

Diary

Dorothy Porter

IT'S THE SILENCE. Even by the river, my ears are straining. It's the silence. At this moment it's a warmish humid silence with the grass outside lushly mesmerising the eye.

Then there's the drone of a fly. And the hum of the fridge. And down by the river at dawn, where I sat watching this morning's mist melt over the water with the poet Judy Beveridge, there was suddenly from the far bank the rippling improvisations of a lyrebird.

This is a wonderful place. Frequently, I have silently thanked Arthur Boyd for this gift of his home, and for the blessing of my time here. I am working with the composer Jonathan Mills on a chamber opera, *The Eternity Man*, which has been short-listed for an opera competition. In a few weeks, we'll be in London collaborating with musicians and singers. For now, we're working in this rich, unsettling silence. I'm scratching for words. Jonathan is scratching for sounds. Amidst this provocative silence, we're both listening for the stir of our embryonic opera growing in our heads.

I am liberated from all my routines, with huge tracts of time. Sometimes I walk into the silence and start talking to myself, sometimes obsessively on the same sore topics, like a rat trapped in the four-am-morning-blues wheel. Other times, and these I prefer, I meld with the silence and let my eyes take over.

Half an hour ago, I saw a blue bowerbird crackling the leaves as he hopped away from what is definitely not a nest. It was strange, almost voyeuristic, to peek into this site of compulsive seek, search and seduction, all littered with blue plastic. David Lynch could make a terrific movie about bowerbirds and the one-night-stand blue-neoned motels the male birds make in the bush. Especially ripe for dramatic treatment are the immature males that never turn true blue and never make their bowers quite right. The females ignore their bowers while the mature males obliterate them. A mess of twigs, divested of all its blue loot, can be cautionary testimony to futile creativity and unsuccessful courtship.

Paul Keating with Arthur Boyd
at Bundanon in 1995

The natural world can creep up on you in the silence, like the march fly that has just landed noiselessly on my bare leg. The silence can be a haunted and itchy space, thick with known and unknown histories and presences, all indifferent to my spooked frailties. Sometimes I watch the big familiar black cows for comfort, even though I know most of them are earmarked for the abattoir.

Meanwhile, there are other people. In the adjacent studio is my old school friend, the painter Julie Harris. I envy the paint smell of creative industry seeping from Julie's studio where her work festoons the floors, easel and walls with an overflow of browns and blues and smudges and stars. They reek of mystery and power. 'The river,' Julie says.

Yes. It, they, *are* the river, whereas I have books, pens and notebooks that announce themselves drearily, like conservative cousins at a wedding. Dry, neat and abstract, they don't evoke the river. But the river does seem to be leaking into my libretto or any stray poem that presents itself. Is it a musical motif? Or just overwhelmingly itself, as when Julie and I went for a swim against its current and literally got nowhere, swimming on the spot in its strong cool grip.

At night, unlike the other artists, I can't work. I've tried. But my writing congeals into a lumpy mess of dark metaphor. Is it because the silence takes on a visual form? On a moonless night, the pitch black can gather thickly around you, as if the air itself is sodden with tar. I go out with a torch to look for wombats — anything to break the surface of the black water climbing over my head.

But, at night, Jonathan composes with intensity on the piano in the cottage a little distance from the community of artists' studios. Sometimes, across the black field, where, in the daytime, two bulls ram or lick each other, I can hear an occasional, clear, disembodied note. And I wonder which character, which scene, which song in our collaborative opera is being musically born.