



The Cockatoo by Laura Lethlean

RR2020_Laura Lethlean_The Cockatoo

[Music]

Welcome to the Victorian Seniors Festival, Radio Reimagined in 2020. This project has been produced on the lands of the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging, and welcome all First Nations people listening today.

As part of our music series, please enjoy *The Cockatoo*, written by Laura Lethlean.

Ruth:

“Annie, I saw you on the news. I thought it was me for a moment, standing in front of that burnt-out car. But it can’t have been me, so it must have been you. You looked exhausted.

Behind the car were layers of black trees with no leaves. White covered the ground, but it wasn’t snow- it wasn’t a European winter or a fairy tale. Australian trees don’t lose their leaves like that. Australian trees have white trunks, but the ones behind you were black. The white on the ground was ash. Was it you, Annie?

You told the newsman what you did to survive. You told him how you’d evacuated at the last minute. You told him you let the chooks out. A tear wet your face and you pushed it away when you told him how you’d driven through spitting embers and thick smoke towards the coast. You stood on the shoreline and watched two fires thunder down the valley and meet up like a sealed envelope. You survived, my resilient sister. What did it sound like? What was the smell?

The sky over the city is making it look like a different planet today. The planet that’s filled with wordless humans, stammering and staring at their screens. No one knows what to do or how to help. They’re saying these fires to the east have eaten up the forest. There’s cars, the birds but the sound is different. The light is different. My shadow, when I walk to the shops, it’s barely there, even though there’s not a cloud in the sky. Smoke and haze have replaced the clouds. The sun’s a dull apricot, like a postcard from India.

I don’t know if you’d recognise me now. Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I imagine it’s you on the other side of the glass.

I know you’ll show the whites of your eyes when you hear this. You’ll huff out your chest and ask why I’m bothering- You’re surrounded by ash and blackened trees; you’ve got enough on your plate. So, why now? After all this time.

I could take you back. Maybe if you've come this far, maybe I can hope that you'll follow me a little further. Pretend we're kids again, playing following the leader... maybe you'll follow me back to the day I got out. I stepped into the grey sunlight and waited. I knew you wouldn't call. After everything, I expected your silence. I agreed with it.

It given me a black plastic card and told me I could use it on the bus. It drove me down a highway and let me out. I stepped down onto the fraying nature strip as the door hissed shut and the bus drove away. Cracks in the footpath led me up a hill towards the place they'd told me to go.

A woman let me in, balancing a cigarette between stained lips. She kicked a pile of sheets down the hallway, towards a small room at the end of a corridor. The small room contained a stained mattress, which was leaned up against the damp wall.

She put her palm to the shoulder of the mattress and it fell to the floor, heaving musty air up and around itself then she turned and shuffled past me, swinging the door shut. White smoke coiled behind her.

I stood still, alone in the grey light. It was quiet. Silent but then I heard something, like a thumping. I looked around but I saw nothing. I opened the door but the cigarette woman was nowhere. Finally, I realised what it was- it was the sound of my own heartbeat. I didn't like that. I slunk back down the hall, out the front where the roar of the highway drowned me out. I followed a sloping fence down towards a rotting stump and I sat beside it on the ground, listening to the traffic and watching the worms writhe up through the soil.

Shade crept across my body. Water soaked through my clothes. I began to shiver. I tried to force myself to keep still, but the sound of my own breath and the blood in my ears began to rise like a siren. I couldn't stand it. I needed the silence of noise. I rose stiffly and I stumbled down the hill towards the thundering traffic.

The endless stream of trucks and cars created their own breath. I found a concrete bridge and I crossed it halfway, leaning over the railing. There were no birds in the sky. Only clouds and smog and noise. I watched the huge machines below, imagining the people inside were hearts, directing the blurs of metal far away from me. I told myself, 'I will never both anyone again'.

Big orange lights turned on and the trucks and cars swapped shadows. I walked back up the hill. The cigarette woman was in her room with the door shut. I could hear a TV commercial, blasting, and a low voice talking over it - maybe a man's. I walked past, into my room and I sat in the darkness.

The cigarette woman brought a man home. He was grubby, with a smile that stretched his face open, so all his gums were red and wet on display. He'd sit at the table and empty his pockets, leaving behind all sorts of things; blades and ashtrays and feathers and pipes and batteries and bags of dirt.

A week after I arrived, the two of them were in the kitchen. They were arguing. I was listening from my room. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I could tell her voice was breaking in her throat. She was crying. Then I heard footsteps and the door slam. Then silence. I came out of my room just to see if he'd left anything and he had. It was nothing like what he'd left before. It was there - laying on the table, was a dead cockatoo.

It was ugly as hell - all wrinkled and naked pink. Hardly any feathers on its wings. It was laying on its back. Its three-toed feet coiled limp in the air. Its eyes were shut to the world. Gently, I rolled its body over, but its beak caught, twisting its head to the side. That's when it opened its eye. It was barely breathing. I didn't know if the man had forgotten it or if he was coming back or ... but it was alive. I couldn't let it die.

I went down the back fence and I dug up some worms. In the dim kitchen, the bird righted itself, weakly raising its head. I dangled a worm in front of its face. It moved a slow, stony claw towards the wriggling thing, trying to clasp and balance at the same time but it couldn't find the strength.

So, I killed the worm between my thumbnail and forefinger and hovered the limp brown line in the air above the bird's curved beak. It wouldn't take. I laid the worm softly on the table. Looking up and around, I saw a tea towel and I scooped the bird up, holding it in one hand. I flung the cupboards open with the other, searching for something it could eat. The shelves were bare, except for a few packets of stale biscuits. I broke one into quarters and I held a portion close. She opened her beak. The tongue inside her mouth was dark purple, like a stone from the seabed. I held the biscuit steady and she touched it with her tongue. Her hard beak scraped and a few crumbs fell away. The beak closed and opened, scaping a little more each time. I sat with her at the kitchen table until half the biscuit was gone. Then I gave her some water.

I thought of calling you then. My first memory of cockatoos was with you. Grandpa had taken us - we must have been five or six - he took us, on that freezing day, to Lorne, remember? We got out of the car and that arctic blast of icy wind hit us right in the chest. My hat blew off and you caught it just in time. And then we heard them - the shirking and screeching coming from above. We looked up and we saw three white winged birds rocking in flight, fighting the gusts and swinging their feet up to land on electrical poles. The sky was swept in that soft, lolly-pop pink. It was dusk. We watched the birds wheel through the air like they were angels, performing a trapeze act. When they landed, a lemon-crest sprouted on top of their heads. I remember you said they looked like they were wearing yellow Sydney opera house hats, with white elastic bands beneath their chins to hold them fast.

I named the cockatoo Jesse. After a few weeks, little white feathers began to grow back in tufts all over her body. When I get home, she would raise her tattered crest in salute then quickly flatten it into a polite, slicked back curl. I tried to ask the cigarette woman about where Jesse had come from, but she was talking to me even less than before. The man never came back. I decided not to mention it.

I didn't answer anyone's letters or calls or go anywhere except the shops and my weekly parole meetings and the library. During that first week, I got a book out from the library and I found out what Jesse should eat. Nuts and seeds and flower buds and fruit. She lived in my room, mostly. Her wings had been clipped, so I didn't get her a cage or anything, I just let her be. As her feathers grew back, I noticed that her eyes were circled by two soft rings of yellow.

Annie, I'm watching a lot of TV. The guy downstairs had a spare and he said either I could take it, or he was going to get rid of it anyway. Most nights when I get home from the shelter, I switch it on. There's a lot of news. Seems like every channel has a crowd of people, talking in circles, coming up with bad answers to terrible problems. There seems to be a lot more people needing help than there are to give it. Sometimes, I think the world is full of outstretched hands, waiting for someone to take hold.

I was in a parole meeting when the officer told me I was looking much better. So, I said to her, "you think I look good, you should see Jesse. She looks like she's had a makeover" and, just like that, the officer invited herself round. She said she wanted to meet Jesse. I couldn't say no. Next day, I get a knock at the door and there's my officer, standing in the doorway. I go, "Well, you're way taller than I thought". She walked into the kitchen and stopped at the window that looked over the backyard. She smiled and said, "I'm always stuck sitting behind that desk, I guess".

I flicked on the kettle and she asked to see Jesse. I brought her out from my bedroom. You should have seen how well Jesse behaved. She nodded her head, no flapping. She even took a nut from the

officer's hand and held it in her grey claw, gently nibbling. The officer said, "She's so tender" and I explained, "That's the thing about cockatoos, under all their screeching and clumsy landings, they're actually very gentle birds".

The officer asked if I had any other experience with birds. I told her about Granny's chook shed out the back of the pub. I didn't tell her about you or the hours we'd spent out there with those fussy chooks, trying to catch them. Remember that time we'd fed them bacon rind? Remember how Granny gave us the spoon for being so wasteful? We spent the rest of the day scrubbing out pots and pans until our fingers were shrivelled prunes.

The officer asked if I was interested in taking care of more birds. I said I didn't know if I had the space, but she laughed again and explained that she knew someone who ran a shelter. She said, "they could do with an extra pair of hands. It could go towards your community service."

Annie, I hope you know what happened was an accident. I don't even know if you'd properly heard what happened - from my version, I mean. My memory of everything is ... it was very long ago. It was a freezing night. I'd finished up at the bar. You'd got the night off again. Granny was soft on you. You'd been on another date with Andrew. I was polishing glasses when I saw the letter. My name was on the envelope. It was written in Rod's handwriting. I'd seen him that morning, so I knew it couldn't be good news.

There were four words written inside. "I've been called up". That's all it said. I knew what it meant. We'd discussed what he'd do if it came. It's a funny thing, to decide to disappear but they were all expecting it then, weren't they? At least the blokes we knew. That morning I'd seen it. The fear that had settled and fixed into Rod's face, that fear of the unknown - that disbelief of what he was expected to do. That night, the air outside was stretched thin - a dry cracking cold. We'd agreed I'd burn the letter as soon as I'd found it, but I couldn't. Not yet.

The wind is warm this morning. It's picking up cans and newspapers and plastic bottles and grit and skittling it across the bitumen towards the coast. Jesse is flapping and frantic. She's wondering why I'm home. The 'no standing' sign that's bolted to the electric pole outside the window is drumming against the rotting wood. The gusts are shaking the doors and windows and rattling memories. It must have been a relief to know that Andrew was exempt. I hope it's ok to mention him. I dream of him all the time, Annie, of course I do.

About six months after Jesse arrive, I was told we had to move out of the shared accommodation. I went looking for a place to live in the west of Melbourne and, eventually, I found a room above a hairdresser in Footscray. My PO lined me up with an employment service place. I told her about my experience at the pub and that I didn't want to work nights if I could avoid it. So, they got me a job, serving coffee at the train station. I was on my way to 'living independently', as my PO put it. I said, "I'd never had the chance to do that". I went straight from the pub to Fairlea.

The place in Footscray was simple, just four walls with a window at the street-end, and a bathroom downstairs that I shared with the hairdressers. I got a bucket, a trestle table, a bar fridge and a gas cooker and I made myself a kitchen. Jesse didn't say much at first. I didn't even know she could speak until a year of us living together. By that time, she had a Sydney Opera House all of her own. I was boiling an egg and I heard a "hello" come from the room behind me. There was no one there but Jesse. She said it again. She'd never spoken before that. I hadn't trained her. You don't expect a bird to talk. I was scared at first, that the people downstairs would hear or see Jesse and kick us out. She liked to ladder-step back and forth in front of the window that overlooked the street. People saw her and sometimes they pointed, but no one told me off, or said I should get rid of her, so we started to relax into a bit of routine.

Every morning, I'd get up before the sun and walk to the station, where I'd grind coffee and pour it until around three. There'd always be left-over bits and pieces at closing, which I'd take back to our place and make into lunch. Jesse had her favourites, especially when I brought the French style pastries. Every time I'd sit at the table to eat a croissant or something similar, she'd flap her wings. I reckon she'd do it to make the loose crumbs come unstuck. Without fail, flakes of pastry would flutter through the air and down onto the table. She'd edge in and bring her pebble-tongue down to touch the buttery flakes. When she came across a larger scrap, she would clasp the clump in her wrinkly foot and gently nibble at the caramelised corners, smiling at me through those lidded eyes.

After we'd done eating, I'd put her on my shoulder, and we'd take the train out to the shelter. When we changed trains at Flinders street, people would always look at us sideways. I told Jesse they were just curious, to see a bird like her in the city. I told her, "Birds like you used to rule the skies around here." Jesse rustled her feathers when I talked like that.

I sometimes wonder if Jesse knows about the forest. Something in her must. Does she wish she could be like those cockies in Lorne? Raucous and free, to fly - to circle with ease above the canopy. I dream about flying all the time. I have dreams where I can push off from the earth and glide over buildings and trees and oceans.

I remember hearing a story about a man who could transplant his consciousness into an eagle's body. He could hover on the wind and look down at the world below.

After my first few months at the shelter, Leslie, the woman who runs the place, asked me if I'd studied birds. I told her I'd finished school but nothing else. She said she was researching the behaviour of magpies and that I was a good observer. Then she wrote an application to see if she could get funding to have me study with her. That's how I started to get paid to come to the shelter. I'd work alongside Leslie, helping her with her research. We discovered that magpies lay on the ground near ant nests and wait for the ants to clean their feathers in their wings.

It felt good to be around little creatures - to help them get better. It was small but, being there, let me see that there was something I could do. Something that fit the person I'd become. I don't think I'd felt good like that since - well, since before the night Rod left that letter.

Granny and Granddad were busy, closing up out front. So, I snuck into the cellar, stole a bottle of whisky and took it upstairs. You were in our room, still dressed from the date. You said I'd just missed Andrew - had I seen him on the stairs? You were about to launch into the whole story - what he said, what you said ... but when you saw my face, you stopped. You asked me what the matter.

I took a jealous swig and slammed the door. I stormed out the back porch near the dunnies with the letter screwed up in my fist. Every breath of cold air stung my lungs. I swallowed the liquor straight from the bottle, gulping it into my belly, flinching against the taste. In the light of the back bar window, I ripped the envelope open again and I reread Rod's four words. I knew he must have gone already - that he wouldn't contact me again. We'd agreed on all of it, especially about me not going with him. He said he couldn't ask me to do that.

The more I thought, the more I drank, the more I knew he was scared and he was running. I was drunk. Maybe he hadn't left yet. Maybe I could see him. I had to see him. I took the keys and started the Holden. I didn't notice the windscreen was covered in frost. In my rear view, the pub was a red blur that lit up as the car chugged into life. I swear there wasn't anyone behind me when I lurched the gear into reverse. That's when I heard the sound. The thud.

I fell out of the car. I couldn't breathe. I tried to catch my breath and then you can running out into the darkness, into the cold. I couldn't look at you. So, I – I stared at him, squashed in the red glow of the brake lights. I stared and then all I could hear was you, screaming. The agony escaping your lungs. You tried pulling him inside, pulling him back alive it but it was too late. Through the whisky and the letter and the sound of his cracking body, you cradled his head. You pushed me away.

They say he died quick. That he went straight down. The car rose and fell over him. I wished it was me. I still wish that, Annie.

They're saying we're losing a lot of wildlife in these bush fires. It's the worst the country has ever seen.

The shelter's at capacity. There's not enough water. We're doing what we can. When chicks fall from their nests, you have to pick them up quick. Not with your hands, but with gloves. I listened to a man on the radio. He'd gone the bush, out near where you are. As I was listening, it went completely silent. I thought the signal had dropped out or something but, then he said, "hear that? That's the sound of nothing. There's nothing left out here. Not birds or insects to catch the wind. That silence – it's the sounds of death."

I'd like to see you again, Annie. There's still time. I could be a proper sister to you. I remember once, it was a natural impulse. Like reaching out to grasp your hand in the darkness in our room above the bar. Since that night, I'd try to follow the path of least resistance, but a trail is still carved out behind me. Like water, flowing through earth, slicing through the land, marking out the edge of survival. It's not enough to just follow the tilt of gravity. I need to choose where I go.

I could help you rebuild. After it rains, the forest will grow back and it will rain. That's something I've learned. Like people, the land has the capacity to survive. To heal. That's Jesse's doing, really. That lesson.

Did you know it takes eighty years for a cockatoo's life to be lived? I've always joke she'll outlive me but I think that's why, even though she's got an appetite to entertain, Jesse's a bird of patience.

If that was you on the news, let me know, hey, Annie?

[the sound of rain falling]

[Music]

You've been listening to the radio play, *The Cockatoo*, written by Laura Lethlean, directed by Katie Hawthorn, performed by Natasha Herbert, with sound design by Michele Vescio. This play is part of the Victorian Seniors Festival, *In The Groove*, Radio Reimagined in 2020. The audio material for this play was recorded remotely at the home of the performer.

This radio program was produced by the Radio Reimagined production team. Producer, Rob Gebert; Creative Director, Nat Grant; Technical Director, AC Hunter; and Post-Production Director, Michele Vescio.

For more information about the Festival and to hear more episodes like this one, please visit seniorsonline.vic.gov.au

[Music]