

Without an Alibi

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The Sting in the Wattle

Without an Alibi

PHILIP NEILSEN



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To my wife
Mhairéad MacLeod

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I The Forest

Narrative of a Leaf

Start with suspense.
Picture an average leaf
humming carelessly in the wind.
It doesn't know what's coming.
Complications.
June frost, drought,
delinquent insects.

It is hard work, putting food on the table,
growing a tree.
Forgoing the luxury of individualism.
This is the heroism
of the ordinary leaf.

With no rehearsal, jump into the void,
fall like an angel
with half a parachute.
Whether raked or left in peace
keep busy in community service.
Be an example without being didactic.
A kind of glory.

Literary Forests

for John Kinsella

1. THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

It was a forest of ‘fantastic limbs
painted against a starry zenith’.
Hawkeye grazed the arm of murderous
Le Subtil, the ‘red devil’, with a running shot.
‘I rubbed the bark off a limb’
he said, disappointed.
The sisters clung to one another,
saw arms and legs above and all around—
the woods had eyes and mouths.

Alice was disposed to laugh.
But Cora felt comforted by their guide’s
hunting-shirt of forest green and amber—
the hues of the undergrowth.
She had seen hunters of the boudoir
at home—snakes who flickered their
tongues at young women in the season.
But the pathfinder’s guile was weathered,
stripped of predatory glances.
His moccasins winked like gem-beetles,
like butterflies drying their wings.
He was earnest, yes, and driven,
in a soon to be modern way,
yet more inviting than
a quadrille and French musk.

Cora waved, though ambiguously:
a square of handkerchief, pennant,
that could have been encouragement
to the hardy colonists
or a warning to the forest, still

crouched beside the treadmill water,
to be more alert in future.
The lace cotton fell and fluttered
like a premonition
for one whose hair was like
the 'tendrils of the vine'.
Always alien to these parts,
but soon embraced by a shroud
of silver birch fine as her skin.

2. THE CHILDREN OF THE NEW FOREST

Only as adults did we realise
that this forest was a lie—the natural
did not reside in the divine right of kings.
We were led astray, along with those
children gobstruck by a king's wig,
his heart yearning for his subjects
but distracted by his new blue garters.

The Puritans had a higher regard for trees
than the Cavaliers. Cromwell found the forest
solid, dependable, unadorned by vanity.
'How have you lived so long,' he queried an oak.
The oak stood, plain dressed, rooted in the
commonwealth of humus and worms,
the fallen acorns, and kept its counsel.
It was then Oliver knew he would triumph,
die, and one day triumph again.

3. ROBINSON CRUSOE

Crusoe looked at a tree and saw congealed
within it a sled, five stout barrels, a fort,
something to notch the working days on.
And Friday, he wasn't a wood sprite,
noble savage, or guide to botanical mysteries,
but an absence of application and shaping.

The coconut trees bore fruit in their idle way
unconscious of the beauty of effort,
the soul's joy in double entry book-keeping.
Behind them indistinguishable groves hovered,
hissing with insects, promiscuous scents,
backward-looking, taboo.

So Crusoe, stranded on a thin strip of sand,
a beach reeking with cannibal vulgarity,
shaded his face with one hand, searched an ocean
of featureless blue, both changing and unchanged,
which might one day puff its cheeks and send ships,
wooden angels flying for captains of industry,
the bold ecstatic prayer that is engineering.

4. THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS

Mole saw clearly that he was an animal of tilled field and hedge-row, linked to the ploughed furrow, the frequented pasture, the lane of evening lingerings, the cultivated garden-plot. For others the asperities, the stubborn endurance, or the clash of actual conflict, that went with Nature in the rough . . . Kenneth Graham

It was Rat who explained
the industrial revolution to Toad—
how it had no business except in
the consuming pleasures of agriculture.

But more dangerous than the machine,
where the plough turned for home,
lay the Terror of the Wild Wood.
A place of confusion and whispers,
malevolent yellow eyes.
Here stoats and ferrets
carelessly spoke uneducated English
and mocked their social betters.

Mole had escaped the Wood, of course,
but some summer evenings, sipping tea
from bone china, or sweeping his pantry,
he felt the pull of the wildness
that had led him there
on that fateful night.

Oh to be an animal at ease in the dark
he thought—a bold Woods Mole.
To walk where there are no paths,
to swagger and give back-chat like a fox,
and never cower at the brush of an owl's wing.

Oh to meander beneath the high branches,
instead of where hedge-rows martial
the meadows in lock-step,
and thin lines of willows despair and slump.

In the Wood there were no privatising rabbits
charging tolls to enter back lanes.
Even the slight weasel felt safe there.
He sat on the river bank, among Comfrey
and pink willow-herb, and grew restless,
taller, more supple.

What on Earth, he wondered aloud,
is a mole doing with a checked
kitchen apron round his waist,
or a Harrods hamper of cakes
and ginger beer?
A ripple of musky heat drifted
from the just visible distance
and he drank it in till his chest rose.
He set off across the fields
towards the rocks and brambles,
this time whistling an old tune
that was sure to be the password.
Golden light already welled
in the paleness of his eyes.

The Black Forest

1.

There are postcards in Freiburg
about the acid rain that drifts in from England:
'Baumsterben—na und?'—
a satirical cartoon of a German family
striding happily in Lederhausen
through a brown, stubbled moonscape—
'Wir lassen ums den Schwarzwald nicht miesmachen!'

To the north a farmer ploughs his field
a child follows a hare.
They stumble over rusting metal,
disappear in a shout, a shock of air.

2.

The forest broods over the town—
every fifty metres along the broad track
wooden signs with stick figures demonstrate
callisthenics for hikers under the pines.
Athletic youths in serious boots
and bright backpacks
stop and bend to the left and right,
reach their toes.
Nature with a purpose.

3.

In the more remote valleys
the green is so dense it comes alive.
There are calls of something
half-human, half-beast.
There are drowned women
caught in the folds of their flowing gowns,

who lie in wait
at the bottom of mountain pools
to trap the thirsty traveller.
The pine-needles provide warmth
for the wood-wives.
They recoil from Carroway seeds,
church bells, or the colour red.
If they happen to hear the sound of a machine
they will lose their minds.
Each year they retreat farther
into the heart of the woods, the ground mist.

4.

Deeper forest—dark and still.
only faint light filters here.

After midnight a demon fell from the sky
trailing fire, and here it has lain for sixty years.
Black water and moss quenched the flames
and gathered it in.
The demon stretches out its arms
but cannot move, its back broken,
its riders sunk into earth.
The forest accepts the new creature.
This metal it can assimilate—
it takes on snow, fire, acid.

The demon with its concentric circles
becomes first an offering,
then a forest god, finished with the sky.
Learns to grow its own leaves
nourished by humus,
breathes through lichen and toadstools,

shivers a lung spark, a premonition
that moves among the branches
until it reaches the village
with its tiny, speckled lamps,
its lovers who stare at the moon.
The elderly listen for the drone of more demons
come to search for the lost one.

Eventually the wood-wives smell the demon
and rub their faces with a potion
of sour berries, fungus and rain water
so they can approach it.
With their wrinkled eyes they see the furnace
of a factory in Manchester,
the demon strung with bright ribbons
and cheering men.
They steal away the bones
and bury them in peat moss.

The Conservative Forest

for Bruce Dawe

This is a family-values forest. The red-checked table cloth is spread on grass where the canopy has been removed. The sun shines as required, a hygienic space to celebrate freedom, strong government, luminous freeways.

The elitists wanted this closed to ordinary people, and left for soap-fearing ferals, anti-social bushwalkers. But now it is accessible, with tables made of eucalypt, trees making a contribution, in full employment.

Long gone is the anarchy of wilderness, the over-excited mind. Discipline is learned from a neat row of firs, a line of swings under the Big Axe. The kids, Andrew and Emma, draw houses with chimney smoke on paper the wood-chips have provided.

But do not relax. Be wary of seductive tunes from the foliage, of horns and pipes, dangerous nymphs with plausible stories. They whisper of peace won without cost in blood. They meddle with gender and leave the young confused.

See them in jester's cloaks, their hair like snakes, lodged in tree tops or introspective undergrowth, cursing the honest toil of chainsaw and bulldozer, the strong orange arms, the friendly giants.

At night you may hear gentle keening, the pioneers whose prayers and sweat cleansed the scrub, made the ground sweet for cattle and wheat, braved the savages and gypsies, carved an asylum under stars for those who followed.

Today is a reunion, mum in her apron, children with toy guns, dad will polish the four wheel drive. The park awaits our return, invites us to enjoy the fruits of our labours. Sausages and wine, the glow of the sacred barbecue. A fire to reflect our hunger.

The Imperial Forest

In the jungles of the Amazon and Peru
Cinchona officianlis the fever tree,
and *Hevea brasiliensis* the weeping tree,
in fragrant yellow and pink flowers
breathe the miasma of morning,
bright-beaked parrots and ginger monkeys.

Malaria-ridden Europe
ringed by swamps and marshes
sends out its scrapers and slicers,
the blazing-eyed plant-hunters of Kew.
They carry their collecting bags and bottles,
traps and scales, jostle with
Colonial rubber tappers and Jesuit traders
to steal the Indians' secrets.

The Jesuits argue up an antidote,
but protestants prefer to die of fever
than drink the papist potion.
Oliver Cromwell sweats his way
to heaven. But the empire-makers
see a way to make the rainforest safe
from boiling blood, as temperate
and waterproof as a men's club.

Joseph Banks, emperor of pressed plants
strolls through his London garden
for miles and miles,
writes sycophantic letters to the mad king,
sings a song for everything
useful in the vegetable kingdom;
the economic crop in E major.

The Brazilian jungles shrink back, while
the Indian and Malayan plantations grow fat.
The colour of the season is quinine.
Cartwheels newly shod with rubber
speed gold to the bank.

The doctors howl and scowl
and flap their white coats.
Bleeding their patients was a good earner.
They continue to tie off arteries,
collect heart-juice in cups,
denounce a powder too cheap,
too light for mystery.

The mosquitoes and syphilitic merchants
scream too, as they crouch in their
respective lairs. But the merchants recover.
Adventure and profit are multiplied
by the fruits of bark and seed,
the magic, once-secret garden,
a home-brand pharmacopeia.

St Martin and St Boniface Destroy the Forest Gods

To show the heathens how utterly powerless were the gods in whom they placed their confidence, Boniface felled the oak sacred to the thunder-god Thor, at Geismar, near Fritzlar. He had a chapel built out of the wood and dedicated it to the prince of the Apostles. The heathens were astonished that no thunderbolt from the hand of Thor destroyed the offender, and many were converted. The fall of this oak marked the fall of heathenism. [Catholic encyclopaedia]

As the German people watched
with horror in their bowels,
beefy Boniface pushed up the sleeves
on his freckled forearms
and chopped down their sacred oak.
Flushed, he leapt onto the oozing stump
and standing with his feet far apart
declared:

'You see now, heathen spittle,
my God is more powerful than yours.
The axe is more pure than the hammer.
Your childish legends,
your superstitious regard for nature,
these are abominations
which the one God who is three gods
(and that should impress you)
can not bear to witness.'

He took the shattered branches
and patiently built a small chapel.
There the people sat huddled and silent
while Boniface told them again
about the fits of jealousy
that heaved in God's bosom
whenever he looked down
and saw them fondling herbs,
or on their knees before forest giants
more tangible than he.

The lament of the tree spirits,
the groans of the oak martyrs
still filtered through the church's
narrow windows on a still night.
But the heathens, faces closed as nutshells,
were too terrified to listen
to the forest stories anymore.
Anyway, they told themselves, it was
probably just the Holy Spirit poking around,
like an aging, fussy caretaker.

Martin, Bishop of Tours
was less robust than Boniface.
Thin-shanked and mounted on a horse,
he specialised in the killing of pine trees.
Some of the more resilient pagans
tied him to their favourite conifer,
then hacked at another, nearby pine
so it would fall his way
and crush him.