's reading, by reducing women's knowledge to childcare and homemaking and substituting political action for private practices, motherhood environmentalism restores the invisibility of the mother, which Plumwood has exposed as the premise of both instrumental reason and patriarchal power.

Despite these conceptual slippages, Sandilands shows how the ecofeminist project also creates possibilities for a more radical politics of identity, where democratic conversations about environmental justice acknowledge the contingency of all subject positions, both human and nonhuman, and recognize their shared exposure to harm. Insofar as the categories of nature and woman are constituted by historically specific understandings, their conceptual alignment, too, sheds light on the failure of essentialism and biological determinism to represent that which exceeds social identity. It is in response to our apprehension of how environmental subjectivity can only be accessed "as a horizon produced through the social"³⁵ that Sandilands expands ecological politics into a solidarity of democratic interests in which language works "to disrupt notions of gender solidity, natural necessity, and reified identity in order to reveal their impossibility."³⁶ Primed for the contingency

32. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

33. Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1995), xv.

34. Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.

35. Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist*, 90.

36. Sandilands, 120.

of identities and their deliberations, such “coalition politics”³⁷ holds the promise of reorienting the whole discursive space of democracy to an open-ended performance of affinities through mutual entanglement and care.

Literary forms, it seems fair to say, have been particularly receptive to the subversive energies of performative affinities, often using irony and parody to rupture old tropes and genres and recast them into a new critical hermeneutic. Motherhood is just one narrative beneficiary of “the parodic possibilities of a performative woman/nature affinity”³⁸ which highlights the political stakes of sharing common values and valuing the commons. In equal measure catalysts of collapse and emissaries of survival, all climate fiction parents call our attention to how family, too, functions as a relational ecology, whose dynamics nourish the moral sociolect of carbon modernity. What recent Anthropocene fictions have shown is how genre (e.g., realism, speculative fiction, the comic, the fantastic, the new weird) can be enlisted to retrain our eyes in the face of social and ecological emergencies and conjure up scenarios for a possibly less impoverished, though no less uncertain, future. Scaled by the coordinates of genre, the Anthropocene itself, as Heise suggests, may “usefully be understood as ... [a] kind of speculative fiction, in that it focuses on the reality of a terraformed planet that the genre has long held out as a vision for the future of other planets, but which has already arrived in the present of our own planet.”³⁹

As part of this aesthetic and critical praxis, the notable prevalence of eco-apocalypse, elegy, and species catalogue has also widened the conversation about the cultural genealogies of genre, wherein tragedy and comedy problematize the hermeneutic frames we use to understand ecological ruptures. Both Glenn Albrecht’s theorizing about eco-anxiety and “solastalgia”⁴⁰ and Simon Estok’s notion of “ecophobia,”⁴¹ for example, work well to capture the human sense of desolation in the wake of environmental breakdown and “the imagining of nature (often gendered as Mother) as an opponent to be conquered.”⁴² Folded into the spectrum of grief and hostility here is the frustration over the limits of human agency, which Estok ascribes to the weight of ontological and ethical privileges the tragic hero assumes in regard to the nonhuman environment. Tragedy, in this view, becomes a narrative site of “an ecophobic ethics,”⁴³ which dramatizes human ecological errors

37. Sandilands, 109.

38. Sandilands, 120.

39. Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 219–20.

40. Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 45.

41. Simon Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 1.

42. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, 9.

43. Estok, 38.

in a way that raises important questions about the links between cascading environmental effects and the distribution of social justice on a global scale.

The cultural labour of tragedy notwithstanding, its attachment to the ethical frontier of human exceptionalism also limits its capacity to convey the multiple registers of environmental precarity and imagine more hopeful alternatives to troubling times. In fact, Joseph Meeker, one of the earliest theorists of the ecological thrust of comedy, has argued that “[e]nvironmental disasters can never be tragic, for they cannot be conceived as the moral error of an individual.”⁴⁴ Highlighting comedy’s affinity to the ecological principles of adaptability, symbiosis, and the biological imperative of survival, Meeker defines the comic logic as “a ritual renewal of biological welfare as it persists in spite of any reasons there may be for feeling metaphysical despair.”⁴⁵ Freed from any ethical commitment to ideas about truth, dignity, or social good, which are central to the tragic outlook, Meeker’s comedic subject values only life itself preserved and proliferated through “the art of accommodation and reconciliation.”⁴⁶ Against tragedy’s anthropocentric disposition, the comic view, in this account, promises humility and endurance as an ecological ethic of survival against all odds.

It seems fair to say that like our sense of the commons, neither tragic nor comic epistemology today boasts the conceptual coherence envisioned by Meeker. Dimock, for example, maintains that contemporary tragedy operates only “in a weaker form, less invested in catastrophe as a necessary end”⁴⁷ and more prone to “the influx of comedy”⁴⁸ and its “democratization of harm.”⁴⁹ Patrick O’Neill’s view of comic entropy, stemming from the blurring of generic distinctions throughout the twentieth century, echoes in Berlant and Sianne Ngai’s argument that comedy produces both pleasure and anxiety in a way that poses a “problem of figuring out distinctions between things, including people, whose relation is mutually disruptive of definition.”⁵⁰ In broader terms, then, the ruptures in generic modalities appear to be coextensive with the crisis of intelligibility brought about by ecological cataclysms and attendant by a vague sense that distinctions between

44. Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival. Studies in Literary Ecology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 58.

45. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival*, 24.

46. Meeker, 38.

47. Dimock, *Weak Planet*, 10.

48. Dimock, 68.

49. Dimock, 69.

50. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233.

tragic and comic modes in literature's formal inventory can no longer settle our wager with time.

Seeing as Flanagan's novel *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* probes the crossovers of the comic and the tragic in the social imaginary of the current climate emergency, O'Neill's theorizing of "entropic satire"⁵¹ and Mark McGurl's notion of "the posthuman comedy"⁵² seem particularly well-suited to problematizing the affective footprint of the cultural rhetoric of ecological decline in the novel. The common thread in both strands of thought is the apprehension of the breakdown in what passes for commonly accepted values, "the erosion of traditional notions of order and truth,"⁵³ which intensifies generic rupture through comedy's affinity to tragedy and reinforces our sense of uncertainty about social norms and ethical actions. In O'Neill's view, the entropic premise of the comic impulse produces a sense of anomie, wherein even the satirical instinct contracts into "the purely deictic gesture of identification and demonstration,"⁵⁴ generating entropic satire, where "disorder is acknowledged as triumphing over order, and didactic confidence gives way to a fascinated vision of maximum entropy, total disorder."⁵⁵ The radical power of these cognitive disjunctions and scalar effects, as McGurl shows, gains most prominence in the genre fictions of posthuman comedy, a species of black humour, where the human subject's hold on self and the world is thrown into "an estranging conceptual relief."⁵⁶ Shuttling between "the grin and the chagrin,"⁵⁷ the mental jolts produced by such fictions deflate the arrogance of human designs, such that all human enterprises appear simultaneously tragic, comic, and obscene.

The scaling of affect that O'Neill and McGurl trace to the entropic leaks in human selfhood prompts me to look at how Flanagan's novel smudges the line between what appears comic and tragic and brings into relief the ruptures in the reciprocal relations between bodies, the environment, and language, as scales of the broken world. By cuing the narrative's maternal figures to its satirical labour, I consider how the novel calls attention to its use of language, particularly metonymy, anacoluthon, and parataxis, as verbal manifestations of entropy in the Anthropocene. As the satirical sting of Flanagan's fiction punctures the dualisms

51. Patrick O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour, Narrative, Reading* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1990), xiii.

52. Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy," *Critical Inquiry* 38, (2012): 537.

53. O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 142.

54. O'Neill, 143.

55. O'Neill, 133.

56. McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy," 548.

57. Berlant and Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," 248.

of human/nonhuman and nature/culture, I also attend to the ways it recalibrates material and ethical kinships, troubling the figural traffic between vulnerability and violence, care and cruelty, and life and (slow) death. The affective implications of the novel's bringing of extinction events into conversation with social traumas, as I hope to show, reiterate entropic satire's mirth as a form of mourning that is also an ethical provocation into thought about what passes as life in the breakdown of planetary life.

The cultural meanings of environmental collapse in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* are organized around the image of Francie Foley, whose dying maternal body figures the large-scale hazards of the climate emergency and extinction events, on the one hand, and the affective labour of kinship ties, which ground the novel's ethical dilemmas, on the other. While Francie lies in hospital, "eyelids red and inflamed, like wounds out of which sickly eyeballs protruded unnaturally,"⁵⁸ "half of Greenland's surface ice sheet melted, France had its hottest day on record, a tiny Australian marsupial rat was the first species to be wiped out by climate change and the last Sumatran rhinoceros died."⁵⁹ Correlative with the veering scales of ecological crisis, the narrative's conflation of metaphor with metonymy tropes the maternal body as an Anthropocenic commons, whose deterioration magnifies the links between planetary and subjective life. Flanagan's use of John Clare's poem "Remembrances" in the novel's epigraph also taps into the cultural memory of enclosures, which suggests ethical parallels between the privatization of common land in mid-nineteenth-century England and the destruction of ecosystems in twenty-first-century Australia. However, as the elegiac tenor of Clare's voice gets refracted through Flanagan's dark humour, the narrative of grief in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* stretches its comedic lament far enough to recalibrate loss as a condition of life's capacity for hope and renewal.

The novel's opening sentence, "Her hand,"⁶⁰ which constitutes the first section of Chapter one, suggests that loss has significance not only as a thematic thread in the plot, but also as a poetic principle, which calls attention to the way language responds to the pressures of trauma. A synecdoche for Anna, Francie's daughter and the novel's focalizer, the hand is a material signifier in a chain of events the novel calls "the vanishing,"⁶¹ which encapsulates the communal demise of human bodies, nonhuman natures, and language. On a personal scale, the hand is a symptom of how Anna's body is gradually falling apart. Visiting her mother in

58. Richard Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2021), 22.

59. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 46.

60. Flanagan, 3.

61. Flanagan, 3.

hospital, she discovers that her ring finger has disappeared, leaving only “a diffuse light, a blurring of the knuckle joint,” but “no immediate sense of ache or loss.”⁶² In the following months Anna also loses her left knee, right breast, another finger, then her left hand, and eventually her nose and eye, turning into a “sad, flabby woman,” a sight that “would be tragic, Anna thought, if it wasn’t so comic.”⁶³ The novel casts this physical disintegration against the agonizing endurance of Francie’s body, reduced to “a sick animal,”⁶⁴ whose face “seemed further changed, more harrowed, more lined, more extraordinary as flesh vanished from it.”⁶⁵ Like the natural world, whose burning Anna follows on the social media, Francie oscillates between life and death, generating resentment in her daughter and a hunger for power in her youngest son Terzo, both of whom begrudge their mother the time they have to allocate to hospital visits. Francie’s eldest son Tommy, who has been their mother’s primary caretaker, is the only one who is concerned not only for her health, but also her wish to have a dignified death. The scenes of maternal suffering raise the ecological stakes of material degradation, comparing Francie’s “bony limbs” to “those of a swotted insect” and her “slurring sounds of distress” to “the most horrible animal noises halfway between a bellow and a bray.”⁶⁶ As the vanishings grow in intensity and scope, claiming the body parts of Anna’s son Gus and her partner Meg, they heave into view the obscenity of the Anthropocene commons and the human failure to acknowledge it.

Palpable tropes for the extinction of the species and the dissolution of planetary flesh, the vanishing human parts in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* register the dark implications of human indifference, summed up by Anna’s conclusion that “not only were people not seeing but perhaps – and it was this that struck her as more frightening than anything – *they did not want to see*.”⁶⁷ Ironically, the fact that “[n]o one wanted to see – far less to say – that Francie was dying and had been dying for a long time”⁶⁸ is beyond Anna’s own discernment. But it is at the level of language that the novel’s ecology of attention reveals the sharpest edges of its entropic logic. Flanagan shows language’s inability to accommodate ecological collapse, resorting to syntactic fragmentation and stammering to convey the affective excess of material disruptions. Anna’s reading of social media is a good example of how the narrative turns parataxis and anacoluthon into a ver-

62. Flanagan, 15.

63. Flanagan, 198.

64. Flanagan, 24.

65. Flanagan, 56.

66. Flanagan, 252.

67. Flanagan, 239.

68. Flanagan, 155.

nacular of entropic satire, which records the “humour warp”⁶⁹ of disorder: “She googled vanishings. Nothing. She posted a penguin meme she couldn’t hold her thoughts she couldn’t read she clicked through smoke sending people crazy it triggers anxiety a professor said it’s like a war the enemy is attacking the city we don’t know where the enemy is.”⁷⁰ Bereft of the compass of punctuation, the syntactic compressions of this passage literalize the veering of thought that exceeds the constraints of its linguistic vehicle, producing a sense of disorientation that is not unlike what Yusoff calls an “interruptive thinking [that] can only stutter into existence, because it is the speech of thoughts that are in the midst of restructuring political consciousness.”⁷¹

In the critical terms of the Anthropocene, the comic affinities of Francie’s loss of speech and Tommy’s stammer may also be read as part of the novel’s conversation about the biopolitical management of life and the distribution of care. In Flanagan’s ecological nightmare, vulnerability becomes a powerful vessel for precarious humour, with both Francie’s and Tommy’s verbal trip-ups airing cynicism about social structures which make human bodies live and let nonhuman nature die. Consider, for example, how the paratactical patter of Tommy’s alliterations evoke the “numerical sublime”⁷² characteristic of the elegiac lists of extinct species: “The ladybirds gone soldier beetles bluebottles gone earwigs you never saw now gone beautiful brilliantly coloured Christmas beetles whose gaudy metallic shells they collected as kids gone flying ant swarms gone frog call in spring cicada drone in summer gone gone.”⁷³ A vehicle of despair, the angry sound-riffs of Tommy’s stammer enhance the comic horror of this catalogue, exposing grief’s collusion with the hollow sense of “hap-hap-happy” promoted by Tasmania’s tourist economy: “Far-far-fucking penitentiaries f-f-faking fun floating over Hobart looks like Noddytown does everyone want to be seven?”⁷⁴

Commensurate with the erosion of planetary life in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, Tommy’s broken syntax is also Flanagan’s way to rethink acts of aggression against the human body performed through society’s biopolitical assumptions that “nature would always bow to will.”⁷⁵ The comic obscenity of Anna and Terzo’s refusal to allow their mother to die is a case in point. Paralyzed and unable to speak, Francie uses an alphabet board to communicate, with the results

69. O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 53

70. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 103.

71. Yusoff, “Politics of the Anthropocene,” 270.

72. Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 56.

73. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 6.

74. Flanagan, 5.

75. Flanagan, 152.

often providing an occasion to “laugh when Anna read them out.”⁷⁶ But Flanagan leaves us in no doubt about how this communication also constitutes a crisis of care, where in response to Francie’s text, “T.E.L.M.E.G.O.,”⁷⁷ Anna pretends not to understand and finally exclaims that “you’ll get better, Mum ... And life will go on,”⁷⁸ something that echoes ironically in the quip of a hospital cleaner: “She’ll outlast the planet.”⁷⁹

Like the land ravaged by fires, “burning in rainforests that never burnt,”⁸⁰ Francie’s body becomes a site of a posthuman comedy enacted through a clash of ontological scales and orders of meaning which cast her children’s plan to control life and postpone death as an instrumentalist ethic of resilience, whose hubristic emphasis on the duty to live turns into a “horrific goodness”⁸¹ and compassionate cruelty, protracting the mother’s suffering in the name of the idea that “postponing death was life.”⁸² Against Tommy’s “stammering something about the need to accept death,”⁸³ Terzo strengthens his resolve that “it was necessary to fight to regain control”⁸⁴ and “save their mother from her own wishes.”⁸⁵ Anna, too, ignores Francie’s desire to have the last rites and quietly watches a cat video while wondering if resilience means “adapting to their own extinction.”⁸⁶ After a series of medical emergencies, Francie no longer recovers, nor does she die, becoming, instead, “the fittest old corpse in Christendom.”⁸⁷ The grotesqueness of this image works to expose the material and epistemic violence of the biopolitical infrastructures which produce both the sense of the environment as a fungible resource and the assumed sovereignty of the human subject. Recalling Berlant’s insight that “resilience and repair don’t necessarily neutralize the problem that generated the need for them, but might reproduce them,”⁸⁸ Flanagan’s satirical jibes illuminate the ethical costs of reducing flesh, both human and nonhuman, to an object of social engineering. Recast as a spectacle of medical mastery, the

76. Flanagan, 184.

77. Flanagan, 185.

78. Flanagan, 186.

79. Flanagan, 276.

80. Flanagan, 96.

81. Flanagan, 211.

82. Flanagan, 246.

83. Flanagan, 129.

84. Flanagan, 39.

85. Flanagan, 105.

86. Flanagan, 141.

87. Flanagan, 17.

88. Berlant, “The Commons,” 393–94.

scene of duress turns the family drama into a puppet show, with Anna and Terzo as “puppeteers who could keep the illusion of life alive and the illusion was even more necessary than Francie, now no more than their marionette suspended by tubes that ran from machines and their life-condemning fluids above to various shunts, catheters and orifices below.”⁸⁹ Sacrificed as animal flesh, Francie is salvaged as a technological monster.

The visceral metamorphosis Flanagan’s dark mirth captures in this figurative language is continuous with its comic strikes against the discourse of neoliberal biopolitics and its instrumentalist ethic, but the cascading effects of environmental collapse the novel records put a strain on the narrative’s own satirical imperative to initiate a change in perception. This is so because the novel’s figural passages that link the affective work of vulnerability to violence, and cruelty to care, advance an entropic mode of thinking, whose insistence on comedy’s affinity to tragedy “disrupt[s] totally the traditional cathartic reaffirmation of the forms of an ordered societal system.”⁹⁰ Implicit in this conception of satire is the recording of perception that cannot be authorized as any form of social truth. As Teresa Shewry insists, “[s]atire may destabilize sedimented ideas, undertake fierce critique, and express different imaginative possibilities, but in its persistently dissatisfied relationship with understandings and engagements, it can turn us critically onto inadequacies in its own commitments.”⁹¹ In this respect, as a trope for planetary commons, the maternal body in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* becomes a powerful means to rethink the material and emotional incoherence of parental legacies in the Anthropocene, bringing into view the ways in which human entanglements with nature and technology render humans in equal measure laughable and lamentable, as well as ecological and historical.

Humour, Simon Critchley contends, “is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category by itself as a negotiation between categories.”⁹² Calling our attention to the material and semiotic interweavings between human and nonhuman agencies, this conception of the comic rehearses Sandilands’s insight into the incoherence of environmental subjectivity suspended in the bonds and breaks that constitute the continuities between nature and culture. Inevitably, this also bears on our understanding of how comic and tragic outlooks in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*

89. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 247.

90. O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 20.

91. Teresa Shewry, “Satire’s Ecology,” in *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*, ed. Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 235–36.

92. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 29.

map the novel's reading of historical experience, trauma in particular, as environmental archives of memories that renegotiate creaturely categories and the ethical stakes of the genres of remembering.

Flanagan's satirical take on family drama reiterates the social significance of scale in understanding environmental rupture. What starts as an individual misfortune (Anna's losing of a finger) and a family sorrow (Francie's hospitalization) expands into a series of nested events, whose permeable boundaries throw into relief the ecological premise of all historical experience. Harkening back to the well-established tradition of the "Tasmanian Gothic"⁹³ and the affective work of "packing death," which repurposes the Australian slang for fear and anxiety for "the literary record of ecocide,"⁹⁴ *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* suggests affective correspondences between the historical traumas endured by humans and the abuse suffered by nonhumans. The novel highlights a web of relations between the genocide of Tasmania's Indigenous people, the Holocaust, and the extinction of the orange-bellied parrot. Arranged on an escalating scale of individual, family, nation, globe, and planet, these narrative temporalities give form to the environmental paradox that Jason Moore has called "the *double* internality of historical change – humanity inside nature, nature inside humanity."⁹⁵

Tellingly, at the frontier of the vanishings in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, Anna's dissolving body serves as a potent metaphor for Flanagan's inquiry into the ecological history of family bonds, epitomized in Francie's reference to Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse," "that poem, you know, that one about how parents mess you up?"⁹⁶ It seems useful to retrieve what is not quoted in the novel, if only to reflect on how Flanagan's glossing over the "four-letter Larkin[s]"⁹⁷ mirrors the repressive moments in the novel's history of parent-child relationships: "Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf. / Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself."⁹⁸ The satirical vibe of Larkin's poetic injunction sets Francie's experience of being raised by an intensely religious mother, "known to all as the Tiger,"⁹⁹ who conceived her out of wedlock,

93. Jesse Shipway, *The Memory of Genocide in Tasmania, 1803–2013: Scars on the Archive* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 52.

94. Iris Ralph, *Packing Death in Australian Literature: Ecocides and Eco-sides* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 1.

95. Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropocene or Capitococene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Binghampton: PM Press, 2016), 79.

96. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 64.

97. Nigel Rapport, "Writing on the Body: The Poetic Life-Story of Philip Larkin," *Anthropology and Medicine* 7, no. 1 (2000): 48.

98. Larkin, *Collected Verse*, 142.

99. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 103.

and a father, who would “drop to his knees”¹⁰⁰ every morning to worship nature’s bounty, in opposition to Anna’s relationship with her twenty-six-year-old son Gus, who lives “like a vampire,”¹⁰¹ “armoured and entombed within his earphones,”¹⁰² stealing from his mother to keep up his multiple addictions. Anna’s refusal to believe that Gus would lie to her is continuous with her denial of her own mother’s mortality: the image of Francie’s “unruly bones pushing out everywhere”¹⁰³ is part of the same cultural imaginary that casts Gus as “ruin theory of wrecked son.”¹⁰⁴ In a rare moment of self-insight, Anna asks herself if her self-deception about Gus is “any worse than the lie in which she and her brother had made their mother complicit and imprisoned her within?”¹⁰⁵ On the comic side of these relationships, Anna’s compulsive restocking of the cash she keeps in the kitchen for Gus to steal is homologous with her obsessive cancellation and rebooking of flights from and to Australia, raising up the tally of her parental failures to include the comic (and carbon) footprint of ecological debts.

In Flanagan’s vision of environmental collapse, the dissolution of Gus’s body gives metonymic access to the incoherence of maternal genealogies, which materialize in the novel the social ruptures of visceral bonds. At one end, Gus’s gradual vanishing recalls how Anna, “[u]nable to afford child care, in a distant, strange city with no family support,” used to leave her young child “to play alone for hours,”¹⁰⁶ shutting the door of her work room and telling him “to be a man.”¹⁰⁷ Overwhelmed by the “unbearable intensity” of her feelings for her son, Anna “understood she had to break something in him”¹⁰⁸ to maintain a sense of self in a world that reduced her life to maternal care. This partly explains why, in an angry retort to Tommy’s suggestion that “Francie had had a good life,” Anna asks “if he meant that their mother should be grateful for being locked away as a housewife?”¹⁰⁹ Yet when it comes to respecting Francie’s wish to die, Anna’s feminist logic gives way to a “loving cruelty”¹¹⁰ that denies her mother the agency she herself claimed through a disavowal of an emotional bond with her son. At the sharpest end of Flanagan’s

100. Flanagan, 117.

101. Flanagan, 157.

102. Flanagan, 225.

103. Flanagan, 254.

104. Flanagan, 203.

105. Flanagan, 195.

106. Flanagan, 158.

107. Flanagan, 159.

108. Flanagan, 159.

109. Flanagan, 171.

110. Flanagan, 173.

irony, what remains of Gus are “three fingers and a thumb” latched to a joystick that controls a video-game gun “fixed on a doomed world running, leaping, loping, flying, seeking to escape the next bullet, missile, apocalypse.”¹¹¹

The images of carnage evoked in the scene of Gus’s demise bring forth the broader ecology of social relations, in which deaths in the family, most prominently Terzo’s and Anna’s, contribute to the disorienting effects of scale that trouble the novel’s satirical reach. When Terzo dies in a cycling accident, in which a truck caves his head in “like an egg,”¹¹² the narrative directs us towards a tragic reading, with a colleague of Terzo’s trying to dispel the rumour that “he had deliberately ridden into the truck,”¹¹³ and Tommy linking Terzo’s death to the suicide of their adolescent brother Ronnie. In a train of affective associations, memory of Ronnie’s sexual abuse figures the social effects of family trauma, which escalate from being the cause of Tommy’s stammer and Ronnie’s suicide to a reason for Terzo’s death. Even the onset of their late father’s dementia, made manifest in his emptying of pillows of their feathers in order to “burn ... the autumn leaves,”¹¹⁴ can be traced back to his discovery of Ronnie’s body in the wake of the “greasy smoke from the autumn leaves he was raking up and burning.”¹¹⁵ Shuttling between the social vocabulary of trauma and the planetary language of disaster, the fire trope troubles the ethical perimeter of satire’s affective labour, predictably exceeding its own capacity to settle the burning questions of ecological endings and continued loss.

Admittedly, the fact that both Anna and Terzo die before the passing of their mother is one of many ironies in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*. However, what marks Anna’s death out for satirical understanding is the confusion of scales at which we may perceive the significance of her final actions. On her flight home to Sydney, she strikes up a conversation with Lisa Shahn, a woman scientist, who runs “a government program to save the orange-bellied parrot”¹¹⁶ and invites Anna to volunteer at Port Davey “to count how many parrots arrive each spring.”¹¹⁷ The episode is significant in several respects, not least of which is the irony of Anna’s discovery during the flight that her “entire left hand ... had vanished.”¹¹⁸ The wider remit of Flanagan’s satire, however, allows for a correlation of

111. Flanagan, 249.

112. Flanagan, 212.

113. Flanagan, 221.

114. Flanagan, 121.

115. Flanagan, 195.

116. Flanagan, 187.

117. Flanagan, 193.

118. Flanagan, 193.

the planetary scale, issues of biodiversity and species extinction, to the socially-scaled accounts of the genocide of the Indigenous Tasmanians and the Holocaust of the Jewish people, a link that Lisa establishes in voicing her concern about the parrot. The material ground of this link, we learn, is the place memory of Port Davey, home to both the endangered bird species and the last of the Indigenous Tasmanians, a woman named Mathinna. Mathinna figures as a character in Flanagan's novel *Wanting*, first published in 2008.¹¹⁹ Retreating from the pull of metaphor that joins the two histories of loss, Flanagan's narrative shows how the ontological interdependencies between humans and birds fold planetary memory into cultural memory, reminding us that "when the Aboriginals lost the war and the few survivors were taken away the burning stopped, the forest advanced, the plains began vanishing and the seeds and sedges with them, and the birds started their long vanishing also."¹²⁰

Significantly, the ecological and cultural labour of deliberate burning, which the Indigenous Australians used as a form of land stewardship,¹²¹ gains a completely different meaning as Lisa reminisces about her Jewish grandmother, who survived a raid in Nazi-occupied Vilnius and escaped the Holocaust when a Lithuanian policeman, who "took the rest of her family,"¹²² left her hiding under a bed. The etymological grounding of the Greek word *holokauston*, meaning "burnt offering," brings the global implications of the Second World War into uneasy proximity with what Jesse Shipway calls the "Tasmanian archive,"¹²³ in which "[t]he genocide thread moves from the moment of European settlement in Tasmania to the 'extinction' of the Aborigines after Trukanini's death."¹²⁴ In the affinities between traumatic histories, Flanagan traces the incommensurability of forms of survival: unlike Mathinna, who was stolen by the whites, turned into "a black princess, a toy, a token, a trophy,"¹²⁵ and then abandoned, Lisa's grandmother was saved by a nun and "came to Melbourne in 1956."¹²⁶ The narratives of survival in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, like its narratives of extinction, are not without ambivalence. Anna's decision to join the volunteering effort at Port Davey is oddly coextensive with her determination to "watch the world die let her mother

119. Richard Flanagan, *Wanting* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010).

120. Flanagan, 189.

121. Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2012), 164–65.

122. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 189.

123. Shipway, *The Memory of Genocide in Tasmania, 1803–2013*, 1.

124. Shipway, 7.

125. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 188.

126. Flanagan, 190.

live.”¹²⁷ At the crucial moment of Anna’s introspective leap, Flanagan teases us with an emotionally-loaded parallel between her commitment to conservation work and the historical mission of Critchley Parker, an Australian man who planned in 1942 to set up “the great capital of world Jewry in the home of the orange-bellied parrot.”¹²⁸ In the end, neither of these salvific dreams can be fulfilled. Birds of a feather, so to speak, both humans die alone at Port Davey, Critchley, having failed to impress a Melbourne socialite he loved, and Anna, having fallen from a ladder while checking the proverbial parrot’s nest.

Arguably, what turns Anna’s death into an episode of terminal pratfall is the narrative’s derangement of scale conveyed through a collision of perspectives, where the dying woman’s ceding to gravity is measured by the gaze of an orange-bellied parrot, who “held her head up a little longer until she was sure that the single astonished eye of the young woman staring into the darkness of her nest was gone.”¹²⁹ Evocative of McGurl’s thinking about posthuman comedy, in which the “vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem,”¹³⁰ the bird’s-eye view in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* reappraises the novel’s satirical gambit in the frame of “an absolutely indifferent, starkly inhuman universe”¹³¹ and the “ontological lowliness”¹³² of its Anthropocene subject. In a move that recalls the long-held cultural associations of parrots with writing, and satire in particular,¹³³ Flanagan takes us on a mental flight, in which human death is reimagined as an evolutionary history of metamorphoses that bring to mind Coccia’s quip about “a carnival of the telluric substance of a planet.”¹³⁴ Lying on “a high plain of alpine heath”¹³⁵ the dying Anna has “waking dreams” of Gus, Terzo, Ronnie, and their father, all now mysteriously restored to health and calling her to join them. But the register of pastoral redemption shifts abruptly as Anna, like the animals in Gus’s video games, finds herself under rifle assault, “ducking and weaving to evade the bullets”¹³⁶ as she

127. Flanagan, 98.

128. Flanagan, 237.

129. Flanagan, 281.

130. McGurl, “The Posthuman Comedy,” 537.

131. McGurl, 548.

132. McGurl, 549.

133. See, for example, Rebecca Ann Bach, *Birds and Other Creatures in Renaissance Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018) and Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

134. Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, 5.

135. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 271.

136. Flanagan, 272-73.

transforms first, into “a Tasmanian tigress with a newly born pup in her pouch” and then into a wedge-tailed eagle, a giant freshwater crayfish, a Tasmanian devil, and “a spotted quoll sugar glider skink a spider beetle.”¹³⁷ Congealed in this parat-actical sweep of recessive transformations is Flanagan’s search for a language that would resonate for Anthropocene readers in its urgency to heed the warnings of climate catastrophe and accept that this time there would be “no possibility for regeneration.”¹³⁸ As the novel closes, however, this impulse, too, seems to implode: as Tommy says goodbye to his mother and welcomes his newly-born granddaughter, Flanagan’s fiction trades its dark mirth for the solace of “kinship time,”¹³⁹ tailored to measure the gratitude of the bird conservationist, who, in recognition of the return of the parrot, sinks to her knees to “wait for that moment when the universe might vibrate in and out through her.”¹⁴⁰

The reversal of mirthful horror to mournful hope at the end of *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* dovetails with the entropic satire’s simultaneous castigation of and collusion with environmental collapse. In staying with the genre’s troubles, Flanagan also remains attuned to the dangers inherent in overlooking the material, epistemological, and affective complexity of the current condition of brokenness. From this standpoint, the twinned scenes involving Tommy’s looking after his granddaughter and Lisa’s celebration of the return of the orange-bellied parrot enact the comic principle of rebirth and renewal, recasting the novel’s labour of care as a kinship bond of “continuity through transformation”¹⁴¹ that animates all earthly beings. In this contingent symmetry of social and ecological retrieval, Flanagan’s fiction, it seems to me, mobilizes satire’s recalibration of rupture as an ethical aspiration toward what Dimock calls “a subjunctive future,” where “a hoped-for world” can be invented out of an existing mess and “cherished for being so far unrealized.”¹⁴²

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137. Flanagan, 273.

138. Flanagan, 275.









139. Whyte, “Time as Kinship,” 40.

140. Flanagan, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, 281.

141. Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, 15.

142. Dimock, *Weak Planet*, 117.

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