

## Sing, Storyteller

Ellie Morton

*O lyrebird, sing me a tale of a sun-scorched land,*

*Indomitable in nature, and in nature, indomitable.*

The leaves beneath my feet crackled where I walked, as eucalyptus is wont to grow crisp once fallen. Even above, there was a dryness to the living greenery; a parched, water-starved thirst to the towering trunks. My whole life lived there, but my eyes fell as tourists upon those trees; there is always a new path to trek.

So it was that in hiking that track, laid down by a firm-nosed wombat, I was led deep into forest. The hot earth radiated back the warmth of the day, and drove me to travel further, into the shaded, tree-ferned gully.

The wet, sclerophyll forest, was desiccated that summer, but no less lively for it. Creaking deadwood boughs, whose life-water had long since been siphoned out, were favoured by the cockatoos. Stretched out, languid, a copperhead lazed, unbothered by the sun.

There was a charm that could not be captured by pictures, I thought. You had to be present to accept every inch of life in the dry, seeking land. It was not the conflagration of the tropical rainforest – clamouring colours, sounds, life so loud it could not be ignored. No, the reward of sitting still in the Australian bushland was to see life lived more humbly, persisting against all odds in its quietly determined manner.

Further down the gully, a rogue sound brought me to stillness. A snuffling, a ruffling, and an echidna blinked beady black eyes at me. I stilled, and watched him for a time, enamoured. Occasionally, he would still himself, raise his long, beaked face, and squint as if to make sure I was not a danger to him. I found myself smiling as I watched him waddle back and forth, a mass of black and cream peaks.

I meant to trek onwards when a voice called out. Watching us was the lyrebird.

‘I didn’t expect you to be out and about,’ I said softly. ‘Isn’t it too hot for you?’

The lyrebird laughed. He shuffled rufous feathers, shook out an ornate tail display; a large, banded statement gently curving amongst white crescents. He cocked his head, wry, and I thought I knew what he was asking. *Where else should I go?*

I felt humbled. ‘Lyrebird, would you sing to me?’ I asked.

For the longest time, I stayed still. The mouthpiece of the forest, why should I deserve to hear his fluting? But he didn’t scorn me. He preened, and pecked at the earth, prepared himself, and he sang.

He sang of old deadwood boughs, dried to kindling, rocky tors and wreaths of flame. A scrim of ash, drawn over the earth. The lyre of the god Apollo sang to me of the fierceness of his beating sun, the heat that sweltered sparks to flame and in the end, razed the land.

As he wove story into his voice, the world around me stopped to listen.

He sang to me of change, and chains, wrapped around saw blades. He squawked the grunts and barks of the machines that ploughed. He taught me how the mechanics could rip-roar right through the forest air. He warbled, and whirred, clicked camera flashes in his song.

I listened aghast, heartsick and heart-scorched.

I followed his song down to the earth where cut stumps left fresh scents in the air, and clogging oil smoothed it over. I followed him out to where the trunks blackened and bruised by flame. I followed his gaze to the sun, beating harder, and harder each summer.

The lyrebird will survive much, he told me. He will dart down a wombat burrow when flames lick the air above. He is small, he is quick, and he is intent to survive.

But the seasons are beginning to flutter like wings, shivering and sweltering, parching and flooding. The ranges he used to escape into are disappearing. What is untouched grows dry, and tender as kindling. When the sky sparks, the conflagration is inexorable.

The air suddenly seemed a threat, and I longed for mist, and a gentle breeze. My human skin wanted for water, my tongue to slake my thirst.

By my side, the echidna, who had been listening along, sensed the end of the story and made a scratching. I was jolted from my reverie.

‘How do you manage it?’ I asked, voice barely above a whisper.

When echidna didn’t answer, I knew he loved the land as I did - and then some – but in a way I could not know. Hearing the lyrebird song, he did not think on what I did - he only knew that in seeking a meal, he had stumbled upon a strange creature. He only knew that the air was growing hotter, but he did not know why; only that when the sun scorched, he suffered.

The spell was broken. The lyrebird let me go, and his voice morphed into his usual song, carolling to his own kind. He darted away, voice belling through the air.

I was left entranced. I was left troubled.

I have not done it justice; you have to seek the lyrebird on your own. Sit a while, ask kindly and you may find he will sing for you. No, I have not done it justice; there is no lyricist like the lyrebird, but after his oration I could not but try to share his song.