

Jokes about trees: A wannabe greenie loosens her roots

Philosophy always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to “creation of the world,” to *causa prima*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Sap and Sweat

I'm crouched in the shed. The square of cardboard in front of me is one flank of a removalist's box. The paint (“eggshell white”) doesn't know how lucky it is to escape the lounge-room walls. With it I'm about make history. Brush in hand and rumple on brow I spell out the fiercest edict my truculent twelve year old self can muster: STOP MURDERING TREES. In my younger days my insides chilled at the mere whisper of *murder*. The word is long and insidious, like a psycho killer's knife slicing through ribs. Now almost a teenager, I relish its potential to terrify. I must protect my flock and only the mightiest words will do.

The paint dried, I tape my bold sign to a knobbly yet faithful bushwalking stick. I step upon the freshly lain footpath outside our house (on which my poorly tattooed initials reside to this day) and squint in the concrete glare. Stretching up and down Target Road are neat white-bricked dwellings and green lawns, rose bushes and peppermint saplings. Shade is a

distant hope for this young suburb. Two blocks to my right I can still see where the asphalt and houses end and bush and gravel begin. I head in that direction, paint fumes wafting from the picket by my side.

My neighbourhood was in “the good half” of Albany’s inland suburbs. We were elevated enough to glimpse a semi-precious splinter of the ocean, and government housing lay on the other side of the drain (“Yakamia Creek”) at the bottom of the hill. It was the very definition of platitude. A neighbour once scolded me and my siblings for scribbling on the road with coloured chalk. I’m sure he blamed us for Target Road’s crushing defeat in the Best Kept Street competition, to the unbeatably prim cul-de-sac behind us. A house residing on this stark lineation was defined not so much by its inimitable architecture but its owner’s quaint personal touches: a standing flamingo here, an exotic flower bed there. Our house’s emblem was a whopping great cement wheel painted brown. An ingenuous landscaper thought it’d lend the property “rustic” charm. Amid such confounding uniformity it instead became a marker so friends could find us. Most would drive straight past, failing to spot the lumbering disk, sadly obscured over the years by a hedge.

At the end of our suburban channel nested a stretch of bush land. Target Road – aptly named after the department store – ended in red gravel and several sandy vehicle tracks wound into a tangle of peppermints, sheoaks, ferns and wildflowers. Four wheel drivers, ’roos, BMX riders, lizards, bushwalkers and snakes alike frequently traversed these thoroughfares. Bandicoots were often spotted and any number of birds flitted around the canopy from crows and wood pigeons to pink galas, honey eaters and the laughing kookaburra, a blow-in from the eastern states. Sheoak needles hitchhiked on your socks and if you ventured far enough your feet would get soaked in the swampy mess ensconced in thickets of tall bulrush. I don’t know how old the bush was, but I liked to imagine the eucalypts were in their hundreds, sullenly creaking their branches at the kids smoking pot on the bike jumps. Perhaps they were ancient. The triangular stretch of valley between Target Road, Ulster Road to the south and Bond Road to the north is swampland, and while patches above Ulster are cleared for farming, most of the remaining land is too wet to develop. Surrounded by bitumen alleys and somehow evading reserve status, the bush here became well acquainted with human contrivance. Not only rainwater drained into the mire at the bottom of my street but suburban collateral of all shapes and states of dereliction.

Funny, when memories of the place spark my mind they usually portray a lush, shady enclave matted with needles and wildflowers and damp with morning dew. But if there’s cause for extended reminiscing, different memories, visual, aural, olfactory memories, soon crowd at the gates. I remember the bush often smelt rotten. One particular pond was embedded so deep in the jumble I only came across it twice. Both times I smelt it before I saw it. For reasons I shudder to imagine it had been cordoned off with rusty wire fencing. I’d

come across the stained husks of cars wedged between trees. Some burnt out but the ones with intact seating invariably hoarded piles of empty beer cans and faded porno mags. Bottles, cans, paper and twisted scrap metal littered the place. It was bush land decorated with corroded, human trace elements. I never personally witnessed the act of rubbish disposal; I rarely saw anybody on my walks besides the odd afternoon stroller, pooch on leash. The litter was like a poltergeist's tacky ectoplasm; haunting clutter reminding me I wasn't the first person to traipse here nor would I be the last. There were mouldy mattresses and stinking refrigerators, doors agape like props in an 80's post-apocalyptic sci-fi. Sometimes I found old toys: a ragged cabbage patch doll with scratched out eyes, a parched plastic T. rex, the paint scratched off its tiny scales. I'd spend hours inspecting junk and creating the backstories of previous owners. I'd dread finding the grisly remains of a murder victim, a sullied white hand poking from a shallow grave like the opening scene of a *CSI* episode. The grey sheoaks certainly cast a fitting gloom for homicide. Unfortunately birds were the main fatalities. Occasionally the mangled white, black and yellow body of a New Holland Honeyeater lay slumped by a track, clawed to death by a prowling neighbourhood cat.

Some might have called the bush fringing my suburb a cesspool. I'd have fought them. Now machines had trundled in ready to knock it down for houses and there I stood on the footpath, holding a homemade signpost, ready to launch a one-person campaign to defend my ramshackle scrubland.

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When I was born my parents lived in Ludlow, a forestry settlement just outside Busselton. Mum looked after my sister and Dad worked as a forester for the Department of Conservation and Land Management. I spent the first two years of my life in an old jarrah cabin supplied by the department, surrounded by pine plantations and tuart forest.

Tuarts are endemic to Western Australia and grow on the limestone sands skirting the coast. They used to stretch from the Sabina River south of Bunbury to the Arrowsmith River 300 kilometres north of Perth. Now they're confined to the Ludlow Forest between Busselton and Capel, hedged in by the Vasse and Wonnerup Estuaries to the west, swamps and the Bussell Highway to the east.

Before Europeans invaded ("settle" is something one does in a chair, not on someone else's land), Aboriginal people hunted on the estuaries and in the open tuart forest. The trees were sparse so grass grew plentifully without manmade fire to coax it. Initially the Wardandi people helped the Europeans find fresh water. Soon, though, the land was overrun with cattle and sheep and the forests steadily cleared for timber. Pushed off their

hunting grounds the local people occasionally picked off livestock to survive. In 1837, nine Wardandi were shot dead for killing a cow. The bloodshed was not without consequence. Constable Elijah Dawson was speared in his cottage a month later. Colonial animosity wasn't only on gastronomic grounds, either. White man George Layman was killed in 1841 after allegedly taking a married Wardandi woman as his maid. Seven Aboriginal people were shot in the hunt for Layman's assailant as well as tribal leader Gaware, two weeks later. I wonder where the names of the Wandandi killed lie now. Maybe the tuarts keep the names under their bark or on the tongues of their leaves. Tuarts can last five hundred years. Maybe there are a few left to remember.

With shame but little surprise, I admit I still didn't know about this dark period of southwest history until quite recently. I can tell you more about Western Australia's forestry industry than the atrocities committed against Indigenous people and you can bet the two are mixed up in ways lost to the history books. Latent racism in the words of friends, family, even strangers on the street, all must thread back to early years of assault and occupancy. The country is not innocent. For one hundred years white foresters and farmers cleared and tilled, grazed and razed, quarried lime, ousted native heartleaf shrubs poisonous to their cattle. The fear of a Nyungar spear must have kept them up at night, listening hard through the salty westerly for the crackle of footsteps. The comfort of total possession came gradually over decades. In the mid-1800s it was made illegal for an Aboriginal person to light fires in a forest. And we'll never know how the forests felt about that.

In 1918 forester Charles Lane Pool ordained an Act that repurchased land between the Capel and Ludlow Rivers from private owners for the purpose of growing tuarts for harvest. Despite the rapid discovery by foresters that tuarts are a devil to regenerate due to their infrequent and vulnerable flower cycles, logging of the rare species continued right up to the 1970s and grazing herds through the tuarts was still popular to reduce the understory's fuel load. Over the last twenty years the method of regeneration has been to clear, dry and burn a hectare of forest to create an ash bed. There, hand-planted, if not naturally seeded tuarts can germinate without competition.

The fact my family lived in a forest that for nigh on fifty thousand years was home to another people is totally sobering. It seems the forest was arrogated, abused, and then protected and "rehabilitated" all by the same social lineage, leading right up to my parents in the 1980s, and to me in the 2000s. And now only a few months ago scientists declared the tuart ecosystem "collapsed" – a combination of the drying climate, rising salinity, disrupted fire patterns, insect infestation, a crowded understory and permanent clearing. A lot's gone wrong. Do we have time to get it right?

Concern for the environment has been a feature in my family since before I popped into the world. Mum and Dad were members of the Friends of the Tuart Forest. They

attended meetings in Peppermint Grove and Mum drew illustrations for the newsletter. Her proudest sketch refers to a proposal to develop one half of the estuary wetlands: a sad migratory bird, suitcase under wing, stands at the junction between development and “habitat”. After a thousand mile journey from Japan it’s arrived to find half its nesting range concreted over.

Attempts to mine in the tuart forest continued into the 90s, well after my family had left for Busselton. In 1993 forty police broke up a protest camp of seventy Forest Rescue members. Cable Sands Ltd had just received the go-ahead to mine sand in Ludlow Forest. I remember hearing adults mutter about old growth trees, but Dad would say *technically* they weren’t old growth but *regrowth* trees, albeit one hundred year old regrowth trees. My sister swears she remembers Dad getting into a verbal stoush with some of Mum’s more liberal friends, but they deny it. I was young and talk of the protests impressed me. I imagined rows of rag-tag people chained to trees, bark stained with sweat, dreadlocks sticky with burgundy sap. Trees – big, old, rusty trees – must be sacred for people to lay down their livelihoods for them. *One day I’ll do that*, I thought.

I was a baby in Ludlow and I don’t remember a skerrick of it. But somehow, occasionally, I’m transported to the cool, shady dampness of our cottage’s back porch. I can smell the dark, oiled jarrah, hear the shiver of ring tailed possum claws on the tin roof, catch the vivid green of overgrown grass surrounding us like a mote, and see those ashen-barked tuarts dewy in morning sunlight. These memories, of course, are imposters, implants of the photographs Dad took of Mum coddling my sister and me on our verandah, succulents in hanging-pots strung from the eaves and leafy canopies in the background. I’m sure we returned to Ludlow once or twice to visit old friends, but Mum doesn’t think so.

If photographs unleashed mnemonic phantoms in my head, it was a painting that fastened the past to my heart. The artist was a neighbour in Ludlow, Daph. I remember salt and pepper hair and honey – did she keep bees? Daph gifted my parents a painting shortly before I was born. When we moved to Busselton they hung the painting on the bricks opposite the front door, next to the jarrah staircase. It never moved for eight years and I examined its every inch. The frame is narrow and unadorned, stained jarrah, deep chocolaty red. Standing in the centre, without fuss, is a single tuart. Its wide, purplish-grey trunk fills the foreground, rising into forked branches. Bright mossy grass and ochre soils lay in patches at its broad base. You can’t see the top, instead the canopy retreats into shadowy blue brush strokes. Tuarts lined the road from Busselton to Bunbury; driving through to visit family we saw them all the time. But this painted tree had the quality of fantasy about it. It was the shade for a teddy bears’ picnic, a secret abode for fairies, a Faraway Tree which reached up to meet other worlds, never the sky. I could step into that painting and rest in its shade, climb in its boughs to have a chat with the birds. I’ve thought of this painting and suddenly been

brought to tears with – what, homesickness? Some strange longing for a composite of childhood dreams.

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Once, when I was eight or nine, we were in the car driving home from Perth along Bussell Highway. Trips to the big city were rare since we had disappointingly few familial obligations there. For one reason or another I had decided to say the word “tree” over and over – and over – again. Perhaps I still hadn’t outgrown the child’s love of repetition. Perhaps I’d extracted the idea from a movie with talking animals. Perhaps I was bored. Whatever the reason: “Tree, tree, tree, tree, tree, tree, tree”, I recited under my breath. I didn’t stop until suddenly, to my surprise, trees stopped being trees. “Tree, tree, tree ... tree? Tree! Tr-ree-eee”. I sounded the word out, examining every phonetic of its single, trilling syllable. I remember feeling delighted with the lingual confusion. I asked my parents what a tree was. For God’s sake, what is a tree? I looked out of our Commodore’s window and saw trees, but they weren’t trees anymore, they were widows of the English language. Dismorphic hunks of carbon squeezed out of the dirt. Earth pimples. Skyscrapers. Thick, thousand-fingered hands with atmospheric pretensions. They were alive and whizzing past me on a treadmill.

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Our backyard in Busselton rambled for what seemed miles. Gnarled eucalypts lined the left fence, their wide leaves home to clusters of spitting caterpillars in summer and autumn. We covered our eyes against their stinging chartreuse ejections. Mum planted a kind of fairy garden complete with winding limestone pathway. I avoided that area too ever since my face stuck to a web full of Christmas spiders laced between bushes. There was plenty of lawn to muck about on and Dad even cemented a basketball court next to the shed. The right hand fence shouldered jasmine creepers while Mum’s rose garden bordered the court. The beach was half a block away and Dad’s handmade gate in the back fence provided easy access on hot summer days. My sister, younger brother and I were on the verge of spoiling. But Mum, being a country girl from a Dardanup dairy farm, always regretted we didn’t have “a bit of bush” nearby to play in.

Trees were ever present, even without “a bit of bush” close by. In the summer my parents sold Christmas trees – bushy, spider-laden pines with accompanying metal tree-stands. They always let us kids choose the household tree from the ones left over. Invariably it’d be huge and unwieldy, with sparse, low-hanging branches. You had to watch out the fat, brown spiders didn’t fall on you while you were decorating it. The sticky, sweet smell of pine still takes me back there.

These days I'm embarrassed to admit it: Life in Busselton, as a kid, was brilliant. Luckily for this story my life took a turn for the mildly horrifying. At the end of the 90s the new Labour government scaled back the state's timber operations and Dad took a job offer from one of the private companies taking over the plantations. This meant moving south to the "Rainbow Coast", a pleasant way of saying "it's cold and wet here". Our last day on Marine Terrace Mum had to drag me out of the hallway cupboard.

Eleven is old enough to feel planted in a place and during those first years in Albany a sharp sense of dislocation would have me sobbing under my quilt at night. The five hour vehicular expanse between Busselton and Albany felt like an ocean. I missed the southwest. I missed swimming at the beach without getting my face blown off by southern winds. I missed feeling dwarfed by armies of gigantic, straight-backed tuarts that threw sunlight in shards upon the ground. I missed taking day trips with Dad to gather firewood in back-block acres. Dodging bull ants, squishing slow-poke marchies and sneezing in the sawdust of freshly chain-sawed logs (picked up from the ground, of course).

Daph's painting found a new spot in the lounge room, behind a door. I felt it quietly hanging there all the same.

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I am on Target Road holding my homemade sign on the footpath. It's the moment when I'd finally stick it to the Man. I'd confront those bulldozers dismembering the bush; fling myself in front of the cold metal machines and raise my sign to the heavens. The destruction would stop as the workmen, red with outrage, summoned the police. Cameras would catch me being hauled away. I'd get on TV, or at least the front page of the Albany Advertiser. A public outpouring of support would follow, putting a complete stop to any more housing developments.

It was to be my redemption. I knew that under our house there was soil, and from that soil once grew trees. And unlike a house, men hadn't laid splinter upon stump with sap in a cement-mixer to build all those trees, they had grown with their own gumption out of dirt and thin air like magic. They'd got so high that, like a bird shot mid-flight, their levelling was undignified and disturbing. The bush was an open-air horror show – a refuge for society's waste – but there was life there, there were small ecosystems of bacteria and fungi and insects and lizards, birds and bandicoots. Did clearing it all out justify four bedrooms and a two-car garage?

Why would a suburban kid with atheistic leanings, in the world's wealthiest five per cent (which dismally includes anyone with loose change in their pocket), whose family is intact, indeed has never been wrenched apart by violence or social iniquity; for whom war is

a generation, not to mention oceans, away; who owns a pet which is also one of the biggest threats to native wildlife – why would that kid care? Why do any of us care about that undefinable thing nature?

Perhaps it has less to do with inherent values than that peculiar animal tendency to get attached to places; worked in, lived in, loved in places. Perhaps we care for the same reason a Carnaby's cockatoo is drawn miles east to nest, or a tuart tree only thrives in the alkaline soils along the coast. Perhaps it's chemistry, the thing that magnetises place, some subtle attraction, pheromones, for instance. We're all made from the same Bang, if you believe it. All carbon and water. Or perhaps "nature" is for the lonely. I didn't know where I belonged anymore – what it's like to be the new kid at school if you're shy and gawky. I didn't need a cause I needed a friend.

How does *feeling* human affect our relationship with *things*? How does living on a particular street in a particular suburb in a particular country on planet earth affect our relationship to *matter*? All those intertwined dimensions which form an individual life – ancestry, social standards, technology, global economies – must help form our relationship with the rocks and clouds, spiders and leaves, vegetables, fibres and herbs, the fossils in our cars, the minerals in our computers, the wood in our houses.

I simply want my trees to be safe. I take my sign and wander tentatively down to the work site. The bulldozers are empty; the workmen have gone home for the day. I glance around to see if anyone is looking. My pulse is racing. Somehow I feel embarrassed. I quickly place the sign against the blade of one of the machines and scuttle back home. The development goes ahead. The houses are built, families move in, everyone forgets.

Moss in Tyre Tracks

Perhaps I should have stayed in Albany. Surprisingly, moving from a fairly peaceful rural town to a fairly peaceful metropolitan area was a significant change. I wasn't five minutes from the beach anymore and I could hear traffic constantly. The university campus was the closest thing I had to the bush and the sudden appearance of peacocks would ruin that delusion. For three years I didn't visit an extent that wasn't thoroughly overrun by humans. I found myself missing trees, again. I missed their old-timer presence, missed having my fallible human senses engulfed by bigger, wiser carbon life forms.

Last year I eloped to Pemberton for a "Romantic Weekend Getaway". We stayed in the town but were keen to venture into the forest. I wanted to walk among the painted karris and fill my lungs with that familiar earthy scent of plantlife. Rie had grown up in mallee country northeast of Albany and wanted to experience the famous gargantuans. We took a guided tour through National Forest, craned our necks looking up at colossal karris and

marris, beheld the creeping white Yeagarup Dunes silently enveloping the habitat, and visited the Gloucester Tree, one of seven look-outs used to spot fires up until the 1950s. I promptly regressed to a childish condition and clambered up its side while Rie stood at the bottom, wringing her hands.

It was magical but oh, how conscious I was of the cliché we were performing. “Jaded metropolitans escape the hustle and bustle for a fleeting soiree in the forest” – *yawn*. I felt like a prodigal daughter returning to the family fold for a half-hearted stopover, wolfing down the home-cooked feed and bugging off. What place did I have here anymore? I was commodifying the forest as a paying tourist, turning it into an exposed, disposable leisure ground. My shoes could spread dieback disease. I had no regard for the Pibbulmun people of the region. It is not my land. It is not my place. I still loved the place but after my trip I suspected my claims of belonging were tenuous at best and plain arrogant at worst.

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My father, uncle and most of their friends are or were previously involved in forestry. I’m hesitant about claiming this heritage. Foresters have got a bad reputation over the years and unfortunately the stereotype of the axe-wielding, nature-hating, pyromaniac forester was largely perpetuated by the green groups I always admired (and still do, but for different reasons).

In my experience, if there’s one thing a forester loves, it’s a forest. I know – crazy. Forestry is not one of those professions you get into if you’re allergic to the outdoors; to the contrary one might postulate that a veritable fixation with fresh air and greenery is a vocational prerequisite. Most people who pursue the career will profess some connection to this particular ecosystem, whether they grew up near a forest, enjoyed camping or hiking in one, or like me have it running in the family. Most, though I might as well say all, foresters love seeing a healthy forest and spend their entire working life trying to maintain the well-being of trees.

It’s a wonder I’m not a forester myself. I suppose there is a level of ambiguity – for example, I’ve often wondered what foresters actually do. I had vague notions of my father surveying soils and saplings, measuring the girth of “big’uns”, planting trees (Dad was always a guest at our Busselton school on Arbour Day, helping each class plant seedlings on the grounds), and generally marching around the forests making notes about the condition of leaves and bark and things. It always seemed a rather benign occupation.

I guess I could never really picture my Dad as the bad guy when it came to conflicts over the southwest forests. And up until this year I preserved an ignorant bliss,

simultaneously disavowing forest logging and removing foresters from these unpleasant operations. I thought most timber products came from plantations, anyway.

It was the Save Warrup campaign earlier this year that finally brought these issues to the surface. I'd read about it online and seen the articles in the newspaper. Forest Rescue was at it again, its members operating clandestine missions in the forest, chaining themselves to machinery in the night to stop the logging. With a mix of admiration and incredulity, nostalgia and a quiver of personal regret, I decided to investigate.

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Dad warned me against entering the forest alone. He worried about the lack of mobile reception and knows full well how easy it is to lose one's bearings amongst trees. He put the fear in us from a young age with stories about children who'd taken one step off the beaten path, turned around and wham! Lost to the bush fairies – and you had better hoped Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie found you before the Banksia men. We even had a print of Frederick McCubbin's "Lost" hanging in the hallway, in case we forgot.

As it happened, I didn't get lost, or bogged, or injured, although I had ten "missed calls" from Dad after regaining mobile reception. I wanted to see Warrup for myself, to get a picture of what all the fuss was about. I drove down from Perth through Bridgetown along the South Western Highway. True to Google Maps I found the turn-off at Cosy Creek Road and trundled along the gravel past a few green paddocks and farm houses. Feeling like a trespasser and waiting for some rusted-out ute to come chasing after me à la "Deliverance", I made it through and soon enough jarrah trees encircled me. A faded wooden sign informed me I was travelling along John Road. On I went for what seemed like aeons. The forest around me was quite open and I could see where it had been cut before.

Abruptly, I found what I'd come for. A sign at a gravel T-junction commanded me to stop. No unauthorised entry. Beyond, along the right-hand road, I heard the groans and moans of metal machines and through the trees saw indistinct orange and yellow linear objects moving with clunks and snaps. I waited for the sky to turn black with belching smoke like it does in "Fern Gully". Nope. I wanted to go further but according to the sign I needed high-vis gear and a hard hat. Those Forest Rescuers were braver than me. I sat in my car and listened instead.

With trees on all sides, the incongruous sound of machines made me uneasy. I drove back along John's Road and pulled over by an overgrown intersection of track. I decided not to heed my father's warnings and go for a walk.

The forest is punctuated with severed trunks and cut branches which make starkly unnatural edges against the roughness of the bush. Grey termite mounds stick out like warts on the face of a sleeping giant. Jumbles of dead wood are heaped at random – either felled

by axe or storm. Every now and again I hear the faint drone of an engine. I haven't seen a bird yet, but maybe I'm making too much noise indelicately clambering over the barrel-like logs that lay across the path at intervals. Moss grows in the bare stretches made bald from vehicle tyres. Evidence of the human activity of bygone days is everywhere. I start recognising faces, characters, in the landscape. I'm compelled to sketch them. I draw a shocked Cyclops, its mouth a gaping, burnt-out hollow. A dead tree with its top snapped off becomes a dog howling at the sky or a serpent twisting up into the heavens. Looking further afield I see streams of leaf and bark flowing up or down, I can't tell. I'd intended to bring a camera but am thankful I forgot. The pen feels less mediated than the lens; less energy expended bringing ink to paper than light to pixel. Or am I mistaken? Drawing and writing trees upon decimated trees, the artist faces an uncomfortable irony.

I leave Warrup feeling weirdly relaxed but none the wiser. I have no idea what a "healthy" forest looks like. It would take more than a lifetime, a millennia of lifetimes, to understand how the system (what is a better word than system, body?) of a forest works (work? Is harmonise a better word? Orchestrate? Create?). Better to ask one of the people whose ancestors lived here the longest time ago. But I don't know any Aboriginal people. I wish I did. These two hundred years past are crushing, today. Australia is compressed between its sore, swollen history and the future, standing before us, wielding a big stick and leering.

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The Save Warrup campaign that had captured the media's attention, if briefly, was all but over by May. The Bridgetown-Greenbushes Friends of the Forest achieved modest success protecting a number of historic tram lines and sections of the forest. I contacted their president, Richard Wittenoom, by email and asked him how he thought people related to the natural environment and the world views that inform that relationship. He promptly got back to me and, though personally busy, provided me with a list of good people to talk to. I noticed most lived in Perth's flush western suburbs and wondered about the connection between wealth, education and environmentalism. I'm still working that one out.

Richard recommended I talk with Dr Beth Schultz, one of Western Australia's longest serving environmental campaigners. When I rang Beth the new proposed Forestry Management Plan was making its way to parliament. This plan sets out the quotas for timber over the next five years and has sent environmental groups into overdrive. In his email Richard mentioned a meeting the Western Australian Forest Alliance (WAFA) was holding in Bridgetown to discuss how their game plan. He said to ask Beth if I might attend. To my relief when I rang her Nedlands home she was not too busy to talk and we ended up chatting for almost an hour.

Beth grew up on a cattle farm in Brigalow in country Queensland. She was taught to shoot by her father but always felt bad about the animals she killed; even regretting the death of feral rabbits and foxes. She recalled a cousin who returned from World War Two and refused to slaughter even his own chooks. In the 40s her family moved to Surfers' Paradise. Fighting the sand mines on the beaches became Beth's first venture in conservation. Beth moved to Perth in 1970 and soon discovered the karri forests down south. She has toiled ceaselessly for the forests to this day.

I was immediately impressed with the passion resounding in Beth's words, now in her seventies. Her voice became quick and strong talking about the forests, brittle and bracing when referring to foresters, dark with dismay on the topic of fire. The Department of Environment and Conservation's burning off is a major point of contention for environmental groups.

"Aboriginal people never lit fires in the karri forest – they barely went in there because it was taboo. We can't even tell what kind of burning regimes Aboriginal people kept because from the 1860s they could be lashed for lighting fires. The forest wouldn't burn anyway, it's too wet. One hundred and fifty years ago you could probably 'drive a coach and four' through the forest, not because fire was more frequent but *less*. Prescribed burning only started in 1952 and by that stage it was to protect plantations, not because it was ecologically sound. Today's forests have dense understories precisely because of the Department of Environment and Conservation's excessive burning – burning promotes growth."

I was floored by the suggestion that burning off might actually warp the forest ecosystem. I was always taught that fire was an ordinary part of the Australian landscape and that forestry fires were specifically engineered to replicate both Aboriginal methods and naturally-occurring patterns of burning. I furiously took notes while Beth indicted the Department's practice of clear felling to stimulate growth, the waste involved in "sustainable" harvesting and the innumerable breaches of protocol designed to limit the spread of dieback, the deadly waterborne mould killing off trees across the southwest. The Department was one thing; I asked how she felt about foresters in particular.

"The first time I encountered foresters they were extremely rude and told us to 'bugger off.'"

She didn't know how the people at the Department slept at night with the lies they told to the public. For example, the timber acquired from logging State Forest doesn't only come from the ground; standing trees are also chopped. I told her my father and uncle are foresters and I can't bring myself to believe that they've been lying to me all these years.

"They don't think they're lying, that's the thing. It's really more to do with worldviews. People believe what they want to believe and only look for evidence that supports their own

agenda. And I suppose I'm the same. I'll reject anything that doesn't support my own worldview."

It seemed like a fair statement. What is an opinion but experience, distilled; an ancient impulse to will? Believing it's okay to burn and chop down a forest is as common sense to some as believing in God is to others. Perhaps forestry and environmentalism aren't so different. Both require faith: The former in science, research, tradition, all fallible in their own ways. The latter faith that "nature" is better off without humans, a far from innocent idea itself. Both sides use science to support their arguments, but forming an argument is an exercise in selection and exclusion.

I can guess why people in the First World latch onto the environmental cause so fervently. Society is a poor and corrupt answer for the questioning non-religious, but nature? Nature exists without us. It is *beyond* human and anything beyond human can surely solve a human crisis. If the sacred is in danger, the duty is to protect. Salvation and sacrifice, the same old story. So why don't we all feel this way? Why is the environment in such a mess if this "connection" is so strong?

Beth's passion for the environment has driven her her whole life. I envy her conviction. I still had questions. It seemed I only ever had questions. Before ending our conversation I asked Beth if I could please attend the Wafa meeting.

"Of course. Bring some food to share and some ideas and energy."

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John Clark's official title is Chairman of the Western Australian branch of the Institute of Foresters of Australia. He is also my uncle, Mum's older brother. John's worked as a forester for over thirty five years since graduating from the Australian National University with a Bachelor of Science. He has survived several restructurings of the state government's forestry agency, seeing it turn from the Forests Department to CALM to DEC. His primary occupation has been working with what he calls "the fruits of the forest" – harvesting and selling timber for the Forestry Products Commission. In 2011 he left the Commission after the government downsized once more.

I already knew how John felt about "greenies". He is man with strong opinions about a lot of things. I asked if he'd like to talk to me about it and he couldn't have been more enthusiastic. We met the next week at his home in Floreat. Over a steak and salad I find myself taking notes as frantically as I'd done with Beth.

"We have this beautiful, renewable resource that we're just not using. It doesn't make sense to me why they're not protesting about all the mines in the southwest. Mining is far more destructive than forestry and it's non-renewable, except in a few million years. People

are sent into a frenzy over the loss of a tree that will replace itself as sure as day turns to night. It is so frustrating to foresters – who are honest people who don't want to make a fuss, who just want to do their job – when greenies shout and scream about quite literally nothing.

“People don't question doctors or accountants – we go to them because they're experts. Well, foresters are forest experts. We're the only profession people feel comfortable arguing against.”

John reiterates the four main threats to forest biodiversity: climate change, dieback disease, feral predators, and expanding infrastructure.

“Study after study has shown that harvesting does not impact biodiversity in the slightest. The forest is remarkably resilient and disturbance is a normal part of that. The forests need fire and clearing out to help germination. We need to be concerned about climate change, global warming. What do trees do? They sequester carbon. Timber products hold carbon just as well as standing trees, and if you take a tree out, there's room for another one to grow. It's common sense. Dieback is controlled with strict protocols that keep machinery clean and restrict work during the wetter months. Fox and cat populations in the forests are more of a threat to native wildlife than a harvester. I tell you, the expanding population is going to do more permanent damage than a few hectares of sustainable yield.”

Out of five million hectares of forest, he points out only five per cent is available to the Commission.

I recall the awful bangs and crashes from the machinery and ask John about aesthetics.

“That's the one thing foresters can't defend about logging. It looks ugly. But a storm or a fire can be just as brutal if not more terrifying than logging. People care too much about their feelings. They don't their heads.”

And when I question the Department's burning practices I get an incredulous look.

“Who told you that?”

“Doctor Beth Schultz.” A lot of eye-rolling and “tsking”. John and Beth have a history.

I wonder about the bad reputation foresters have received. This is a particularly sore point for John. He tells me in exasperated tones that if it weren't for foresters there probably wouldn't be a forest here today. I thought this was true, to a point. What John did not mention is the public pressure placed on the Department to restrict logging and preserve large parts of the forest.

“What good do you think has come out of the green movement?” I ask.

“Nothing but a lot of paperwork and unnecessary restrictions. All those cultural heritage surveys have jacked up the price of beautiful local furniture.” I'm surprised by this dismissal; I thought cultural heritage would be a point of common interest for all parties. In John's view we have all the history we need, Aboriginal and European, in museums and

books. To him, “locking up” the forest dooms those ecosystems to a death by stagnation. At the same time, though, he readily admits rare and pristine habitats should be protected, and he is glad that Western Australia conserves much of its forests. Which is it, I wondered, management or conservation? I notice a fundamental difference between Beth and John’s rhetoric which hinges on *use*. Do we use the forest or leave it be? Will it survive without human intervention, or are we the problem?

* * *

Two days after my discussion with John I drove down for the Wafa meeting in Bridgetown. I was more than a little nervous. John’s eyes had lit up when I told him about the meeting. He didn’t ask me to tattle-tale and I wasn’t interested in leaking any top-secret Wafa intelligence, but somehow I felt like a mole.

The meeting table was buried under piles of research, pages of compiled evidence, copies of the Forest Management Plan and enormous maps of the southwest. When I walked in, the room looked like a who’s who of WA environmental activism. I met Beth Schultz in person, as well as Richard Wittenoom, Jess Beckerling (Wafa’s campaign manager), Piers Verstegen (Director of the Conservation Council of WA), Simon Peterfly of Forest Rescue and representatives from a host of organisations including the Southwest Environmental Group and Cockatoo Rescue. My palms went a bit sweaty – a combination of feeling star-struck and treacherous.

While a flock of black Carnaby’s made a guest speech outside, we sat down for the meeting. I took pages of notes. These people know their stuff and the talk was often detailed and technical. Most of it’s a blur, but I remember clearly the conversations over lunch. I spent a few awkward minutes in the kitchen scanning for a butter knife until Simon Peterfly lent me his with a smile. Then I spotted Jess Beckerling at the meeting table, frowning over a copy of the Plan. I took a deep breath, sat down, and struck up a conversation.

I asked Jess why she got into conservation and discovered she had a scientific background, studying environmental science at Murdoch. While at university she’d joined a number of protests in the karri forest, fell in love with the place and has fought for it ever since.

Jess believes there is “a fundamental philosophical divide” between foresters and environmentalists which will never be resolved. I was about to ask why when Jess continued, “Once a journalist asked me, ‘Why?’ I said, ‘I have no idea why foresters chop down trees, it’s not something I can get my head around.’” I put forward a few of John’s arguments; they sounded so convincing coming from him. Jess refuted every one of them, backed up with evidence.

“The public has every right to be sceptical of foresters. They are part of an organisation that destroys trees for money and doesn’t even see any profit.”

It is oft-quoted the Commission is losing money. John says it’s a blatant misreading of the profit report. I’m not an accountant, I can’t say either way.

After speaking with Jess I make myself a coffee and start chatting with Piers and the new climate change guy at the Conservation Council, Jamie. Along with Jess and Simon they’re part of the younger breed of activist at the meeting. Oddly the ages seem to jump straight from the seasoned, grey-haired campaigners – weathered faces, hardened expressions after years of battle – to those in their twenties and thirties, who probably remember, better than I, the old-growth protests of the 90s. Where were the forty to fifty year olds?

Jamie asked me politely who I’m “with”.

“I’m not with anyone... I guess I’m trying to find where I fit.”

“That’s the best way to be,” Piers says.

“Choose climate change!” Jamie perks up. “Where’s my card? I’m always looking for new volunteers...”

It’s then that mention I have foresters in the family, that I’m not really sure about any of it and that I’m searching for some kind of conviction. My uncertainty casts a shade of dejection and I get a sudden sense of difference. I’m missing something. At any moment someone will realise this and say, “Look, you just don’t *get it*. Now *get* out of here.” This doesn’t happen, but Jamie and Piers look at me quizzically when I ask why they want to save the forest. I suppose “why” is beside the point. Is belief even a conscious decision?

Perhaps the ingredient I lack is passion – raw, furious passion. Kind of a depressing thought, isn’t it? The people of Wafa adore forests indelibly, but it seems more than that. They want to see the forest in a certain state, a pristine state. They want a zero logging policy. Fine, why not? The forest is drying up due to climate change, anyway. Change is rolling down faster than we can hope to “manage” it. I don’t know what the forest needs, I don’t know what it wants. I’m passionate about finding the truth, but I find only sides and few in-betweens. The in-betweens are promising.

* * *

The very day after the Wafa gathering I met with Lachie Mccaw, a forester for the Department. Dad knows Lachie from his days at CALM and offered to set up a field day for me. John’s views as a forester were persuasive but, well, blatantly bias. I sought an alternative perspective.

Lachie took me into Stockyard Block in the Wellington National Park north of Collie. It was an overcast day with patchy rain but that only served to render the jarrah forest more dark and magnificent. I hadn't been through this area before and I was surprised at its beauty considering Collie's insalubrious bogan image, due in no small part to the town's coal mining industry. Most of the state's power still comes from coal but we'd prefer to ignore that fact or at least distance ourselves by turning the coal-mining town into a pariah.

Lachie grew up in Melbourne in the metro suburb of Kew but nurtured a love of the outdoors, bushwalking and camping in the Dandenongs as a Scout. During the Franklin River campaign he joined the protests in Melbourne. He is quietly spoken and answers my questions thoughtfully. I believe he has a genuine love of and concern for the bush.

We drive into the hills behind Collie and stop on the side of the road. Lachie shows me a patch of jarrah suffering frost damage and an attack from a species of borer beetle. The crowns of the trees are brown and their leaves dotted with windows; they look sickly but Lachie assures me neither frost nor the insect are fatal. There are banksias here too, a good indication the area is free from dieback.

We turn off the main road and head along sand tracks, stopping occasionally to move branches from the road. A storm went through here a few months ago – Lachie reckons he's never seen this kind of carnage from a storm before.

Finally we stop at a site he has monitored for the last four years. In 1997 the area was logged and burned. The regrowth didn't flourish until another prescribed burn ten years later. The trunks are still blackened but there are plenty of new, unmarked saplings around to mark the passing of time. Not far from where we park stands a line of fluoro-pink pegs marking where a jarrah seedling has sprouted. Lachie strings up a measuring tape along the transect and we slowly pace along it, noting the health of the tiny jarrah trees. Despite the lack of rainfall in recent years many were still alive. Lachie estimated about half would make it to adulthood, which he considered a remarkable achievement. He described how jarrah is one of Australia's hardiest trees and how their ability to survive drought, fire and disturbance never ceases to amaze him.

Out in the forest I felt calm and unhurried. With Lachie I didn't have to break a bone in my hand to keep notes. He didn't seem to think there was an ecological apocalypse looming in the forest. He worried about the frequency of droughts, and the spread of dieback, but not about chopping trees down. He believed the most likely outcome of the Forestry Management Plan would see current levels of logging unchanged.

Working with trees. I could see myself doing that.

Punch Lines

My bedroom window faces the front garden of the house I rent in Kardinya, south of the Swan River. Instead of lawn the owners planted, seemingly at random, masses of daisies, two or three rose bushes, and a sprawl of miscellaneous shrubs. For all the grassy weeds that make up half this verdurous riot – the scabby patches of dirt that defiantly refuse to get rooted, the ravenous epileptic cabbage moths – I like this garden. It resembles the kind of unkempt state I keep my bedroom in. I enjoy gazing at the bursts of white, purple and orange flowers that follow, wide faced, the sun’s daily trajectory. Would I like it more if I could remember what the little white flowers amassed on stalks were called? From what I’ve read, the act of naming is either a violent and suppressive extension of the mono- narratives of colonialism and western science, or a vital stitch in the fabric of understanding we must urgently weave in order to look after the only planet we have. The only planet stupid enough to sustain human life.

I have a feeling I knew what these plants were when I was fifteen years younger and mucking around at mum’s feet while she taught me gardening jargon and rid her roses of aphids. I suspect I knew a lot more when I was eight than I do now. That child’s spongy wonderment outstrips my creeping adult lassitude any day. Now I’m not sure what I know. The greater my vocabulary the more I realise what hopeless tools words are. Anything put in words is inexorably simplified for the vain purpose of comprehension. Infinity in words somehow fails to impress. Perhaps, though, the dilution saves us imploding from sheer detail.

* * *

Earlier this year I planted trees around Lake Claremont with the Big Help Mob, a youth volunteer group. Abundant with plant and wildlife, the lake was a home to Mooroo people before a government “beautification” program expelled them in the 1940s. In the 60s the place was literally a dump, in the 70s a golf course. Forty years later a hundred people my age gathered with hats and trowels and sowed ten thousand native seedlings on behalf of the Friends of Lake Claremont. It was an edifying day attracting bright, exuberant people ready to lend a hand to the recovering habitat. And yet I felt odd. Too many smiles and too much giggling. I kept thinking, *we’re planting trees in one of the richest parts of Perth so the well-to-do have a nicer place to walk their dogs. Was I being too cynical?* Claremont was gentrified during the 80s, about the same time the rehabilitation program started up. The health of habitat, parks and money are tied up with each other, I suppose.

My suburb Kardinya is near Piney Lakes Reserve nestled in Winthrop, an area with big houses and silent streets. The “lake” is a small swampy marsh which dries out during the summer and is ringed by bush and boardwalks. Although watered lawns and a circuit of

footpaths encircle the fenced-off bush area, I often jog through there. It's quiet and leafy, and although you can't see the lake from the path, quirky sculptures peep out from behind trees, like a life-size mosaic pelican, a stone pig and a towering iron cassowary. Sometimes I'm lucky and spot a bandicoot, or a rabbit. Last year I scored some writing experience at Perth Zoo. One of my jobs included sitting in on school lessons run by the Zoo's education team and writing up reviews for the website. In one lesson the topic was "native habitat". Piney Lakes was the exemplar. (I was secretly proud.) The kids were taught that planting native trees in their backyard provided nests and corridors for roaming wildlife. I liked the idea of giving local fauna a chance to stretch, a place to hide from the terror of our pets. The backyard in Busselton had its resident blue-tongue lizards and ring-tailed possums. Although we often heard them scurrying in the roof or in the undergrowth, the sight of one of these creatures in the open inspired in us sheer delight. Just imagine the *life* that would emerge in the city if bush replaced garden.

A recent study found people are happier living closer to parks. They like the lawns and the walkways and the water features, space for recreation. Harder to get lost in. Some, though, are good to lose yourself in, if that's what you're looking for. Take Kings Park, for example. Perched overlooking skyscrapers and the Swan River, Perth's botanical gardens welcome in picnickers by day and fringe dwellers by night, like any self-respecting park in the middle of a city.

* * *

I've been reading work by the Western Australian author and poet John Kinsella. We share some ancestral commonalities: his grandfather was a forester born on a farm in Ludlow, one hundred and twenty years before me. Admittedly I was born in Bunbury, but we both spent our infant years breathing in the tuarts' exhalations, and not everyone can say they share that with John Kinsella's grandpa. Also like me, Kinsella lived in Albany for a time. So I was excited when I started reading his essay "Cross-cut", Kinsella's own exploration of forests.

Kinsella notes that historically, mythically and literarily the forest "is a place of revelation, even liberation, but always anchored to the lore of mystery, the unknown, the threat." A threat justifies subjugation, hence the timber industry, hence burning off, hence baiting foxes, I suppose. *If you go down in the woods today you're sure of a big surprise.* That song sounds sinister until you find out about the teddy bears. Kinsella laments the loss of the "wilds." What are the "wilds?" What makes something wild? If a tree falls and no one is around to hear it, is it wild? Is wild simply the absence of a human? Is it all top-down control, human over nonhuman? Or has it to do with webs and subtle rules of engagement, the passing of time and epochs, cycles and re-cycles? I feel like I'm making excuses for cutting

down trees. According to Kinsella, “The way we describe a forest will vary depending on our position regarding its use.” *What is my position? How have I been describing trees thus far?* I don’t like tree felling – the things took decades to grow, who are we to cut their lives short for a table-and-chairs ensemble? Suppose clearing fulfils a natural, biodiversity- sustaining role in the ecosystem. Suppose the science is overwhelming that what the forest needs most of all are fewer trees. If that were the case, why aren’t foresters insisting we hack into old-growths? *It would be for their own good*, after all. I’m pretty sure Uncle John wouldn’t mind. For him the fact that the forest *grows back* equals a zero loss. But no one makes this suggestion precisely because it flirts with narcissism; humans taking what they want without consequence. A side-ways glance at history tells us it isn’t a good idea. But is there an “in-betweenness” here, a “within reason” tug on the reigns?

The environmentalist, unlike the forester, does not trust the *homo sapien*. Sure hasn’t been much reason to trust it so far. Why why why does society look after *bad guys who like to loot and plunder?* Where is our Captain Planet? Why can’t forest management purely exist for the forest and not, for once, human benefit? There is no money in ecology for ecology’s sake. There is money in ecology stripped down to a bare element, a hunk of dead cells, a thin rectangle of bleached carbon, a mineral. But perhaps a mineral is different to a tree; the tree can replenish itself, the mineral cannot. Can we not kill two birds with one stone, to use a grossly inappropriate, ecophobic phrase? Can we have our forest, and timber, too?

Words are problematic, we can agree on that. “Sustainable” leads us down the garden (forest?) path. It falsely “binds together the idea we still have the past in a bright new future,” as Kinsella puts it. Sustainable feels exhausted with its own optimism. Fish stocks continue to deplete despite catch limits and season restrictions, most of our energy still comes from fossil fuels despite advances in renewable technology and the carbon tax. No one’s kidding themselves that WA’s galloping mining industry is sustainable, are they? Shall we call a spade a spade and admit the sustainable use of natural resources is a myth? Grab that spade, dig yourself a veggie patch.

Kinsella again: “The word ‘rehabilitation’ becomes the escape route for the mining company (or the loggers, etc.): the absurd notion that nature can be controlled and reconstructed along its original lines. It becomes the ultimate tool in the linguistic reposition of system control: the species interaction is replaced by species mimicry, a replacement of the real with a cybernetic simulacrum.” What is real, when, where? At which point in time are “original lines” located? Today Dad rang me because he’d read the article about the tuart forest “collapsing”. (Was it a violent collapse, crumbling trees, earth splitting?) In response to this break down, which let’s face it has been developing for decades, the Tuart Forest Restoration Project plans to sow thirty thousand tuart seedlings plus twenty five hectares of

additional under-storey species. I don't know about Kinsella but I'll take this posturing simulacrum over a collapsed ecosystem any day.

* * *

Trees are the strong, silent types. But if you listen long enough, like Siddhartha by the river, they'll let you in on their secrets ... And bless the sod who has time for that. Seriously, who has time for that? If only Roald Dahl's story *The Sound Machine* was nonfiction and we could suddenly *hear* plants. If every tree knocked down made "a harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, low-pitched, screaming sound" as it hit the ground. You can bet we wouldn't dare tempt that hell-raising sound with a chainsaw. And right now, I reckon the forest would be screaming for water. We'd hear the whole damn forest roaring like the MCG on grand final day, except it'd keep going, day and night, so no one could sleep. The whole southwest would be deafened by trees.

* * *

I recently read a book called *Echoes from the Forest*. It's a collection of stories written by foresters about their time working in the south-west. Some things I have noted: Forestry was always a manly business. In the good old days before photocopiers and work-safety training, forestry oozed practicality, reason and muscle; it was about chopping and sawing, marking trees to chop and saw, lighting fires and fire fighting. Only one woman had her story in *Echoes* and it revolved around the fact her kind, in the forestry game, are about as rare as numbats are now.

Lord knows patriarchy isn't unique to southwest society, but the state's forests have certainly entertained the old tale of Man meets Mother Nature, always getting the best of Her after a healthy sacrifice of sweat, blood and ash. The women and children are saved from the bushfire and Little Red Riding Hood, in the deep dark woods, is rescued by the axe of the huntsman. Is this the purpose of the forest, then; battling and defending, validating and breadwinning? It's changed now, of course. There are more women in the industry. We need more changes for the better like this.

* * *

I am not equipped to speak about Indigenous perspectives on the Warrup conflict. I only hope I've shown respect to the Pibulmun people whom I acknowledge as the traditional and rightful custodians of Warrup and surrounding lands. The following is part of a speech that elder Wayne Webb gave at a Save Warrup rally in 2010. It was later printed in the Bridgetown Greenbushes Friends of the Forest Warrup Report.

We are all gathered here in this ancient land of the Pibulmun People. This area our people have always called Warrup - the place of the female kangaroo. We are surrounded by a unique, diverse ecosystem that has been used as a *biddi* or pathway for our ancestors and by our ancestors. This *biddi* has taken us many places over the years but more importantly it sustains our families and gives us *tharja* - food, *karla* - warmth, *gabbi* - water and *maya* - shelter. Wherever it was needed it was our *kala* - home that we can always return to.

Noongar Bujera - Mother Earth provides us with everything we need to survive. But because she speaks in a different language many people think they can ignore her. While I look around today I am proud to see that she has her supporters who are willing to speak up for her in a united voice that all people can understand.

The voice of the earth – there may not be such a thing, in a literal sense. My atheist being, for one, won't have it. But humans, collectively, with all that restless potential for creativity and destruction, must *learn*, have learned *before*, in the right ways, somehow, to *listen*. There is no stockpile of emergency provisions; like Wayne Webb said there is *everything we need*, and no more.

* * *

The tuarts and karris, jarrahs and tingles, black butts and marri are here because for millennia the land copped lightning and fire-sticks and bruised from the flames and under these scorching epochal patterns the eucalypts bore their children. The forests are here because of silent dances between light and chemicals and gases, called photosynthesis and osmosis and the carbon cycle by science. The forests are here because rain fell and weathered this great granite plateau down to a plethora of soils that each birthed its own plantlife. It exists because white people forced out black people and banished ancient ways and installed ill-fitting ones. It exists because after it was cut it down with two-man saws it grew back wherever possible. It exists because the 60s happened; because the public demanded it and state governments promised it. It exists because Australia is a First World country and in the First World it is understood that one always trades up, not down, and that space, once colonised, is seldom relinquished. It exists because employers are required to give their workers weekends and holidays to spend how they wish, and some of them wish to spend it outside cities. It exists because it is not a city. It exists because most of us live in cities. It is there because we remember it and it is there even if we don't.

Reasons the forest might not exist in the future... Too many to name.

* * *

Lawrence Buell writes that place is “felt space, space humanised, rather than the material world taken on its own terms.” I don’t know what terms a brick might own – mechanical processes, economics, factory workers, labour laws, water, rock-bed, weathering, sand, heat? Is a brick, on its own terms, nature? Am I out-of-place, then, in a brick house? What constitutes humanising? Does a beaver animalise the trees it fells to build its dam? *Am I not an animal?* Buell goes on to say a sense of place, of belonging, should not be championed or disparaged, rather its capacity to raise *environmental humility* understood: Place-sense, with an awareness of origins and energies and environmental collateral. I am a child of the suburbs, comfortable amid uniformly tiled slanting roofs, bricks, blocks, walls and pot plants. I am afraid of chaos, afraid of being lost. I like my bed and my couch. *Here in my car, I feel safest of all.* No small degree of indignity comes with these confessions. What I want – well, what I want doesn’t matter. What I do, with what I know, is all I can account for.

Perhaps, much later in time, humans will no longer see the forest from the inside. After we have learned to leave it be. And we will only have images, not even lived memories. To walk in a forest. To work in a forest. To leave the forest be. No, this is too great a concept. A forest is a gestalt. It is more than the sum of its parts. It is soil, leaves, rain and ash, single-celled microbes and beasts of all sizes. It is a changing climate and deadly diseases, timber houses and wooden toys. It is a story and a campfire, blood and song, the remembered smell of red ants and charred bark. It is spoken of and spoken for behind walls, multiplied and shared in pixels, imprinted and faded in grey matter, carbon, canvas and dancing bodies.

* * *

For a few months, this year, Daph’s painting was lost. Mum and Dad had just moved back to the southwest from Albany, back to Australind, the narrow fold between Leschenault Inlet and the Collie River. I go down there now and jog along the dirt track beside the river. Grandpa used to fish here. Mum wants to take him out with a line one day, for old time’s sake, “before he gets too old,” although he turned eighty-eight this year. I asked about the painting and Dad said he hadn’t seen it for a while. It was somewhere in between all the boxes and junk, my slice of the tuart forest. He found it a few weeks later. It’s hanging up in the lounge room, now, those shadowy indigo branches gazing into our home.

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“Storms make trees take deeper roots.” Dolly Parton. “A tree has roots in the soil yet reaches to the sky. It tells us that in order to aspire we need to be grounded and that no matter how high we go it is from our roots that we draw sustenance.” Wangari Maathai. Do you have a favorite quote about trees or a few beloved tree quotes that you would like to see included here? Please email your tree quotes and attribution to Trees Group. If you like these tree quotes, you may want to peruse this page of forest quotes, season quotes, or this collection of quotes about nature. We also encourage you to laugh, groan, and giggle at some funny forest jokes, tree jokes, riddles, and puns. The forest’s trees were tall, taller than the ones back at home, the kind you could climb up for an hour and still not reach the top. It’s the middle of the day but the ground floor was cooler and dim, all the sunlight having been blocked out by the leaves above. It’s eerie as he walks further into the woods, a strangely fitting setting. Summer is turning into Fall, so while most of the canopy of leaves were green, oranges and red dot the foliage, some of which cover the ground already. There’s the faintest of a wind running through the trees, (or perhaps someone creeping closer) when Dib pulls out something flat and paper-like, partially obscured by its position in the bag, but he nods his head proudly at it. “Aha! My favorite photo of my favorite alien She has killed every herb garden my sister and I have ever given her. So my mother was thrilled that our front yard was the size of a postage stamp. It, like every other yard on the block, only needed to be trimmed once a month to look good. And yet, every Monday and Thursday at 7:30 a.m., the city-contracted landscaping team would drive down our street and unload two or three industrial mowers and go to work on the little patches of public grass around mail boxes and trees. Later, when I moved to Michigan, my family and I lived in a condominium complex our first year. As part of the deal, eve