I worry about things a lot. I find it really awful the way that we’re treating our environment, a lot of people are just so dismissive of the problems that are in the environment. I mean you look around and they’re like ‘Oh we’re fine, look the sky is still blue, the trees are still green, everything’s still functioning’, and they don’t see that it’s only just still functioning, it’s on the brink of, it may not be in our lifetime but it’s all going to come crumbling down. Do you really want to ruin it for other generations?

(Mirabelle, interview)

It’s something that as humans we have the responsibility to be doing more towards preventing climate change from worsening. I feel like we could be doing a lot more than what we are already doing, and it’s worrying that the environment that we know today might not be the same for our future generations, so my grandkids or my great grandkids might not experience the environment in the same ways that I have, there might not be the same animals. And that’s really sad.

(Kelly, interview)

Mirabelle (15) and Kelly (16) were interviewed for this final chapter of our book in order to begin and end with the views of young people. We started the book with Clayton, who was four, and we finish the book with teenage girls who have a lot to say about children, place and sustainability. Like Clayton, the girls are growing up in the shadow of a ‘crumbling’ world, with the sense that the world is on the brink of collapse. For Clayton this is manifest in the tension between a world
going faster and faster to fling off all the rubbish on Australia and the necessary and inevitable anchors that are holding it in place. For the older children, tension is held in their perception of a world that is only just still functioning and we are not doing enough to forestall its disintegration. Through this apocalyptic storyline they inherit a sense of failed responsibility to future generations of humans and to the animals destined for extinction. These are powerful stories transmitted in language that produce strong emotions. The ways that they negotiate the impact and meaning of these stories is threaded throughout the interview in the play of light and dark, the spoken and the unspoken, and what lies in between.

Mirabelle and Kelly move between the globally distant and intimately personal in their responses to questions of what is the ‘environment’, what is ‘nature’, and how they think about ‘sustainability’. Even in their definitions of these words their struggles to understand and negotiate a meaningful position for themselves can be heard. Mirabelle defined the environment as ‘the world in which we live, like everything, the trees, the plants, the rocks, the cars, the fences, everything is part of the environment and everything contributes to its wellbeing’. When trying to distinguish ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ she said, ‘I differentiate them by the way that the words make me feel, like nature’s sort of happy, beautiful, laughter, love filled, like with life and stuff, and environment is just completely everything, all of the notions mashed into a word, and like anger, but love as well’. Environment is the location of struggle, a powerful word that embodies both human and non-human but also, significantly, the mysterious workings of language and strong emotions like love and anger. Nature on the other hand is potential, it is free of these connotations; as Kelly says, ‘Nature is like the substance behind the environment, so it’s like the plants and the animals and the living and the non-living and it’s more like, nature is the substance and environment is how it all works together.’

Their point of entry into the other of what environment might mean is through their relationships with their dogs. Dogs had been part of the world prior to their coming into it; both girls were born into families with dogs. They said, ‘dogs think about their environment as in their territories and your territories and where they should pee and where they should poo, and where they come every morning to get their food, that’s part of their environment’. They see dogs as having ‘a different sort of access to the environment, how they smell each other’s scents and stuff’, in their dog world communications. But most of all it was their intimate relation with their dog others that was important to them.