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The Rivers of Babylon

I had a little breathing vent that was also my peephole. Tucked into my swag on a freezing night in the Simpson Desert of Central Australia, I could look out and watch the stars. Orion is one of the great night folk: in winter, in the desert, in the hours that are so early that dark is all there is, Orion lies seductively low on the horizon. Even peering out through my little airhole I could see him and feel happy.

He is said to be a mighty hunter, and maybe he is, but that's not what matters. Nobody who was just chasing rabbits would wear his belt slung low at that interesting and supremely attractive angle. He is chasing the Seven Sisters, and he really gives them a run—all over Australia, north and south, east and west, and all around the whole world. Call him what you will, everywhere people seem to know that it is women he's hunting. I knew him in North America, where I grew up with him, and when I came to Australia, I started hearing about his adventures in this country. I imagined him wearing an Aboriginal belt: a well-ochred string with the brightest and shiniest of pearl shells strategically placed. Actually, I didn't fully appreciate the meaning of men's thighs until I saw Aboriginal men dance. Even the oldest greybeard can make you feel dizzy as you sit on the ground with your eyes fastened on...but these are not the best thoughts for a lady in a single swag on a night when it's way too cold to even go for a walk. Best to leave Orion to his nightly chase and try to get some sleep...

In the morning it was clear that the Seven Sisters had been running all around the camp that night. The tarp was covered with ice, and I could almost hear Uncle Fred Biggs telling the story. Roland Robinson wrote it up years ago and called it "The Star Tribes":

And there's those Seven Sisters, travelling
Across the sky. They make the real cold frost.
You hear them when you're camped out on the plains.
They look down from the sky and see our fire
And "*Mai, mai, mai,*" they'd sing out as they run
Across the sky. And, when you wake, you find
Your swag, the camp, the plains, all white with frost.

Such beauty, such stories, oh Lord what a morning!

The sky is full of stories of desire wherever you go, but I still felt lonely for the northern stars. When you say goodbye to your familiar night folk, you feel a strange loss. Knowing that there are no bears here on the ground in Australia makes sense of the fact that there are no bears in the sky—they wouldn't fit. And yet I like to think of them shining so beautifully in their own country.

It takes time to get to know new stars, but when I began to make their acquaintance, I found that though I was far from the Bears, I was now close to Crocodiles—both the Sky folk and their Earthly countrymen. At first I only knew of the Southern Cross through the words of Mark Twain. He was not impressed:

We are moving steadily southward—getting further and further down under the projecting paunch of the globe. Yesterday evening we saw the Big Dipper and the north star sink below the horizon and disappear from our world.... [But] my interest was all in the Southern Cross. I had never seen that. I had heard about it all my life, and it was but natural that I should be burning to see it. No other constellation makes so much talk.... Judging by the size of the talk which the Southern Cross had made, I supposed it would need a sky all to itself.

But that was a mistake. We saw the Cross to-night, and it is not large. Not large, and not strikingly bright.... It is ingeniously named, for it looks just as a cross would look if it looked like something else....

It consists of four large stars and one little one....

One must ignore the little star, and leave it out of the combination—it confuses everything. If you leave it out, then you can make out of the four stars a sort of cross—out of true; or a sort of kite—out of true; or a sort of coffin—out of true.

This was not much of an introduction to a group of stars whose stories I came to know and learned to cherish. When I came to Australia to do research, I went north to the great tropical savanna country and lived with Aboriginal people for a number of years, learning all that I could of their philosophy, ecology, and country. My teachers in Yarralin and nearby communities know the Southern Cross as the Crocodile. What we see as stars are the men standing around him and getting ready to spear him. What we see as darkness is the body of the croc. And the croc himself is the focus of a story that connects people, languages, cultures, trees, hunting, waterholes, trade routes, and the big winds of September. The story starts with the Owlet Nightjar Dreaming ancestor and his efforts to kill a big crocodile that was living in the main waterhole of the Nightjar's home country. His spears simply were not hard enough, so he had to go to a nearby country to get a special wood. He came home then and killed the croc, and after all that he decided to have a rest. While he was sleeping,

some cheeky youngfellas came up and started cooking and eating his crocodile. When Old Man Nightjar woke up and realized what was going on, he called up a big wind that grabbed the boys and scattered them around the country.

People who belong to this country took me to see many of the elements of the story that are still there today: the boys (now stones), Old Man's whiskers (also stones), and the waterhole. Other parts of the story have been destroyed. The tree, for example, that was sacred to Old Man Nightjar was bulldozed to make way for an airstrip.

At the end of the story, the Crocodile was thrown up into the sky, where it remains. When the Crocodile tilts in a certain way, it signals the part of the story when the winds come. And every year the winds do come.

How wonderful that in a world of flux and unpredictability, the travels of the stars also tell an Earth story—season by season, and year by year. And yet, in this time of escalating Earth deaths, the star stories may be suffering too. There is cold consolation in Brad Leithauser's poem "Zodiac, A Farewell," part of which reads:

The great ark of the zodiac
Is adrift on an endless sea.
There's comfort in knowing its cargo can come
To no harm from you and me,
That no storm of human contriving could
Ever reach so far...
The constellations' great consolations
Lie there: in how distant they are,
And how bright the way they, high and dry,
Shelter in the open sky.

Where Leithauser, like the ancient Greeks, finds consolation in distance, Indigenous stories describe lots of to-ing and fro-ing between Earth and Sky. Old Tim Yilngayarri was the only person I've been lucky enough to meet who had actually been to the Sky country. This old man taught me with great patience. He had lived through events I can barely imagine: massacres, near slavery, and many other forms of cruelty. At the same time, he had been the top man for dogs and dingoes, their "Lawman" throughout the whole region. His stories about the Sky country are difficult to understand, not only because he and I struggled to communicate across language gaps but also because he speaks from experiences that I cannot fully imagine. I could not meet him halfway in conversation because I'd never been there. He describes Earth-Sky connections that are available only to a few people, and as he had been there, he brought back a report for the rest of us. He said that the Sky people had dropped a rope and taken him up to their country, where they gave him special powers. And when he looked back at Earth, he saw the fires of people's camps

looking like stars. Old Tim left it open to us to imagine the reverse: that to look at stars is to see the campfires of the Sky country.

The old man lost his power, and now no one in that area has had the experience of being taken out of this world and given power. It may be, as some suggest, that the connections are being lost. But not everywhere, not yet, and not as long as the stories are told and the songs are sung. Not while the Crocodile stars still shine and the symmetries of wind and stars beat out their steady rhythm.

As I learned when I left the Northern Hemisphere, the Star folk are most fully alive when they are connected with their Earthly countrymen. Happily, dogs, like Orion, seem to be everywhere. In her exquisite essay “Oyez à Beaumont,” Vicki Hearne reminds us of the moment in T. H. White’s *The Sword in the Stone* when the great hound Beaumont, gored by a boar, lies dying. The huntsman kills him in compassion: he “let Beaumont out of this world, to run free with Orion and to roll among the stars.”

In Australia the dogs are dingoes, and they run with the Seven Sisters, not with Orion. Women and dogs! I can’t help but feel happy about the protective mateship dogs offer us: how they chase guys who pester us, and bite the arms and legs of those who might harm us. Some Australian stories tell of how the crafty Sky hunter sent his penis underground to try to get to the Sisters, to ambush them from below, as it were. But the Sisters were not sitting on the ground, and they set their dingo mates on him, urging them to savage the unwelcome visitor. As Mark Twain would say, I will draw the curtain of charity over the rest of this scene.

Where the Seven Sisters go, dingo knowledge goes too. The stars tell Old Tim’s people that the dingo pups are being born, and when the stars make another shift, they say that the pups have opened their eyes. The old people, all those long-gone generations of Aboriginal countrymen, would raid the dens and take some pups to eat and some to keep as companions. They all lived together like that for some five thousand years.

Today, though, dingoes are under sustained attack by pastoralists who mistakenly believe that the use of 1080 poison (sodium fluoroacetate) will protect their vulnerable calves by diminishing the dingo population. In fact, recent research shows that poisoning disrupts the family structure of dingo packs and produces unsocialised rogue beasts who attack domesticated animals. In spite of scientific evidence, and in complete disregard of Indigenous people’s views on the use of poison, the war against dingoes goes on. It is quite possible that the pastoralists will win. Like the Assyrians of old, many pastoralists descend on their dingo enemies with the blood-thirsty desire to annihilate them by death and dispersal. And like Tiglath-Pileser, who piled up the heads of the defeated peoples “like heaps of grain,” some pastoralists display their spoils of war, hanging the dead bodies of dingoes from trees, fences, and signposts.

If they win, if all the dens and families are dispersed, and even the lone survivors are hunted down or left to die of heartbreak, the only dingoes left will be in captivity. Like wolves and some domestic dogs, as well as many humans, they howl with grief and with lust, but one of their other primary motivations is to locate and communicate with other members of the group. Their howling vocabulary is complex, and they sing out to their countrymen in harmonies that amplify the sound of their voices, telling each other who and where they are.

I have actually been very, very close to a howling dingo. That was when I visited Dinky the Singing Dingo at Stuart Wells Roadhouse, south of Alice Springs. The owner of the roadhouse, Jim Cotterill, told me that Dinky's family was living in an area where 1080 was laid, and the nursing mother died. Some stockmen found the litter of six pups in a hollow under a sandhill. They put a trap outside, and it took about three days for the little pups to give up waiting for their mother and to come out. I do not understand why the stockmen took the pups back to the head station, since the purpose of 1080 was to kill them, but in any case, the owner knew that the Cotterills had a few animals at the pub. He rang and asked if they'd like a dingo. Jim said the pup was about six or eight weeks old when he got him. His pup mates were all killed.

Jim's daughters play the piano, and when they practiced, Dinky started singing along with them. These days in the pub, Dinky hops up on the piano and walks back and forth, singing. According to Cotterill:

Every time someone starts playing the piano, Dinky creates a din. He starts howling, or singing as we call it. With a chair alongside the piano, he will walk up onto the keys—we call that his playing. He stands there and sings.

Dinky's singing is absolutely awesome, especially as he is willing to allow people to get very close. I taped him so that I could listen to him whenever I wanted. Only now I can't bear to hear him. Not since I came to realise that I know this song; I have listened to it and sung it many times. From the Babylonian victory right up until today, the song cries out the anguish of exile and diaspora, of those who can never go home again. These are the days of violent extinctions, of global dimming and moving dust bowls, of habitat fragmentation, ice melt, and plundered lives. Animals are experiencing all this loss, and if we could better hear the waves of their agony, we would know this and be tormented. We would know that for the rest of our lives we will hear a growing chorus of increasingly diverse voices:

For the wicked carried us away in captivity,
Required from us a song,
How can we sing King Alfa's song in a strange land?

I have heard the dingoes singing across the cliffs and gorges, across plains and deserts, and I cannot really comprehend that no matter how bright the night, or how sweet the air, there may come a day when we'll never hear them sing. Not to their Sisters in the Sky country, or to the hunters in the Sky and on Earth, or for the love of their own kind, or in celebration of their own way of being in the world.

As yet another silence rolls out across the land, we should all be howling:

My Lord
My Lord
Is this the morning
When the stars begin to fall?