

Tales from the Inner City

By Shaun Tan

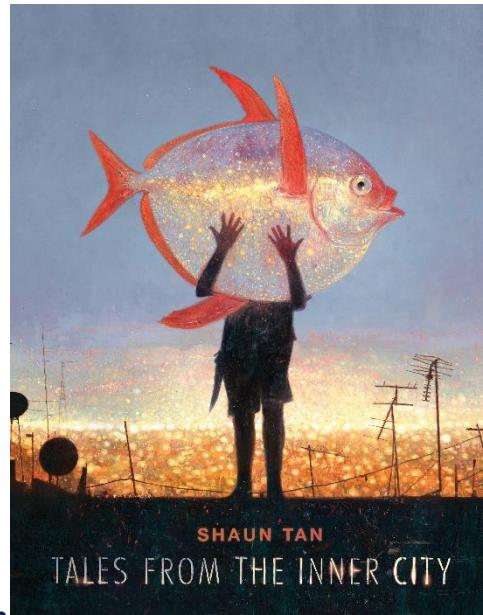
October 2018

ISBN 9781760523534

ISBN 9781760637231

Hardback

Special edition



Commentary on *Tales from the Inner City*

Shaun Tan, July 2018

Tales from the Inner City, a sister volume to my anthology *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008), is a collection of 25 illustrated stories about relationships between humans and animals. The basic premise I set for myself was quite simple: think about an animal in a city. Why is it there? How do people react to it? What meaning does it suggest? The first story I wrote concerned crocodiles living across the entire upper floor of a skyscraper, and this triggered a flow of similar daydreams. Like most artists, I often work like this, starting with a seed concept, building it as a series of investigations, exploring an idea in different forms until I have something that feels more or less complete, with some unifying feeling or theme.

As far as that theme goes, much of my work, from *The Rabbits* through to *The Lost Thing* and *Tales from Outer Suburbia* deals with this separation or tension between natural and artificial worlds, provoking a sense of longing for something lost, or something that can't even be remembered entirely. Our current way of life is, historically speaking, amazingly strange, both in a wonderful and troubling way, a kind of glitch in geological time marked by great separations and abstractions. I've often felt that many material and spiritual problems suffered by myself and others may have something to do with this distance from nature in a post-industrial world, especially in urban centres. Thinking about other animals is a useful way of appreciating this, stepping back from a rather narrow anthropocentric mindset, trapped as it is in contemporary human concerns and self-obsession.

Importantly, my animals never really speak, and their animal natures remain inscrutable. They are beings that move in and out of each story as if trying to tell us something about our own successes and failures as a species, the meaning of our dreams and our true place in the world, albeit unclearly. In that sense, these fictional animals have some parallels with real ones; animals whose day-to-day presence might illustrate principles of life we are least inclined to see, either due to cultural distraction, physical distance or the barriers of language. We are just so busy being humans all the time, while other mammals, insects, fish and birds endure beside us like forgotten kin. And while we may never understand the lives of these other animals – it would be foolish to assume otherwise – by writing and painting stories about them we might at least stretch our imagination and come to understand a little more of our human selves.

The original illustrations in *Tales from the Inner City* are almost all oil paintings on canvas, and quite large, being about 150 x 100 cm, without any significant digital work. I like the direct materiality of traditional media and enjoy being able to use whole-arm gestures for varied textural effects at this scale, using brushes, palette knives, pieces of cardboard and sometimes a shower squeegee drag wet oil paint across a canvas in large swipes before resolving details. Prior to painting, I create a number of sketches and smaller paintings, some of which are shown below. For this book, a lot of preliminary work was digital, and took the form of photo-collage – piecing together collected found images – which is why the imagery in the final paintings remains quite naturalistic, drawing on photographic references. In some cases, I built small scenes, like museum dioramas. The opening image ‘Deer’, for instance, includes small toys in a little forest constructed in a cardboard box on my windowsill to recreate the desired lighting and composition.



A small diorama construction using toys, sticks, leaves, paper, paint and photographs as a way of playing with ideas and developing compositions for a painting.

I'm often asked which comes first, the story or the illustration. It's a bit of both, a very to-and-fro process, each informing the other throughout successive revisions. Almost always there is some kind of fuzzy mental image, like recalling a dream: a lungfish in a gutter with a slightly human face; a cloud of butterflies invading a central business district; or factory workers riding a yak home on a snowy afternoon. I'm not always sure where these images come from, although I can usually identify a few influences, whether from news stories, conversations, or misinterpretations of something only partially seen or heard (a common source for ideas). Painting or writing is almost a way of trying to figure out what those originating daydreams might mean, as they are sketched out in both words and pictures in small notebooks, using a pencil or a ballpoint pen, often repeatedly, trying alternative variations of the same idea. This is an evolutionary process, over hours, weeks or months, and I often end up with something quite different to that which I originally imagined. What interests me especially is the way

that an absurd premise – crocodiles on an office floor, bears with lawyers, an orca lost in the sky – can begin to make perfect sense, if you spend enough time writing or drawing them. Hidden meanings, fears, revelations, philosophical questions and real-life concerns seem to bubble up of their own accord.

The overarching thought that flowed from a lot of this work was simply this: humans are animals. It's something we tend to forget, that we are just one species among several million on this planet. Our laws and religion tell us we are special, but are we really? One thing we know for sure is that we are self-aggrandizing, and weighed down by very human notions of superiority, so much so that we tend to separate ourselves and only communicate inwardly. Fictional writing and painting is part of this process, it's an internal dialogue that forever turns inward, but at least it *tries* to look outward too, at non-human things, the way a scientist or naturalist does.

I often wonder if our distant ancestors, being inherent naturalists, had a better grasp of other animal life. When you think about cave drawings, which are so often stories, the dominant motifs are animals; and when you look at children, many of their very first words and concepts and toys are animals. Not human figures, but bears, elephants, giraffes, mice. Our daughter was born around the time I began thinking about this book and first writing these stories, and it cemented the idea that there is something very fundamental about a human longing for closeness to our non-human relatives, either through pets, stories, toys, television shows or visits to the zoo, which for a while I was doing on a weekly basis, living not too far from it, observing a small army of other new parents and strollers.

And yet we also seem to disrespect animals greatly, when you look at the way they are treated, the destruction of their habitat, the cruelties of factory farming, and many other deprivations and injustices. And that's just by our own measure. There are no doubt further problems we are not aware of, inadvertently or willfully, such as the recent discovery that noise from cargo ships interferes with long-distance whale communication, with possibly fatal consequences. Increasingly we live in environments far removed from forests, plains, deserts and oceans, from cities to cyberspace, and then constantly feel that something is deeply missing. We are also belatedly realizing that our own fate is deeply entwined with that of our fellow creatures (something our distant ancestors already knew well) as we continue to degrade the land, ocean and air, and tick off species as they become routinely extinct, disrupting a finely-tuned network. As I was getting this volume ready for print, the last male Northern White Rhino died, just like the rhino in my own poem, bringing countless millions of years of that subspecies' history to an irreversible close. We are living in the Anthropocene era, the first time it can be said a single species is responsible for global changes on a geological scale, and arguably a period of mass-extinction not known since the demise of the dinosaurs in the late Cretaceous.

My book is not so much about these issues, but the vague and confusing sense as contemporary humans, especially city-dwellers, that life has become very strange and complex against the backdrop of this massive crisis. That's not necessarily a bad thing, because it opens the imagination to possibility, a heightened awareness, a self-critical appraisal that drives us to think about the world differently. But that imagination does, I believe, need to be routinely steered back to things that matter, as an important means by which we *realise* the things that matter. Things that always seem bigger, older, wiser and ultimately more enduring than ourselves.

Story Origins

Specific inspirations for each story came from many different places, and while I don't think it's important to know about them – and sometimes much better not to – I'll explain a little below for curious readers. I only hope that these notes do not adversely colour your own interpretations or impressions, or limit any other possible reading and understanding.

CROCODILES

There are a few crocodiles at Melbourne Zoo, including the critically endangered Philippines Crocodile which the zoo is actively trying to bring back from the brink of extinction. Their enclosures sit behind large glass walls, in aspect not unlike those of any department store or corporate reception, and attention to their ideal living conditions is also not unlike the furnishings, climate control and vending facilities of any office space. Indeed, there are strong similarities between skyscrapers and aquariums. Both are abstracted living spaces located in almost impossible places, but if well maintained by technology and regular servicing, surprisingly sustainable and comfortable. (There is an enormous saltwater crocodile in Melbourne's CBD, as part of an aquarium complex, and I often wonder if it ever has thoughts about its location in space, a few levels above a riverbank.)

When thinking of a story or image, I always try to postpone the obvious question – why? – in order for the imagery to play out unfettered by rationalisation. When dreaming, we rarely ask why strange things happen, and so the dream is allowed to proceed. But upon waking we can wonder about possible meanings or similarities to real life. In the case of upper-level CBD crocodiles, there was for me just something potent or even logical about this image, even natural. Upon further research, I noticed that many large cities were founded on swamps and riverbanks, given the importance of waterways for transport and sustenance, factories and sanitation. In fact, it's very easy to forget that almost all the major cities of the world were once animal habitats, and that cities themselves are not very old within the grander narrative of natural history. Would not a floor of crocodiles remind us of this? And, in some alternate universe, might wildlife have been better integrated into our urban centres, rather than exterminated, razed or cleared or pushed to the periphery? Who is to say that the cities of the distant future make our own present metropolises seem strangely bereft of non-human life?



An idea for an elevator button. Would users assume it's a company logo, rather than a warning about actual crocodiles?

BUTTERFLIES

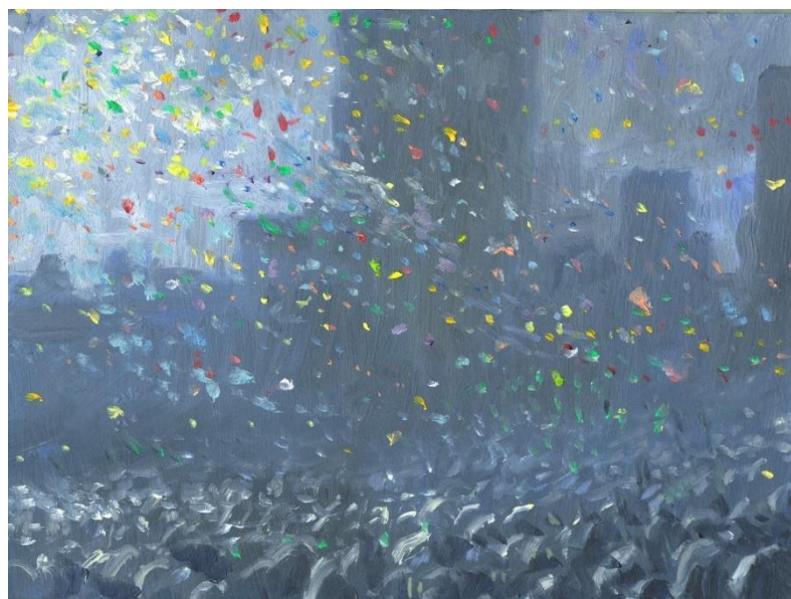
Not long after preparing *Tales from the Inner City* for publication in October 2017, a large, moving mass 110km wide was detected by scientists at the National Weather Service over Colorado, which they thought must be migrating birds, only flying in the wrong direction for that time of year. One meteorologist put out a query on twitter, and the answer came back: vast clouds of Painted Lady butterflies, which had been descending over Denver in recent weeks. Life imitating art?

The image of a mass of butterflies filling city streets may have been something I'd seen a long time ago, I can't quite remember. In Perth, where I'm from, I remember at least one incident of bees filling the CBD for unknown reasons. Part of the attraction of these events is a sense that something has changed, that the environment has shifted a little, and we can both take delight in this and worry about it the same time.

One interesting thing about butterflies is how much we enjoy them landing upon us, like a kind of secular blessing. The average visitor to a butterfly house becomes very still and welcoming at the approach of a butterfly, in a way they would not with any other flying insect, such as a dragonfly, locust or beetle, much less a fly or mosquito. They enjoy a special respect in our imagination, as almost metaphysical animals, hard-to-believe flying canvases that are attractive to each other but also, strangely, to the eye of a quite unrelated primate. Their presence tends to inspire a certain mindfulness, an awareness of breath, position and time, not unlike mediation. They seem to come from another world, as far from urban bustle as you can imagine.

In human culture butterflies are a significant symbol for transformation, premonitions, personifications of souls, and both good and bad omens (the people of Devon, England, once hurried to kill the first butterfly of the year to avoid bad luck). In more recent scientific paradigms, they are an emblem of chaos theory, the so-called 'butterfly effect', where the wing flap of a butterfly in one part of the world may influence a tornado in another. Above all else, animal symbols are always interesting, because the animals themselves always resist such attachments – they 'exist

for their own reasons' as Alice Walker puts it – and we are left to represent them however we want. But in doing so we must always respect their real lives beyond any conjecture, their independent existence, their ungrasped, self-possessed reality.



Sketch for 'Butterflies', oil on board, 20 x 15cm

DOG

Dogs are one of those animals that really are urban dwellers and have formed a very intimate relationship with human beings. Our histories are inextricably linked and ancient, going back at least 15,000 years. There are many theories of human-canine coevolution, supported by evidence that early humans and wolves were hunting partners, each benefiting from the unique skill sets of the other (and both able to crack bones, either with canine teeth or human customised rock-tools, to obtain prized marrow). Who knows how many millions of stories have passed between our species in that time, and there are perhaps few inter-species friendships that are so epic and transforming, or so descriptive of the vagaries of history, including the rise and fall of many different civilisations.

At a more personal level, the powerful bond between humans and dogs is repeatedly severed by death, given that our life-spans never quite align, and this was the starting point for my story. For many years I've had a news clipping on the pin-up board that overlooks my desk, a picture of a dog whose owner died in a tragic house-fire. There is something about the dog's hard-to-read expression that I've always found compelling, neither sadness nor joy, and it reminds me of many stories such as that of the famous Hachiko, an Akita dog that waited patiently at Shibuya train station every evening, up to nine years after his owner had died suddenly at work. The sheer loyalty and urgent optimism of dogs has always been a great inspiration for their human companions, who so often wander from such virtuous paths, and anxiously question their place in the world. It's interesting to speculate that no matter what future faces our planet, no matter how transformed or tragic, even apocalyptic, it's hard to imagine that a dog will not be there to urge us forward.

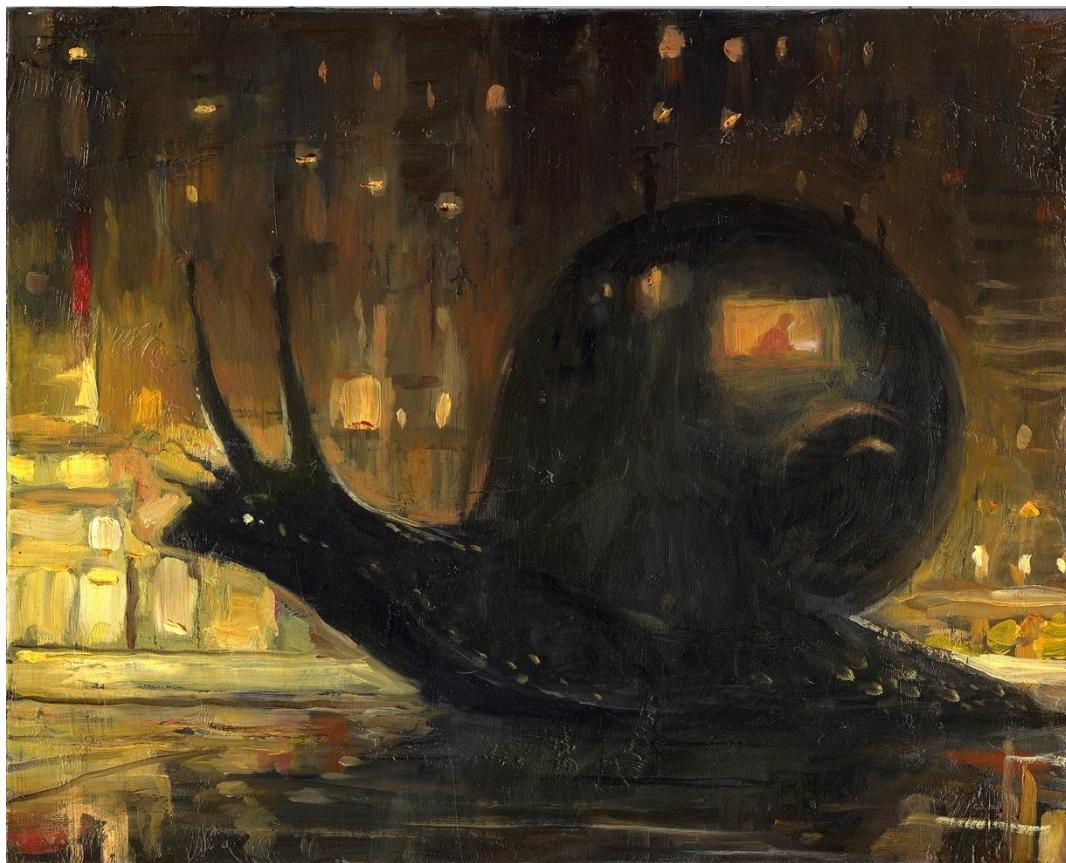


Colour sketches for 'Dog', working out a landscape changing over time, acrylic and pencil on paper

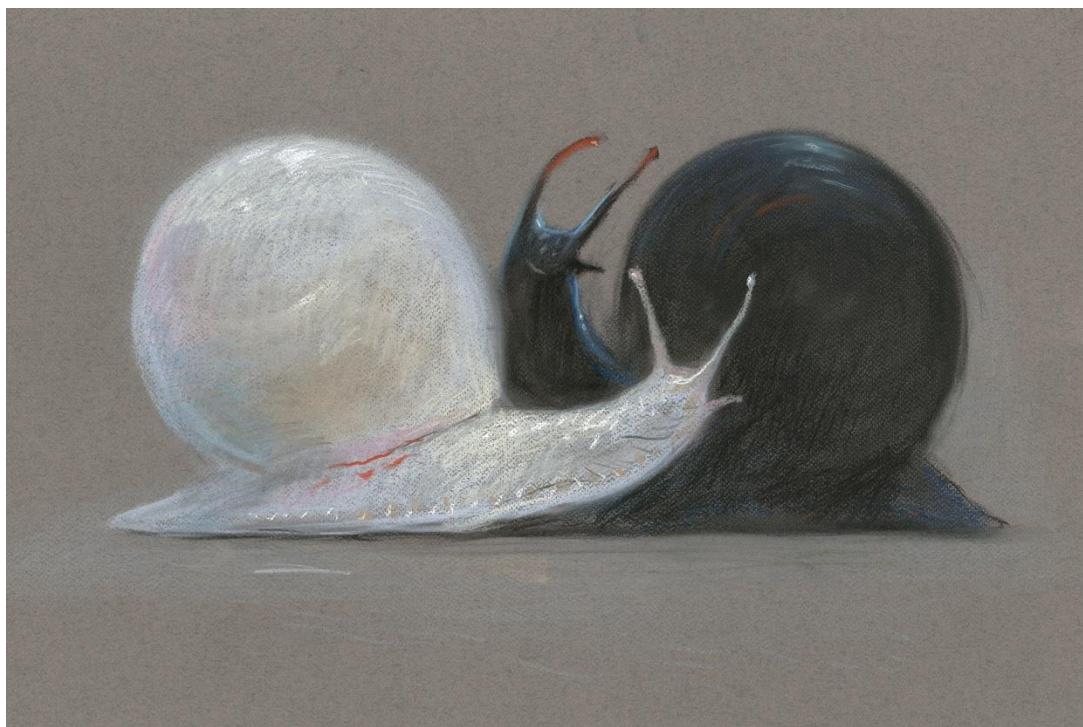
SNAIL

I worked for a short time on a project involving large snail sculptures in urban spaces, and while this was never realised (the project shelved for logistical reasons) it did leave in its silvery wake many thoughts about snails, cities, and human reactions to the prospect of oversized molluscs. Snails have quite complex reproductive behaviours, most being hermaphrodites. Their mating habits are very strange from a human perspective, but also quite beautiful and graceful. Up-scaled to gargantuan dimensions, I've always thought it would be amazing to see this coupling in a central business district: giant soft forms moving against a hard and passionless geometry.

Interestingly, not long after I'd written my story and was working on the companion painting, there was a government postal survey that was proving socially divisive in Australia: should we legalise same-sex marriage? Fortunately, there was a positive result, a majority 'yes'—perhaps not what many driving conservative politicians were hoping for. But it did reveal a disturbing level of ignorance, misinformation and baseless fear from the minority opposition, a perceived right to judge the lives of unknown others, and while my story is not specifically about this ill-conceived referendum, there are clearly parallels. It's always interesting to reflect on prohibitions of the past: the denial of voting rights for women, the illegality of coffee, the taboo of interracial marriage, even the banning of pinball machines in New York City and wonder: what on earth was that all about? Moreover, what will people of the future have to say about our own contemporary attitudes? They will no doubt find much to be bewildered about.



Oil sketch for a related project, about single people living in 'snail apartments', looking for love.



Pastel drawing (A1) of courting snails.

SHARK

The painting for 'Shark' was inspired partly by the work of early 20th Century American artist George Bellows, most well-known for images of boxing and other working-class scenes of New York. I particularly like his paintings of milling crowds and huge urban constructions, such as *Pennsylvania Station Excavation* (1907). His paintings are filled with a great sense of drama and tension, but also a slightly dreamlike or unreal quality. Similar landscapes recur in my own work, particularly with the inclusion of large animals, such as the drifting dead fish in *The Red Tree* (2001), and my image of a giant shark strung up between indistinct buildings is perhaps related to this.

The story, as a separately conceived element, was written partly in response to news items about a series of fatal shark attacks along the West Australian coast (where I grew up), leading to excessive punitive measures against sharks suggested by the State Government, the cause for much local controversy. Proposed legislation allowed for large sharks caught on baited hooks set on drum lines one kilometre from the shore, so they could be shot and dumped further off the coast. Part of the public outcry against this indiscriminate slaughter was recognition that unnatural shark behaviours were largely caused, in the first instance, by human overfishing leading to starving sharks venturing beyond their usual territory, where previously they had co-existed with humans relatively peaceably (I swam without any fear of shark attack as a kid, the only close encounters being with wild seals and dolphins, signs of a healthy ecosystem).

Aside from the details of this debate, the quickness to violence reminds me of a darkness not far below the peaceful and sunny veneer of life in Western Australia, and human society in general. Coupled with this knee-jerk aggression is a wilful ignorance about the possible consequences of such action, a failure to project both the practical and moral outcomes, and

terrible commitment it might impose upon a community. At what point can it be decided that a violent policy is a success or failure, that killing should now end, that danger has passed? This led me to think about the parallels between punitive shark hunts and other conflicts, such as the so-called ‘war on terror’, as if the destruction of one terrorist cell will do anything other than inspire another. Once peaceful solutions are eschewed, the spiral of violence naturally follows, like an endlessly slaughtered shark.



Sketch for ‘Shark’, oil on board.

CAT

The idea for this story initially came from seeing many lost cat notices taped to telephone poles in my local suburb and wondering about two things. Firstly, what happened to the cat? Who can say, given how freely and unaccountably these pets are allowed to roam. Secondly, given that they *do* roam so freely, how do we really know which cat belongs to which human, and vice versa? A neighbour’s cat used to frequent my own backyard, clearly claiming it as its extended territory, and one afternoon it had been sleeping there for so long that I finally went to check if it was okay. It wasn’t: it was dead, for unknown reasons, and I had to inform the owner – at least I knew who they were. I once saw a man pick up a road-killed cat and quite casually dump it the nearest wheelie bin, so presumably that cat’s owner would never know what had happened to their beloved pet. We see a lot of lost cat notices, but not many *dead* cat notices, which could be just as helpful, since cats, like rats and other animals, often slink away from their homes – however that is defined – to die.

Cats are fascinating companion animals, being at once openly affectionate and mysteriously self-contained, independent. Their loyalty can be both deep and questionable, and their thoughts, like those of all animals, simply unknown. For such reasons they are great metaphors for many aspects of life, including luck and fate, for which they are often symbols in different cultures.

The image of the black wave looming above the swimming cat of my painting has a dual inspiration. I once saw a small exhibition of dark symbolist paintings by the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg. Although he wasn't a very skilled painter, I was interested in his fixation on a series of nearly abstract paintings of a looming black wave, viewed front-on, its edge weakly illuminated by dying light. I've also always been intrigued by one of Goya's late 'black paintings,' of a sinking dog, painted directly onto the walls of his home at a time when his physical and mental health were deteriorating. There have been many interpretations of this mysterious image, although Robert Hughes sums it up best: "We do not know what it means, but its pathos moves us on a level below narrative."

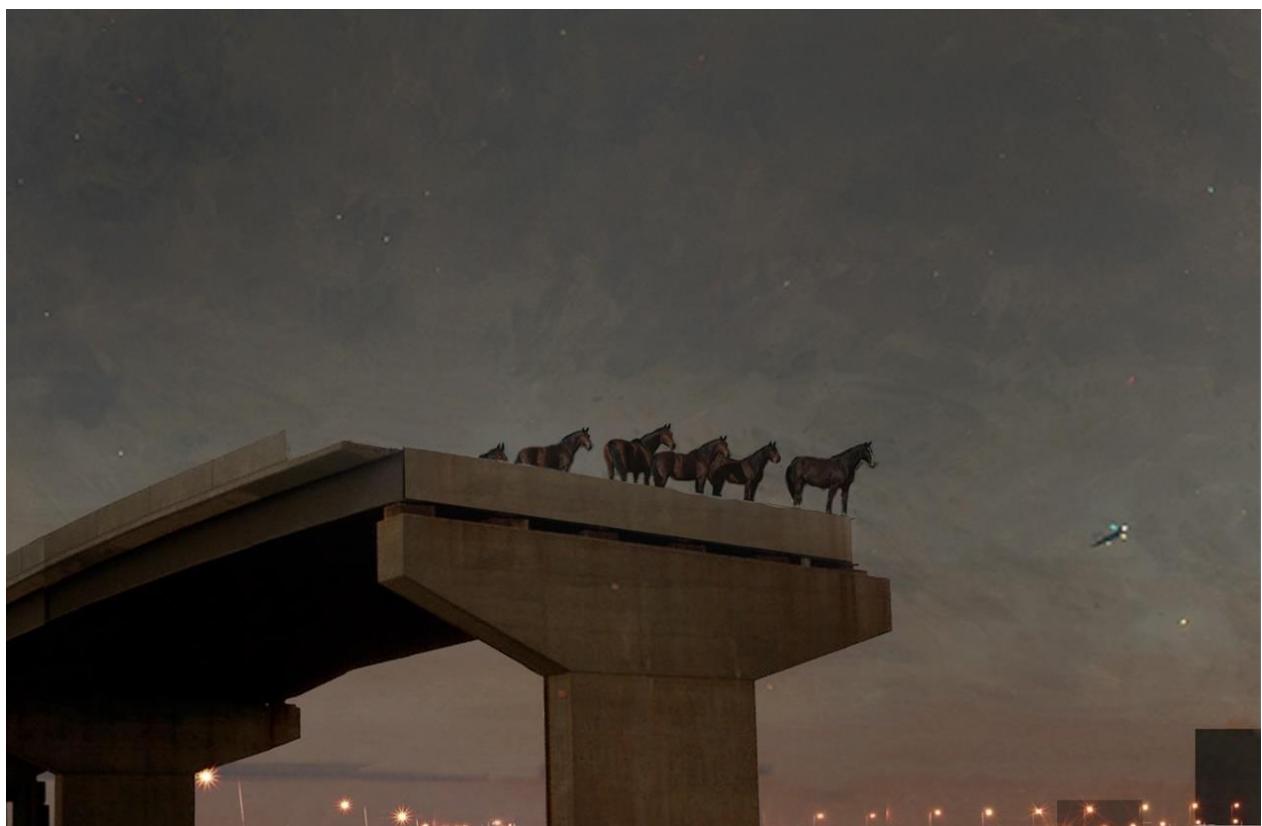


Left, Francisco Goya, Untitled (*The Dog*) c.1819-23, and right August Strindberg, *The Wave* c. 1900
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goya_Dog.jpg; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Strindberg,_Wave_IX.jpg

HORSE

The story 'Horse' was inspired by something random said by my daughter (then two years old) while we were driving home from somewhere one night. She exclaimed 'elephants running!' prompted by jaunty music on the radio, as she tends to interpret music as animals and other things, particularly after watching Disney's *Fantasia* (a favourite of my own childhood). I imagined her seeing elephants, or some other animal, running along electrical wires, as if this is something only a two-year-old could see, with neither the capacity to articulate or remember it clearly, but just enough awareness to shriek 'elephants running!' Instead of dismissing such a thing, I wondered – as artists and writers tend to do as a professional obligation – what if there really *was* something running alongside the car, what would be the reason or purpose of it? While elephants seemed unlikely in the history of the Australian city we were passing through, horses seemed possible, or rather the ghosts of horses.

This led me to do a little research, and I found an article 'The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century' by Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr (2007), which discusses the sometimes overlooked history of horses in pre-industrial cities, when horse-power was literally the main energy source of transportation, manufacturing and other industrial processes in the time before steam engines or electricity. The governing philosophy of the day dictated that animals were machines without feeling or consciousness, not unlike robots (their cries of pain were understood as 'mechanical reflexes'). Horses in such circumstances typically had very short and brutal lives, seen as devices for generating profit, and many of the smaller details in my story are factual, such as the engraving of the words 'sentiment pays no dividend' in the rafters of urban stables (reminding workers not to be fooled by an animal's apparent consciousness) and the lighting of fires under exhausted animals to get them moving.



Preliminary collage for 'horses' using found and painted images, digitally edited.

Would not such maltreated animals haunt the cities they helped build, like restless spirits, long after everyone has forgotten their service? Of course, such abuses inevitably continue in any

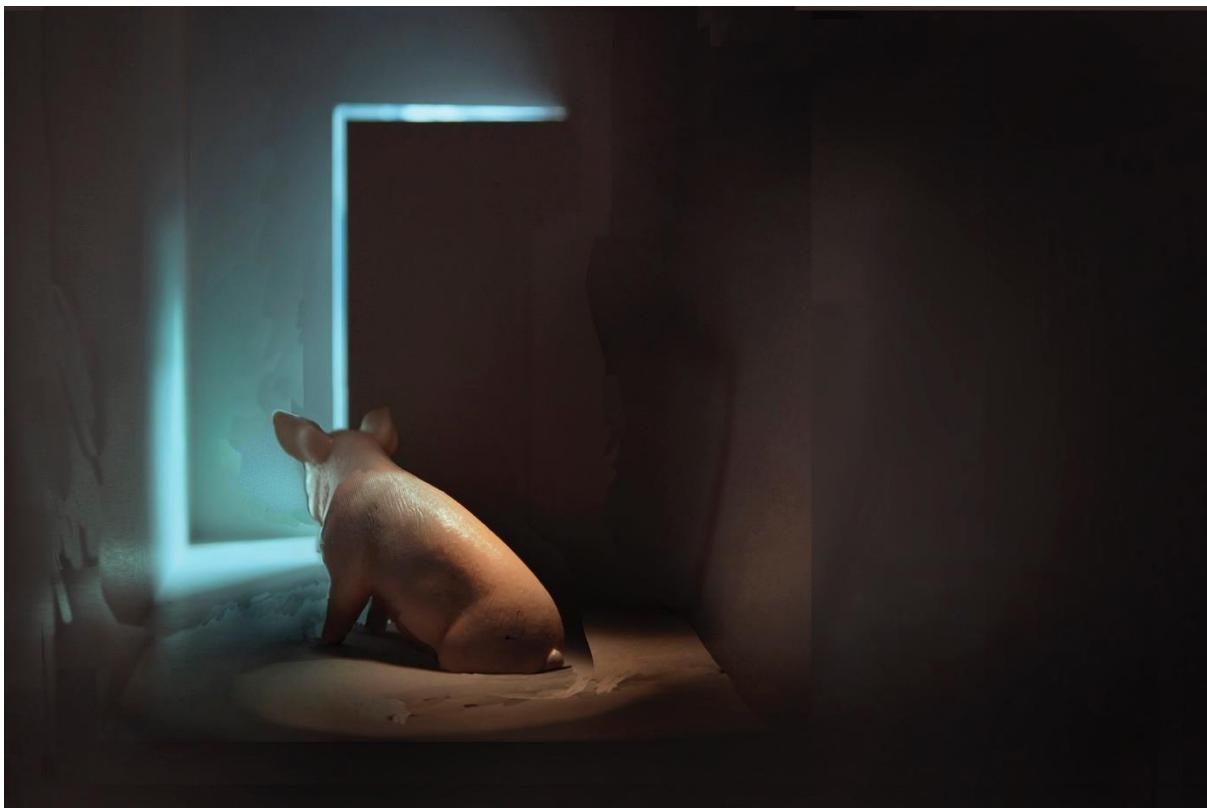
place where animals are worth money to humans, and continue to go ignored, and these are the things that ‘haunt’ humans in very real terms. We need to remember that our cities are built on the suffering of other animals, and that this continues all around us, every day, often without comment. The worst aspect of animal cruelty is the extent to which it comes to be regarded as normal and economically acceptable, with institutions designed to ensure that this remains so. As Saul Bellow put it: 'A great deal

PIG

While I don't eat pork myself, in part due to a visit to a piggery a long time ago on a school excursion, this story is not so much about the problem of eating pigs as it is about a much bigger dilemma. What do we do when familiar cultural traditions come into conflict with our sense of what is moral, rational or fair? The consumption of animal flesh is a good example, and nobody is immune to some qualms about it: you only need to discuss the culinary appeal of dogs (no more intelligent or sentient than pigs) or drift even closer to home on the genetic scale, to primates, to arouse serious moral aversion. But beyond matters of meat, all of us are faced with different conundrums about what to accept as normal and okay, and what to question; when to act, and when to refrain.

What I love about speculative fiction is the way it can address commonplace problems in unusual, hypothetical ways. Imagine growing up in a world where everyone keeps a tormented animal imprisoned in their back room, and nobody ever questions it, even as they worry about the welfare of other creatures outside of that room. How would you behave? Would you accept it or challenge it? A similar dilemma might apply to economic systems, religious teachings, political and social views, pretty much everything. The world is full of internal contradictions and inconsistencies, something that children notice particularly as they launch a stream of questions, having a great compass for such things, and wondering about alternatives: why must things be done this way? What if we did things differently? *Why* don't we do things differently?

As we age, perhaps we wonder less, as experience teaches that some paradoxes appear to be irreconcilable – how we feel about the origin of our food for example, or land, or privilege – and small compromises, double-standards, fuzzy logic, exceptions and wilful ignorance accumulate like complicated valves in the plumbing of our philosophy, especially in the absence of alternative narratives. But we do still keep wondering on some level, reviewing things, remaining hopeful, imagining how things might be different, thinking creatively and self-critically. The worst thing is not an inconsistency in our thoughts and behaviour, because that's normal and inevitable. Human culture is, arguably, galvanised by contradiction, and evolves accordingly. The worst thing is believing that there are no inconsistencies, no contradictions in our thinking, that all is exactly as it should be. Nothing could be more self-deceiving and dangerous.



A preliminary sketch using a model of a pig in a cardboard room, illuminated with differently coloured desk lamps, then photographed and digitally edited to become a direct reference for a final oil painting. This is not only an effective way of creating naturalistic imagery, it also helps to play with concepts and composition, much as a child might do with toys (in fact, exactly as a child does with toys).

MOONFISH

A moonfish, or opah, is a large, colourful and rare fish prized among deep sea anglers, particularly as trophy fish, being easy to taxidermy. They are also the first fish discovered to have a warm heart, allowing them to regulate body temperature. That said, my story is not much based on such facts, but rather the memories I have of fishing along the south west coast of Australia with my family, who were avid anglers – almost all of our family holidays were camping and fishing adventures, particularly around the Margaret River region. I also remember gathering in the middle of the night under a bridge in Mandurah, catching migrating prawns with scoop nets, one by one, the tell-tale reflection of their eyes in our torch beams allowing us to spot them. There is something particularly strange about fishing at night, an even stronger awareness, perhaps, that you are entering another creature's universe, your perceptions narrowed and your senses heightened. I'm mindful of a passage in Henry David Thoreau's memoir *Walden* (1854) that describes night-fishing on Walden Pond in evocative detail; also, of Tim Winton's many lyrical and sometimes magic-realist descriptions of fishing along the WA coast.

The idea of fishing in the sky has been one I've played with over the years, as in *Rules of Summer* (2013), drawn partly from the distant memory of a vivid childhood dream, seeing streams of colourful stars moving above our suburban house in the middle of the night. It's also inspired by images of kite festivals, where the entire sky begins looking something like a tropical aquarium. If

there really were such heavenly fish, how would you catch them and what would they look and feel like? What would they taste like?

I was also inspired by many reported cases of restaurants, particularly in Asia, serving endangered or protected animals, illustrating both the ignorance and contempt that certain privileged consumers have for the rest of the world. Closer to home, it led me to consider my own regrets about the number of fish, molluscs and other invertebrates I've thoughtlessly killed during many years of summer fishing trips with my brother. While I'm not necessarily against fishing, I do have qualms about the ease of its thoughtlessness. My brother eventually took up diving and, having seen fish in their natural environment up close, no longer has the desire to catch them as anything other than photographic images. I also long ago swapped my fishing kit for a paint box.



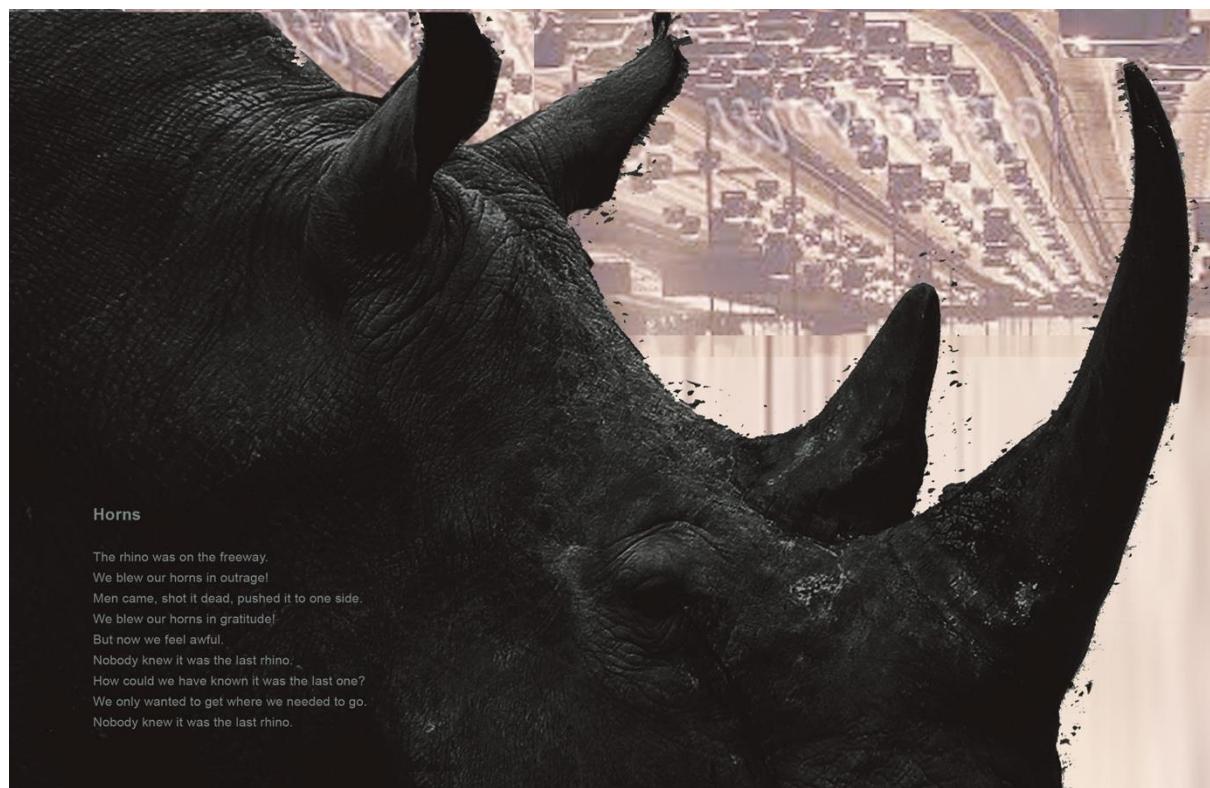
Working photo-collage, playing with visual ideas for 'Moonfish'

RHINO

The idea for this poem came while commuting in Melbourne and noticing a safety campaign warning drivers and pedestrians to give way to trams. The visual simile used was a rhino on a skateboard, noting that a tram weighs as much as 30 rhinos and is incapable of sudden stops. But without knowing this meaning, the black-on-yellow traffic sign was nicely cryptic. I imagined it as a practical warning sign alerting commuters to an actual rhino in traffic. What problems and reactions might this cause? Among other things, probably a fair bit of outrage.

There is something especially insulating about a private car, a mobile lounge-room that reduces the external world to abstract signs and obstacles, and this may account for the lowered tolerance threshold of most drivers and, in inverse proportion, their impatience. Traffic is always a great metaphor for a post-industrial mindset, as is the traffic jam that naturally follows from poor urban planning. We become components of a technological system, rather than the other way around, and that feeling of entrapment can be maddening.

I was also influenced by the documentary *Tyke: Elephant Outlaw* (2015, Lambert, Moore) about an abused circus elephant that broke free during a performance, ran through a central business district and was shot to death by police, which in hindsight appears to have been a regrettably excessive response. Like the case of Tilikum, the psychologically damaged orca at SeaWorld (see below), this case inspired legislative changes internationally, limiting the extent to which people can acquire and mistreat animals in the entertainment industry.



Preliminary version of 'Rhino', digital photo-collage with draft text. Collages are a great way to play around with ideas easily, and in this case, the final painting is quite similar to this quick test.

OWL

Around 2015, I was one of a group of artists and writers invited to contribute a story to an anthology being put together by the Hush Foundation, an organisation that explores the use of music and other art forms in helping children deal with painful medical procedures at The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. As part of this process we were given a tour of different wards, learning about the challenges routinely met by patients and staff.

I became interested in the fact that wards were named after animals, as I was already then thinking in terms of urban animal stories (having written 'Crocodile', 'Butterfly' and notes for many others, for what might become a collection of some sort). For instance, there is the Dolphin short-stay ward, a Koala cardiac surgery ward, a Cockatoo neurological care ward, Kookaburra cancer care and so on. There was something reassuringly ancient about these associations, that in times of human crisis, surrounded by technological solutions and extensive research, we might turn our thoughts to some sort of animal benefactor or totem, something beyond our own biology. The image that came to my own mind immediately, given the whiteness of many spaces, was of an arctic snowy owl, a bird I've always found particularly fascinating. (I have a picture of one on my wall.) As the medical staff explained various spaces, I imagined such a creature sitting quietly in the corners, still and watchful with big yellow eyes: a little disconcerting but ultimately there for some benevolent purpose. Just like machines, medical devices, chemicals and procedures – scary but potentially life-saving.

In one ward we visited a girl of about six or seven receiving chemotherapy, part of her routine treatment. She had a sprightly personality and a brave attitude, very interested that we had come to chat with her about her experiences: but we could also see her fighting back tears as the delivery device, a hook-like needle – not unlike a bird's talon – was inserted into a port that was permanently placed in her chest especially for this administration. It was a very moving experience, not so much because of her tears, but because of her effort to master her own fear, of *not* crying for much of the procedure. The resulting poem and illustration were later published in the anthology *Hush Treasure Book* under the title 'Ward', which refers to both the physical place and the act of guarding or protecting.

But why an owl, or any animal other than a human, to convey these impressions? Aside from the antiseptic whiteness, and the combination of soft white feathers and sharp beak and claws, which bear some analogy to medical beds and needles, I'm interested in the *lack* of conventional empathy or kindness in animals, regardless of how we might project our own pathetic fallacies upon them. They are not necessarily like us, they are not necessarily soft and kind and caring in human terms. But there is still often a sense that their presence or mere existence is consoling, just like the naming of a ward after a koala or dolphin.

I feel that modern medicine works something like this hard-to-read snowy owl, it's a strange kind of love: cool and rational, distant, somewhat non-human. Often painful and uncomfortable, but highly effective. In my poem, I'm interested in the idea that something can care for you without caring, be good for you without being 'good'. That the cold and clinical can also be life-affirming and benevolent, and we must sometimes surrender ourselves to that, to put knowing before feeling, and reason before fear.



An oil sketch over the top of a photograph taken during a visit to the Children's Hospital.



An unused illustration for 'owl', oil on canvas 90 x 60cm

FROG

Frogs are among a group of animals known as indicator species. What this means is they are sensitive to environmental change, and their presence or absence can indicate the health of an ecosystem. Like the canary in the coal mine, the death of certain frogs can indicate lethal changes in climate, toxicity and other problems that might otherwise remain unknown. I became aware of this idea when illustrating a story for a science fiction magazine about 20 years ago (below), which extended the notion that certain people might be 'indicators' of things going wrong with the social or physical environment around them.

For the story in this collection, the image came first: an executive boardroom occupied only by frogs, an industrial landscape in the background. It came from the thought that if humans occasionally transformed into other animals, our environmental attitudes and policies might be quite different. It's only because organisations, politicians and other individuals believe themselves insulated from the effects of dumping, toxicity, radioactive waste, deforestation, erosion and climate change that they can sustain certain harmful practices. In truth, nobody is insulated from environmental effects, and when frogs or other vulnerable animals are in trouble, so are humans. That said, it does tend to be the most disadvantaged members of society that suffer the most, living so often on an unsafe periphery.

Frogs and tadpoles have often featured elsewhere in my drawings and paintings, as they were important animals in my childhood. I grew up next to a swamp and used to collect frog spawn to raise in an aquarium, eventually releasing full grown frogs back into the swamp. Their physical

transformation from tadpole to frog, two very different looking animals, was endlessly fascinating. In many cultures, frogs are symbols of fertility and rebirth, so as well as being possible harbingers of doom, as indicator species prone to disappearance and extinction, they also remind us of the possibility of renewal and resilience, the myriad cries that fill the air when a drought finally breaks.



Indicator species, Eidolon magazine, Perth, 2000, an illustration for a story by Cecily Scutt.

SHEEP

'Sheep' is open to interpretation but draws a little on the problems of the animal export trade in Australia, where live sheep travel overseas in vast cargo ships built specifically for this purpose. One uses the term 'live' cautiously, as a shocking number of the animals die from heat stress and other abuses along the way, given that they are sent incautiously into the Middle Eastern summer temperatures. Those that survive often do so in nightmarish conditions, soaked in urine and excrement, which is something that residents of Fremantle (where I was born) can smell from miles away even prior to each export ship's departure. My description of people removing washing from clotheslines is not a fictional detail. The fact that this unnecessary industry has continued for so long, its abuses covered up by corporations and politicians (only made public by whistle-blowers), can only be explained by the vast profits accrued by the companies and governments that 'self-regulate' animal welfare. To some extent such abuses are understandable, as they naturally follow from the status granted to an animal whose value is purely economic, and whose days are numbered accordingly. Once you stop respecting another creature, anything is possible, and any rationalisation passes inspection, including the notion favoured by many capitalist enterprises that animals lack feeling, consciousness and moral consequence.

In a broader sense, it's one of industrial farming's great ironies that the animals upon which we are often most dependent economically are those that we respect the least. There is very little celebration of sheep, chickens, cattle and pigs the way that even inert mineral wealth or other treasures are lauded, and yet many cities, particularly in Australia, owe their existence to such agriculture. One can't help but wonder how this disrespect of value, even at a base monetary level, infects the human spirit in other ways and debases our broader respect for all life and principles of fairness. There is, for instance, a strong argument among anthropologists that the domestication of animals for food and work precipitated human slavery; that acceptance of hierarchy, inequality and

subjugation within human society may begin with our diminished regard for those creatures outside of it. To quote Mahatma Gandhi, 'The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated' which can be read as both a criticism and an encouragement toward improvement – not just for the welfare of animals, but the self-respect of their custodians.



'Sheep' (detail), oil on canvas

HIPPO

The story 'Hippo' is partly inspired by the true-life story of William James Sidis (1898 – 1944), an American child prodigy with exceptional mathematical and linguistic skills. His 1920 book *The Animate and The Inanimate*, written at the age of 17, postulates the existence of dark matter, entropy and the origin of life: "Our theory of the origin of life is that there is no origin, but only a constant development and change of form."

As is sometimes the case with child prodigies, Sidis experienced a difficult life as an adult, coloured by conflict, misunderstanding and at times public ridicule. While my own story is entirely fictional (and greatly exaggerates the notion of genius) it does draw upon a number of real-life biographical details: a difficult relationship with parents, imprisonment, media controversy, misrepresentation, privacy invasion, and Sidis' regression into obscure areas of study later in life. You can read more about it in *The Prodigy: A Biography of William James Sidis* by Amy Wallace (1986). I also thoroughly recommend Nate DiMeo's *The Memory Palace* podcast episode 'Six scenes from the life of William James Sidis, wonderful boy', which is a superior poetic interpretation of Sidis' life than my own small and fictional digression.

As a frequent visitor to Melbourne Zoo, one of my favourite animals is the pygmy hippopotamus that can often be seen gliding weightlessly around its pond through a glass wall. It's one of those animals that seems (whether true or not) to observe its human visitors with reciprocal interest. The movements are calming and almost hypnotic, and there's something about its big round body encased in reflective water full of bits and pieces of plant matter and foggy microbial mist that feels very reassuring. The hippo, at least within those moments, appears at peace in a way that many busy humans barely have time to dream about.

What do the two things have in common, a human prodigy and a hippo? Well, not much, but that mismatch is just the thing to generate interesting ideas, trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. However, while observing the hippo, I did think about what I'd read of William James Sidis, and how in later life he sought a very private and secluded existence away from a public spotlight that had shone very brightly in his youth; how he became distrustful of human institutions, including religion, suggesting that if there was a god, it would likely be something that is 'in a way apart from a human being.'

Despite all speculation and assumption, we never truly know how another animal thinks. The only detailed thoughts ever recorded in the world are from a single species, one that talks to itself incessantly, within languages of its own creation (a case in point right now). I can't help feeling that there are as many kinds of intelligence, and intelligent feeling, as there are species on the planet, that there are different kinds of thinking which may be quite far from anything we can imagine in our own narrow sphere. And even if that speculation is rationally baseless (although I don't think it is) it's still worthwhile to consider for poetic reasons. And, after all, who can say that the most intelligent thing to do is anything other than float in water, swimming with the current, just being the thing that you are, immune to all judgement and assumption. Isn't there some kind of genius in that?



An early concept sketch for 'Hippo', digital collage.

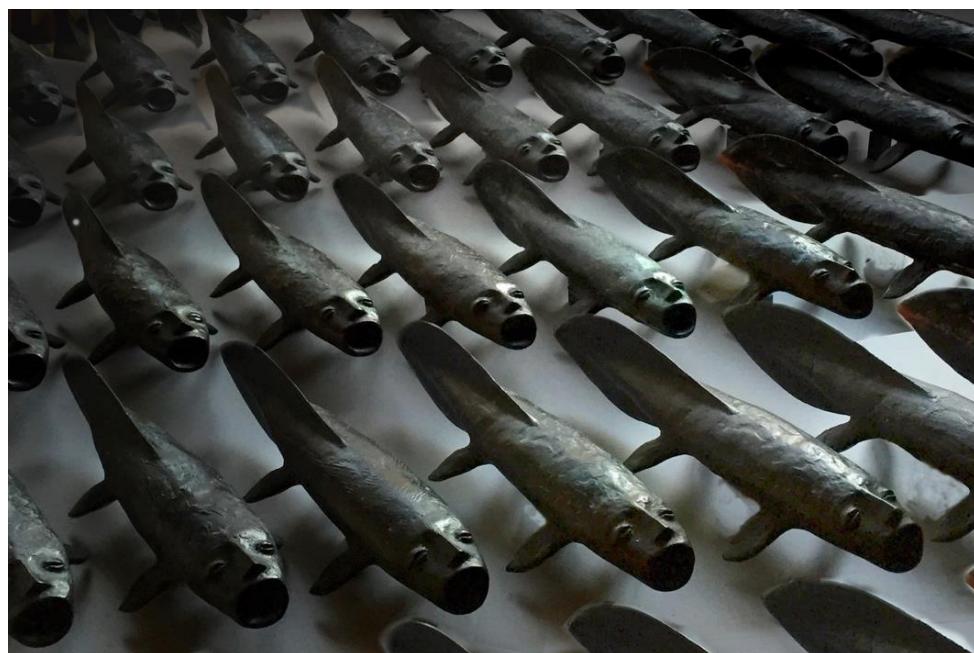


The first washes of paint on the final 'Hippo' illustration, acrylic, 100 x 150cm. The great thing about painting, especially at a large scale, is the way that accidents – drips, streaks and colour mixes – can suggest unexpected forms and take on a life of their own.

LUNGFISH

At the Melbourne Museum, there is a medium-sized tank not far from dinosaur fossils that contains a couple of live Australian lungfish, *Neoceratodus forsteri*, beautiful and enigmatic looking animals. They have adapted to changing climate conditions that might affect water quality and availability by having a single lung than can breathe air when necessary, such as during a drought. Their real aquarium is cleverly integrated into a display of sculptures that show the emergence of early amphibians, explaining the transition from water to air-breathing vertebrates. While these Australian lungfish are not prehistoric – they are of course living and contemporary – they are relatively unchanged relics of ancient fish groups that first appear in the fossil record about 380 million years ago, so it's quite amazing to see them today and observe similarities to those inconceivably old stone impressions.

Evolution is a complex and often misunderstood process, viewed too often only in the shallow frame of hindsight. We are familiar with linear diagrams showing the rise of an upright *Homo sapiens* from a crouching simian, or even earlier, from something not unlike a lungfish. In reality, the diversification, change and survival of species is a vast and irregular branching. Looking at paleontological and genetic evidence one begins to appreciate the role of chance accidents, that things might always have taken a very different route if the dice were rolled again. The humans we are now were never pre-determined, at least not by known natural processes (we are free to speculate about other agents), nor are we more ‘highly evolved’ than other animals, we are equally evolved. It’s always fascinating to think about how things could have turned out differently, or how we might still change and diversify as a species. We often believe we are at some enlightened moment in the history of life on earth, marvelling at our own achievements by the insular standards of our own measure. But what if these are just the Dark Ages of another people’s future? Might we not be just another kind of lungfish, living in the river bottoms of our own self-belief?



Lungfish sculptures (painted plaster casts from a clay original) arranged, photographed and digitally adjusted as reference for a final painting.

ORCA

For some reason an image came to mind one evening of a whale brushing against a skyscraper, not unlike a cloud, but being regarded by people below with very little interest. I didn't think too much of it until later seeing the documentary *Blackfish* (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013) which focuses on the plight of an orca named Tilikum, separated from his mother in the wild and trained to perform at SeaWorld in Orlando, Florida. The film presents a compelling argument that the conditions of captivity amounted to psychological torture, and likely precipitated the death of three human trainers. Aside from the questions of abuse and tragedy, the film raised a deeper question for me, about how humans take control of other animals' lives with relatively minimal understanding of long-term consequences. In this and many other areas of human politics and economics, there is surprisingly little caution when it comes to taking irreversible action, such that when things go wrong – as they so often do – nothing can be restored or forgiven.



A simple photo of a toy Orca which became an important visual reference for the final painting. Documentaries, toy models and online images were essential research, which also remind us of the way that our understanding of animals is heavily processed by culture and technology. Our experiences of nature are largely mediated – by screen, language and simulation – and rarely direct, and it's important to remain always aware of this.

TIGER

'Tiger' was inspired by a news item about a research program trialled in India, where villagers warded off tiger attacks by wearing masks on the back of their heads. Because tigers only attack from behind, the presence of a second face confuses them, enough to guarantee the safety of their quarry. You can read more about this in the *NY Times* article 'Face masks fool the Bengal tigers': <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/05/science/face-masks-fool-the-bengal-tigers.html>

While the masks proved very effective, vulnerable forest workers would sometimes take them off or forget to put them on, and then sometimes get attacked. This reminds us that we are often impractical in our thinking when it comes to safety: when preventative measures work, we don't notice them, and we can forget to be vigilant. We are also not especially sensible about probability and statistics: we worry about getting struck by lightning and believe we can win a lottery yet think little about the risks of driving a car (the first seat belt law was, for instance, not passed until 1970, even after this remarkably simple device had saved countless lives).

I wondered, if tiger attacks were a big problem in large cities, how effective would a program of mask-wearing be? It's one thing to always wear a weird head ornament while fishing or working in a forest, maybe another to do so in an urban environment, where it might conflict with dress codes, convenience, personal taste, and, of course, self-conscious pride. In thinking about this idea, I realised that the notes in my sketchbooks were no longer about the entertaining idea of tiger attacks in city centres, but rather how people might respond to being advised to wear a mask, and what it reveals about human nature (as opposed to tiger nature). It always interests me that a fanciful idea can help to explain something very ordinary in a new and surprising way.



Photo-collage preliminary sketch for 'Tiger'.

PARROT

Our family's parrot, Diego (featured in the painting for this story) is a Brazilian sun conure that has been living with us for nearly 20 years and has changed very little in that time: active, curious, wilful, affectionate, yellow and very, very *loud*. People always ask if Diego can talk (he can't) and this question became the trigger for this story. Why are we so fascinated by talking animals, or any kind of human-like action, from dancing dogs to cats in caption-worthy positions? Naturally we take comfort, or at least amusement, in behavioural similarities. We might even feel less alone as a fairly isolated, intellectually lonely species, seeing another animal imitate our own behaviour, no matter how superficially.

However, I think the more fascinating thing about having pets is how we come to appreciate the real *strangeness* of another animal, learning to respect the deep mystery of their inner lives. I'm sure other parrot owners may disagree but speaking personally I find parrots both familiar and utterly incomprehensible, and both of these – familiarity and incomprehension – have only increased in equal measure over time. It's as if the closer you get, the less you know: a wonderful paradox, and a great metaphor for life in general.



Sketch for 'parrot', acrylic and pastel over digital print.

BEAR

This story had very simple origins, just thinking about the phrase ‘bears with lawyers’. Sometimes a few words can set in train a variety of thoughts, either fanciful or logical. I’m not much of an expert on law, but I’m aware of its centrality to all human society, as a set of operating instructions that seem to place reason, impartial judgement and due process above the vagaries of impulse, passion and baser motives like revenge, prejudice and greed. It’s a system in constant development and evolution, as it should be, because it’s far from perfect and often abused. One only has to review the criminal justice system in a country like the United States, or examine the way that colonial powers have historically drafted ‘fair’ legislation concerning indigenous populations, or the ways in which wealthy corporations excuse themselves through legal loopholes to see that law is often used as the *agent* of baser motives: self-interest, prejudice, abuse of power and so on, disguised as their exact, ennobling opposite.

Amid such problems, we are inclined to forget that human legal systems, which do have immense power over the natural world outside of human concerns, have only ever been written, debated and executed by humans, that is, one species with incommensurate power. The best that other animals can hope for is representation by human agents, and fortunately there are many who do this: lawyers, academics, philosophers, politicians, scientists, journalists, artists, teachers, activists and so on.

Animal rights is the idea that non-human animals are entitled to the possession of their own lives, to be protected from suffering, and afforded the same consideration as similar interests of human beings. Given the vast investment of human capital in the exploitation of animals and their habitat for food, labour and space, arguably a crucial factor in differences of religious, ethical and scientific opinion, this is naturally a matter of ongoing friction. Human legal systems generally recognise animals as ‘things’, or property, which facilitates use and exploitation (not unlike the colonial definition of subjugated people as property, which facilitates slavery). However, such definitions also seem contrary to our scientific and intuitive understanding.

Animal Law, which has risen as a distinct area of law in recent decades, seeks to challenge such assumptions. Regardless of viewpoint, there can be no question that current attitudes to non-human animals are at the very least contradictory; that the conditions permitted in factory farms, for instance, are condemned as unconscionable for domestic dogs and cats. Is the fact that humans are the only ‘legal persons’ in the world due to an inherent status? Or rather the fact that humans are, conveniently, the only animal that writes laws? What would happen if other animals developed the facility to engage with our legal system more directly, had their own voice, could litigate and vote? Among other things, humans would be compelled to think harder about how we see ourselves in relation to the rest of the natural world, and more deeply, how we respond to internal contradictions: openly or punitively.

At the time I was working on the story and painting for ‘Bear’, I was also reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* by American writer Dee Brown, covering the history of Native Americans in the American West in the late nineteenth century. It’s a fascinating, gracefully written and harrowing read, and reminded me strongly of patterns of Australian colonial history, particularly the making and breaking of treaties, and the way in which ‘enshrined’ legislation so easily collapses to the pressures of commercial interests and ulterior political motives. It’s always interesting to see how law can be an instrument of extreme prejudice and partiality, while claiming to be otherwise.



Sketch for 'Bear', oil on board, 20 x 15cm

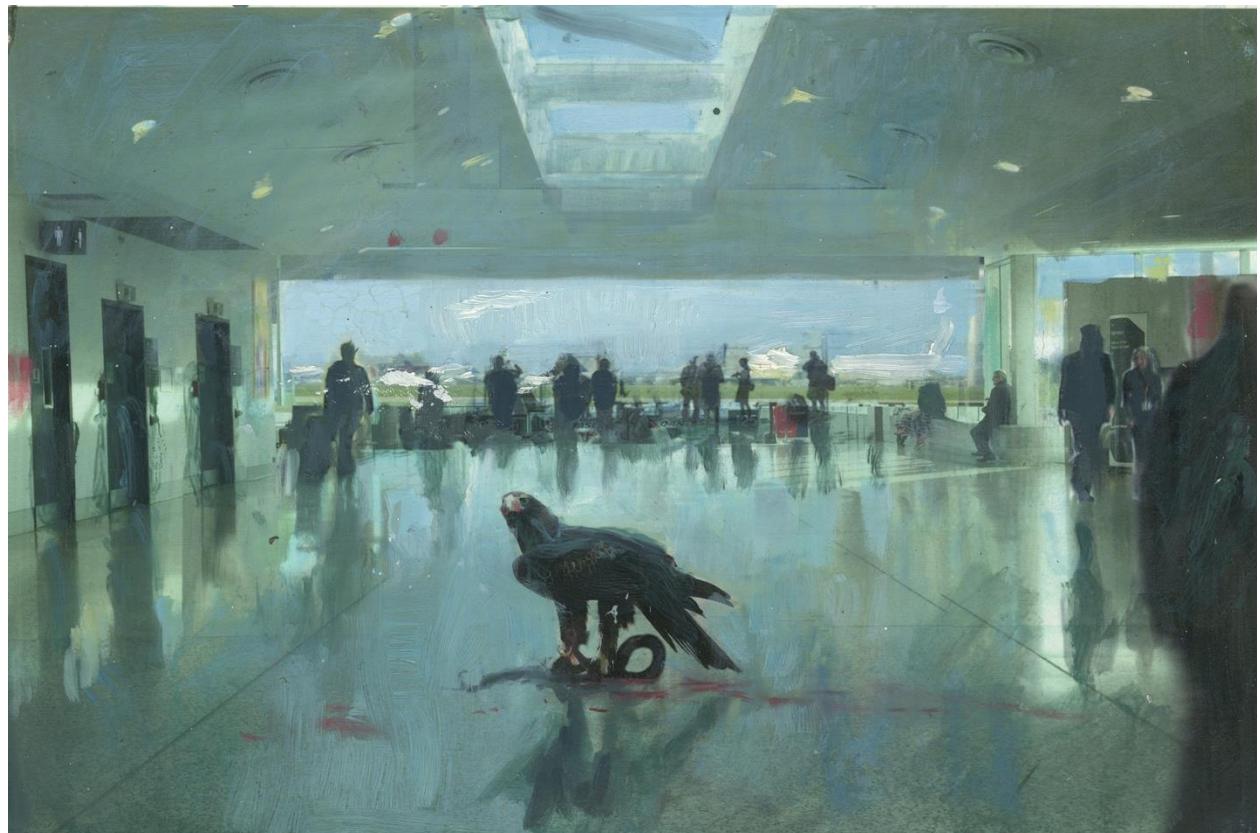
EAGLE

'Eagle' is another one of those stories that began as a singular visual idea. The painting is based on one wing of Melbourne airport which, as airports tend to do, looks much the same as any other. I'm always fascinated by airports as post-ecological spaces, both in and out of the terminal, how they are such an impressive, science-fictional transformation of the landscape into an image of industrial transcendence: literally geared towards leaving the earth. They are also typically far enough away from urban centres that the natural world, a distant hemline of ocean, forest or desert, is still visible from the terminal windows.

At the end of a flight one evening, I was heading to the baggage carousel, foggy and daydreaming as one tends to be in those unscripted moments between one place and the next, and the image of an eagle attacking a snake in the middle of the concourse came to mind (I don't know why). That vision reminded me of the Aztec legend that the great city of Tenochtitlan was founded upon the place where an eagle was seen to devour a snake on top of a cactus: a place that is now Mexico City, one of the largest cities in the world (and you can see the eagle, snake and cactus on the very evocative Mexican flag).

The eagle in my picture is an Australian wedge-tailed eagle, a kind I've seen claiming roadkill on the long and lonely stretches of highway in Western Australia. They are huge, fierce-looking raptors, whether gliding like aircraft or standing long-legged on a carcass. Traffic zooms down the highway at impossible speeds, our bodies insulated by technology, passing along an ancient coastal plain without any apparent intersection besides the collisions of hapless kangaroos, emus, rabbits

and foxes, for whom the eagles wait. I'm always struck by how transient our non-indigenous human universe seems, and not just in terms of motion, but history too. The wedge-tails gaze back at us with serious, time-sharpened brows as we whoosh past, as if casually waiting for the world to return to how it was, seeing us, perhaps, as little more than ghosts.



Preliminary sketch for 'Eagle', oil paint over a digital photograph.

FOX

My wife and I once stayed at a friend's flat in London and, waking in early jet-lag hours, looked out the window to see two young foxes jumping around in a small backyard. We were later told that although there are many foxes in London, it's unusual to see them, so we felt quite privileged. What struck me most was the playfulness of these foxes, their cavalier ownership of space as they leapt about and tussled: and yes, maybe it *was* their space, since human ideas of ownership are quite artificial. Who owns what? Who are the invaders and who the invaded?

Foxes, of course, are a mainstay of folklore in the regions where they have experienced an uneasy coexistence with fellow predators, humans. It's perhaps no coincidence that they are known for cunning, intelligence, adaptability and thievery, the same qualities that have also given humans an edge over other animal competitors – they are, basically, a lot like us. In the mythology of many

cultures they are tricksters, and among the few untamed animals, like pigeons, rats and raccoons, that not only survive in urban landscapes, but thrive. As with dogs and cats, our histories are intertwined, although largely as mutual outsiders, and while foxes can be tamed (check out the long-running experiments of Soviet zoologist Dmitry Belyayev) they are generally very resistant to human companionship, at least in any conscious or intimate way.

My story was initially inspired by a line from a Finnish children's song seen on TV, which had a refrain something like 'We are foxes running wild'. It brought to mind humans changing into foxes and running amok, as a kind of liberation from the usual behavioural strictures. Elsewhere I'd also sketched an image of multiple foxes leaping out of an open fridge in a night-time apartment, while human occupants slept soundly, and this may have been partly inspired by the photograph, 'Red Fox Restaurant', by the wonderful American photographer and installation artist Sandy Skoglund: a couple served by a waiter in a monochromatic restaurant remain oblivious to dozens of bright red foxes leaping all over the furnishings. This layering of different realities, one unseen atop another, is not just for playful amusement. It speaks to the fact that there *are* multiple realities around us, as perceived and imagined by different creatures (and animals must certainly construct realities in their minds as we do, in order to plan, navigate, socialise and survive harsh conditions). Our human understanding of reality must only be one thin slice in space and time, even as we arrogantly assume it to be definitive.



Sketch for 'Fox' (winter), acrylic, oil and pencil on photo collage.



Sketch for 'Fox' (autumn), acrylic, oil and pencil on photo collage.

PIGEON

One concept for my pigeon story came from the podcast episode 'The Island of Stone Money' on NPR's *Planet Money* (I like listening to podcasts while I'm painting and drawing). It's about the tiny island of Yap in the Pacific Ocean which, as the presenters note, economists love because it helps answer the question that is far more complex than the average consumer would suspect: what is money?

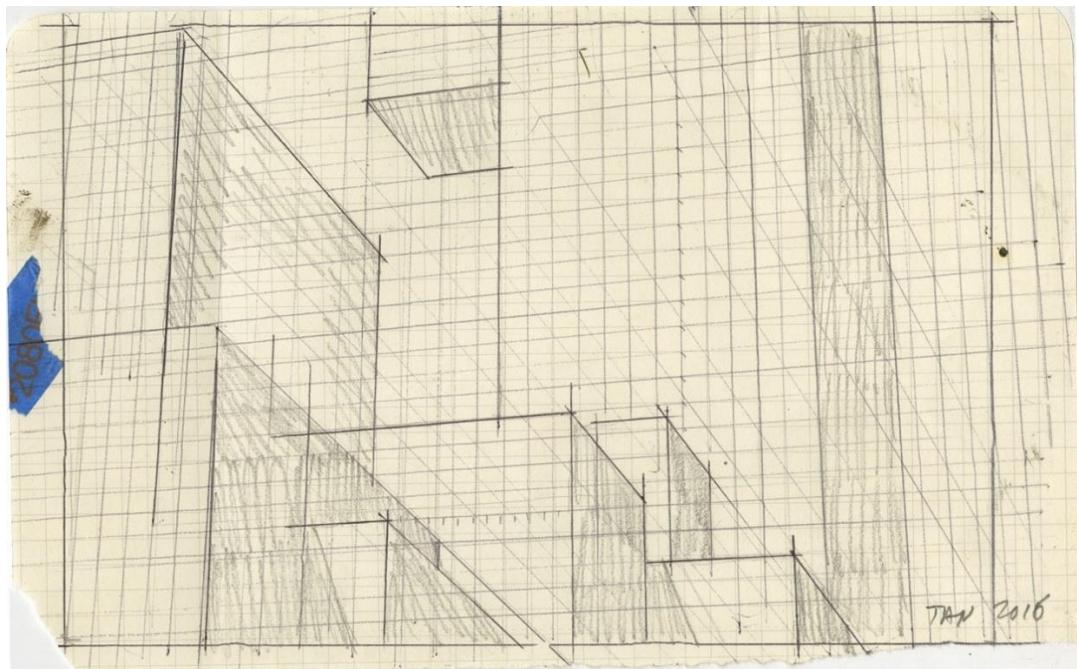
Historically the people of Yap used a special hard-to-acquire stone from a distant island as a form of agreed currency, once it had been artfully carved into wheel-like shapes. Some were small, like coins, but some very big, so big that they could hardly be moved. They were still currency because, like a large bank account, everyone on the island knew who the owner was, even if they did not physically possess it. In one instance, one of the large stones was being ferried by boat between islands, but fell overboard during a storm, irretrievably to the bottom of the Pacific. Instead of writing it off as a loss, people still continued to acknowledge it as good money, that could be owned and traded, even though it was at the bottom of the sea, intangible and invisible.

This is a terrific explanation of what money really is: an abstract idea. So long as everyone believes a thing has value and collectively agrees on its status and imagined location, nobody even needs to see it or touch it. It is free of physical constraints, the perfect exchangeable commodity. Account balances, coins, bank notes, gold bullion, these are all fictional representations of value, agreed symbols of exchange. No money is actually real (and even though something like gold has

practical value, such as in jewellery and electronics, the vast majority of it is vaulted in dark safes, never to be seen or touched: it is generally not mined for practical reasons, but abstract financial ones). These concepts extend beyond money to many other mythologies of modern life, from the imaginary existence of corporations to the assumption of presidential competence, and this also explains how things can go easily wrong when belief falters, when a naked emperor is called to account. A system can crash even when material realities are fine, just because people stop believing in it. I recommend Yuval Noah Harari's popular non-fiction book *Sapiens* as an entertaining read about our commitment to things that are not real as an effective way of understanding human civilisation.

The image of a floating skyscraper is one that I've thought about and sketched numerous times. It's not necessarily an original concept, recalling the island of Laputa described in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a levitating realm populated by patriarchal academics, mathematicians, philosophers and aesthetes who are unable to make practical use of any of their knowledge, a kind of society too removed from earthly realities and ultimately pointless. The mythologies of many cultures have similar representations, of gods or floating worlds that have intellectual power without practical value, and these all seem to comment on a universal human tendency. I love looking at skyscrapers, which are amazing structures that seem to aspire to an ethereal existence, much like the weightless appearance of stone Gothic cathedrals, and with a similar investment of rarefied belief. They are our secular temples, sheathed in reflective glass, more of the sky than the earth. I find them most fascinating and poetic at night, when they are mostly empty.

Pigeons are an interesting parallel metaphor, as common city animals that can fly, and also because of their attraction to the same kind of monumental stone buildings that governing authorities trust, especially banks and financial institutions. (Pigeons are originally coastal birds that like to roost in rocky seaside cliffs, hence the preference for these places.) When I see huge flocks of pigeons milling around financial districts, the similarities between the people and birds, both in appearance and behaviour are striking – the bustling activity, the flock mentality that underscores market speculation, the waistcoats. But I'd suggest that the main difference is that pigeons are more concerned with tangible realities, like finding crumbs of food and nesting material, while the humans are primarily concerned with intangible realities, like money. Both systems are efficient, with their own virtues and shortcomings, but I can't help thinking that one will inevitably outlast the other. In the end, nature does tend to favour reality over fiction, and the meek will, as is so often the case, inherit the earth.



Sketch of architectural forms and shadow placement for the 'Pigeon' painting.



Colour sketch for 'Pigeon', paint on photo-collage, 15 x 20cm. I was interested in abstracting a cityscape, as it might appear to a bird, a series of impenetrable stones. The image of a golden floating building is one that recurs in my sketchbooks.

BEE

The central image of this story came from footage of a nuclear explosion and wondering what the opposite of such a disaster might look like. An explosion of flowers?

In my sketchbook, I'd been doodling ideas for an imaginary guidebook *Great Rooftop Gardens of the Subconscious*, one of many random and undeveloped thought streams. It concerns a series of inner city rooftop gardens that only exist when their respective horticulturalists – random urban residents who are not actually gardeners – happen to be asleep. Only when dreaming can they tend to their plants, unlimited by the constraints of weather, time or physics, and also allow themselves to be interviewed about each project, explaining how the designs of their gardens reflect personal fears, aspirations, joys and repressions. Somehow this idea morphed into a very long consideration of a Japanese couple growing a cherry tree on top of their run-down apartment building, and so this story followed its own course, combining with the aforementioned impression of a floral 'atomic' explosion. The Japanese couple, the Katayamas, also make an appearance in *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, although in very different circumstances, as an elderly recluse and a lost deep-sea diver.



A preliminary collage sketch using found and personal photographs, digitally edited.

YAK

One part of this story was inspired by a vivid dream: I was working in a huge factory, putting electronic components into a glass endive (a vegetable I'm barely familiar with, but not in dreams apparently). I kept thinking about it for a long time after, this idea of making electronic vegetables, maybe a kind of metaphor for our desire to transcend organic processes? I think the environment of the dream, the huge factory, may have been inspired by the photography of Edward Burtynsky, famous for remarkable images of large-scale industrial landscapes, which are at once beautiful and disturbing in revealing the sheer scale of our impact on nature, and the vast organisation of compliant human labour. There is an opening scene in the documentary film about his work *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) where a camera pans, seemingly forever, across rows of Chinese workers fitting parts to electrical products in a mega-factory, which I'd consider essential viewing for any modern human.

I'm not sure how the yak fed into this, except perhaps that I imagined that the ancestors of many modern-day labourers may have had a more agrarian existence: my own grandfather from the Fujian province in China was a water-buffalo herder as a boy, an image I know now mainly through porcelain knick-knacks. Although our material world seems intent on abstracting itself from nature, finding in technology a myth of transcendent progress, much of our happiness still seems based on very old organic traditions, perhaps wedded to distant memories of something else. I imagined a group of factory workers simply looking forward to the final bell, when they can head home upon the woolly back of a giant yak, like the memory of a preindustrial journey, an impression that now comes to mind whenever I see commuters nodding off on evening trains.



Sketch for 'Yak', charcoal on paper.



Sketch for 'Yak', paint and digital collage – a much more impressionistic image, which may not have worked so well as a printed book illustration, but one that really captures the atmosphere I was aiming for with this story.

HUMAN

The concluding story in my anthology, 'Human', was also inspired by a dream. I was at an archaeological dig with some friends, and we were all looking for our own skeletons. Being a dream, there was nothing unusual about this, and when we found a couple of familiar skulls, we were only surprised at how small and simple they looked, the same colour as the ground, mixed up with other bones and rocks. I don't usually remember dreams enough to write them down – and so few are *worth* writing down – but this one felt particularly meaningful. As I started to elaborate this vignette into a longer piece of text in a sketchbook, one thought leading to another, I realised that this might be a very logical ending to the series of animal stories I'd been grappling with.

My brother is a geologist, and as a child and teenager he was obsessed with fossils – the older the better, often small shellfish and trilobites. I never entirely understood the passion until I realised that it was about time, the fact that you can hold something inconceivably ancient – a fish that was swimming around 100 million years ago – right there in your hand. After all those intervening eons its memory is there, even if every bone has been replaced by a different mineral. Geological time puts all else in perspective.

Around the time of writing *Tales from the Inner City* I was also reading *The World Without Us* (2007) by Alan Weisman. This non-fiction popular science book considers what would happen if humans suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth; what impact would remain, what things would change, and what aspects of nature would return and resume. It's a terrific and well-researched read, and not unlike Bill Bryson's amusing *A Short History of Nearly Everything* in reminding us of our incredibly limited significance in the cosmic scheme of things, and how vulnerable we are to calamity. (I was also reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* not long before, a book that considers life after such a calamity.) The scenarios presented by Bryson and Weisman may seem bleak, but they are also filled with surprising optimism. Life will always change, adapt and persist, not even the near-sighted disasters of humanity can destroy it, only bring it to a temporarily deplorable state. Regarding things from this distance, that future – deplorable or redemptive – seems much more a choice than an inevitability. It really depends on our ability to imagine other lives, to respect ourselves and our relationship to nature enough to consider alternative realities.



Sunrise and river of light, oil on paper, 15 x 10cm