

From the Kitchen

30 May 2012



Littoral perambulations punctuate my literary journeys. Sauntering along the beach allows me to cogitate, dream and kick seashells at squawking gulls. The water-sand interface reminds me of all that is ephemeral, whether rearranged gently by the lapping water or washed clean by huge, wind-driven waves. Tomorrow a new arrangement of flotsam will paint the beach with another temporary frieze.

We humans gravitate to that which we perceive as permanent. Nothing is. England is shrinking, symbolic of its shrinking global influence, as its east coast dissolves in the North Sea. Closer to home in Australia, bits of cliff fall away from time to time, leaving houses cantilevered over the briny, to eventually succumb to gravity themselves. Farther away, a comet meets a fiery end as it is drawn into a gaseous giant planet. Stars occasionally blow up, giving rise to magnificent displays of gas and debris, whose viewing through telescopes has us gasp in wonder.

We live our lives looking forward to ephemeral events, such as the brief flowering of plants. The briefer the flowering (such as of the *Rafflesia*) the more we seem to look forward to seeing it.

The rows of rotting seaweed and other marine life left by the receding tide are testimony to impermanence. So are the males of some species, who die immediately after mating, and the females of others, who die shortly after depositing their eggs.

Wandering through the forest, I wonder about all the living organisms, from the huge trees to the microscopic bugs, and that they only know the moment. Does living in the moment lead to a sense of what we would call eternity, because there is no consciousness of before and after? How does eternity relate to permanence? We know that there are many species (apart from *H. sapiens*) in which individuals experience the loss of something that once was and is no more, such as a mate or, in the case of dogs, a human companion. Do such creatures have a sense of the ephemeral nature of existence or do they, through feeling loss, show that they expect things to be permanent?

Meandering through said forest or perambulating along said foreshore, I can delight in everything around me, ephemeral as it is. As soon as I try to capture anything with my camera, I am trying to freeze the experience. There is a paradox in this: the instant captured by the camera is an instant I fail to experience with my own eyes, because the opening of the shutter to expose the film or sensor freezes me out. My visual experience of that moment (I can still smell and hear it) is the same as that of anyone I show the photo to – there is only the photo.

I know that many of the photos I take have nothing to do with an attempt to create permanence (of a scene, a view, an experience) but are attempts to see and share a different perspective or context for what may mostly seem mundane. But even in that noble process I am taking myself out of the immediate and the immediately accessible. I could experience and enjoy these different perspectives and contexts without resorting to any optical technology. I can experience the extra-ordinary simply by experiencing it.

My writing can be looked at in the same way. My creative mind and imagination gush forth ideas and images almost without surcease and I try to explore some of this flow in words on paper. The thoughts and images are ephemeral, yet I try to give them a semblance of permanence. Do they have more value, or a different value, for being accessible to others? Maybe so, because many of my thoughts and imaginings are stimulated by those of other people made available to me through their writing.

We seem to crave permanence in so many things, such as our relationships. Our marriage ceremonies include vows to stay together forever, or at least until one dies. We read stories to our children in which protagonists live happily ever after. In seeking this permanence, even though we know it to be a myth, we may be missing out on – even avoiding – experiencing the ephemeral moment. If we expect something to be forever, we may not make any effort to ensure the magic of the now. The album of happy wedding photos can be trotted out as a reminder of the promise of for ever and to help make the present moment less painful or less ordinary.

Many people become concerned when learning of the impermanence of the earth and the sun. Though the sun will probably burn as it does now for another five billion years, they are concerned about what will happen when it eventually swells and engulfs the earth. Even if humans as a species survive as long as the dinosaurs did, no-one's descendants will have to endure the frying of this planet. However, because of a fallacious sense of the unchanging nature of the planet, we may well doom our near descendants and all other life to extinction, through a failure to appreciate or even see the changes that are happening this very moment.