

# Childhood

PAUL WILLIAMS

'Stop it! Stop it!'

Arthur, Barry, Hank turn in unison, but when they see me, they laugh like cane toads and turn back to the task at hand. Arthur's aim is wide, but Barry's is deadly accurate. One pebble hits the tree trunk directly below the nest. Another whistles through branches and clatters on the bicycle shed roof.

'Wish I had my BB with me,' says Barry.

The other kids are watching. Laughing even. I am truly the alien here. No one else thinks it is an atrocity to kill baby birds in a nest.

'I'll report you. You can't do that. You can't. Stop it now!'

I have no power. Who will I report to? Their parents who buy them guns and encourage them to shoot small animals? The headmaster who drowns his cat's kittens at birth because there are too many of them? My father who admits he burned grasshoppers with a magnifying glass when he was a child?

Hopeless.

But I cannot stand by and do nothing. A fire burns in my chest.

It is Hank's stone that hits the nest. The crowd cheers. Down it comes, tumbling through leaves, hitting a branch, overturning. Out fall two baby currawongs, all beaks and claws and flapping grey feathers. They hit the gravel path hard. The mess of sticks follows. I rush to them, kneel to pick them up, I know what the boys will do if they get to them. One bird's wings sticks out horribly, and blood dribbles from the other's head. I scoop them up in my handkerchief and cushion them in my satchel between towel and swimmers.

The boys have caught up with me.

'Cockroach!' Arthur grabs for my satchel.

'Go away! Leave them alone.'

Barry kicks out at me. If they could, they would smash the birds' heads in. I have seen it before with the baby miners.

'Tree-Hugger!'

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.'

It's childish. I don't know why I say it. It is what little kids say when they have no power. And it's not true: of course words harm you. Words have deformed me; words have crippled my life.

'Well then,' says Hank, 'we'd better use sticks and stones then.'

I clutch the satchel in one hand and ride fast up the dirt track from the school bicycle shed, but do not get far when a pebble hits me in the back, then another, and then one smacks me bang on the side of my head. I pedal hard, steering with one hand, trying to keep the satchel steady.

'Gottim! Gottim!'

When I am out of range, I call back: 'One day the animals will rise up against you. You'd better make friends with them now because on that day... on that day...'

Their laughter follows me all the way up the hill.

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'Boys will be boys,' my father says at dinner that night. 'No, Danny, I'm not going to call Mr Johnson or Mr Walker. Sorry.' He takes a bite of steak, and I watch the blood ooze out onto his fingers. 'That's life, I'm afraid.'

'You should keep away from those boys,' adds my mother.

'Don't provoke them,' says my father.

'Aren't you eating?' My mother pushes my plate closer to me. I prod the steak with my fork, dip it in gravy and re-arrange my food.

'I don't feel hungry tonight.'

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Childhood is supposed to be the happiest time of your life, according to my parents. What they mean is that life only gets worse. Childhood is nothing more than powerlessness and fear. In the Great Chain of Being, a child is at the bottom with the animals. But adulthood is no better. If children are bullies, adults are worse: they cheat, lie, and become distorted caricatures of themselves. It is not advisable to grow up.

Only the animals have got it right. Animals are from a time before innocence was lost.

But the animals are an oppressed race. Their voices have been silenced.

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The baby birds are ugly things. I feed them raw mince, which I have to steal from the fridge and roll into little worms to drop into their wide beaks. I try to bind a foot with a bandage, but the bird pecks it off immediately; I dab ointment on their wounds. They are trusting souls, unafraid of humans. They will die, I know. I have only prolonged their suffering. I make a nest for them out of an apple box, stuff it with grass and leaves and mince worms. They caw and caw for their mother. I am your mother now, I whisper. I know, I don't speak your language, but I will look after you.

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Nature is cruel, predatory and cannibalistic. Life is harsh, hot and dry. Most children spend their time at the club swimming pool while parents drink and smoke themselves to death at the hotel bar. It is an empty life, one which I am expected to grow into. And 'grow up' means to become superficial and shallow, to work in some meaningless job that will drain whatever joy I am trying to cup in my soul. Harden in the sun like a prune. Deepen my genetically programmed fault lines until they are pronounced and habitual. 'Toughen up,' the adults say when I display that soft emotion I call childhood. 'This is life.'

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Next morning, I check to see if the baby currawongs are still alive. I somehow expect them to die. But they're fine. They caw when they see me hold out the mince balls. They flap their wings and claw my arm, unafraid. I have to administer water with a dropper, for I have no idea how they drink. I talk to them and they listen, their pied grey heads cocked onto one side, their gold eyes bright. They understand, if not the words, the soothing tone of empathy.

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Every night my parents huddle in front of the TV, lights on, windows shut against the darkness. I sit outside and stare up at the stars, breathe in the moist night air. I can see the stars in colour, in three dimensions, and can hear them. They make faint music barely audible to the human ear. They send messages to those who will listen.

I like the silence most of all. But it is never quite silent enough, even out here in the outback. Trucks strain up hills far away, or engage their brakes down the pass. The mine clatters and whines. And the television in the living room is louder than everything, a constant noise my parents use to fill the loneliness of their lives. They don't like me sitting outside every evening.

'Come inside, Danny, what are you doing out there? You'll be eaten by mozzies.'

'Your favourite program is on TV.'

'Don't you have any homework?'

'Such a strange boy.'

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I've had them for eight days now. They grow a lot. Still very downy on the underside. They are always hungry and I feed them crickets and worms when I can find them, and mince rolled into snake shapes when I cannot. They leap onto my hand and flap their untested wings. They need to learn to fly, but I do not know how to teach them.

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On the road outside my house, three older boys are squashing cane toads. They have collected an apple

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box full of them, and as they release them, the boy with the heavy boots leaps and stamps onto them, to the cheers of the others.

I run out to see at least twelve dead toads on the road. 'Stop that!'

The boys pause, and when they see it is me, they release another toad and leap onto it.

'Stop!'

'They're invasive pests,' calls out John Turkington. 'My dad says whenever you see a cane toad, you have to kill it. They destroy the environment. Didn't you know that?'

'No. Stop it. It's cruel, not matter what they are. They can't help being cane toads.'

John Turkington laughs. 'Stamp!' he says, leering into my face. 'They need to be stamped out. Stamp! Stamp! Stamp!'

And with each word, he ends the life of another toad. The road gleams with toad blood and toad innards. Intestines and colons and sinews are spread on the tarmac.

'We're the invasive pests,' I say. 'Humans are the invasive pests who destroy the environment!'

They stare.

'We need to be stamped out. Humans are the pests.'

I am surprised at what comes out of my mouth when I am angry and powerless. Even here in the heat of the moment when my cheeks are red and my voice quavery, I know I am being silly. Childish. What I am saying is not logical. Yet I insist. 'We are the only animal on the planet that destroys things. We are! We are!' I choke on my rage and the words come out as a stutter.

The youngest boy, at a nod from the others, pours the remainder of the toads out of the box, and in a free for all, the others squish, stamp, slide them into the tar.

'Join us, Danny,' calls John Turkington. 'It's the best fun ever!'

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It is a question of finding my voice. I have never had a voice. My sentences trail off like a slug's gleaming passage on a hot concrete driveway, dry up and die. I can never finish a sentence.

Swallows his words. My teachers write on my school reports: shy, soft spoken, quiet. Timid. Dreamy. There is a huge world inside me that can never emerge. I am like Dr Who's Tardis, small on the outside, and inside, a universe, a world spinning full of emotions, ambitions, yearnings, and most of all, words, sentences, long, long trails of sentences that flow endlessly out of me into the spiral entrails of galaxies. I want to be everything, everybody. I swell to burst every time I breathe. But nothing comes out.

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'Danny, what are you going to do about the birds?' my mother asks. 'They make such a racket all the time, and the box stinks. I'm worried they'll attract snakes.'

'Wring their bloody necks,' says my father. 'That's what I would do. They're pests. Currawongs steal eggs from other birds, you know. And they wake me up in the morning with that godawful racket. Get rid of them, Danny. Or I will.'

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I am worried about leaving the birds on their own, exposed in the back garden. There are too many predators on the ground and I am afraid that one day I will return from school to find the birds dismembered and eaten by some fox or dingo. And now I have to worry about my father too. He's done it before. They need to be safe.

But already their instincts are at work. That afternoon, I find them leaping off the edge of the box, flapping their wings and plummeting to the ground. They return and try over and over again, cawing in triumph when they are airborne. I pile grass for them to land into to stop them hurting themselves, they are so determined. I encourage them to keep trying, acting as their ski lift every time they tumble to the ground, and muttering encouragement in the coos and caws of what I think must be bird language.

The bird with the damaged leg takes his first faltering flight. His sibling joins him. They do one circuit, then another. I whistle in encouragement, and they caw in delight at their new found power. A few more wobbly landings, a few more circuits, and they are qualified navigators of the air.

At first they can only circle my head and land in the

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low branches of the gumtree, but each time they go off, they fly further away. Finally they soar over the roof of the house. I expect them to disappear forever, but here they are, returning in triumph, calling loudly, hungry for their next meal. They always return. This is home, and I am their mother. How long does all this take, I want to know, for currawongs to grow up.

Childhood is a golden age, the best time of your life, I tell them. Better enjoy it while you can, little currawongs. Humans are your enemy, I tell them. Fear them! Don't trust any of them.

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But I don't have to worry. Nature takes care of its own.

One morning, as the baby currawongs peck mince snakes from my hands and clamber onto my shoulder, I hear an urgent cawing.

Overhead I see two dots. Two shadows in the sky circle the house, descend and glide with their wings outstretched. Their feathers are like fingers spread in the wind. I think of predators and shield the babies under my arms as a mother would. But then I see two large glossy currawongs. They caw again, speaking a language I now understand.

The baby birds understand too. They wriggle apologetically out of my hands and waddle out in the clearing where they can see their parents in the sky.

The two birds circle twice, calling, watching me with cautious eyes.

And then the two babies—healed, plump, ready—leap into the air. They flap hard, squeak a greeting to their soaring parents. They take their place between them, fly higher and higher in the blue haze. I watch them become four tiny dots, listen to the echo of their distant cawing. And then they are gone.

#### **Author**

Paul Williams grew up in Zimbabwe and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin (USA). His young adult novel *The Secret of Old Mukiwa* won the Zimbabwe International Book Fair fiction prize (2001). He has also published several short stories and a memoir (*Soldier Blue*, 2008) about growing up in the Zimbabwe civil war. At present, he teaches Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.