

The Eucalypt Forest

South East Queensland

Every year, towards the end of summer, my partner and I take a drive down a quiet, dusty lane not far from where we live, to look at the vivid colours of the tree trunks revealed as the dry bark splits and falls away. It's called Postmans Track and was once a lengthy bush track, but is now a dead end, bisected by the waters of the lake that formed when the North Pine dam was built.

On one side are acreage properties, some with neatly manicured grounds, but most with tall trees and native shrubs growing naturally (more or less tidily) in keeping with the surrounds. On the other side of the track is a vast expanse of native bushland, bounded by the ubiquitous three-strand barbed wire fence. This is where our annual pilgrimage leads, as we drive slowly to the end of the track, admiring the variegated display of the shedding eucalypts. This year I made the trip alone, for my partner was not well, and chose to stay at home and nurse his cold.

A faded sign on the fence warns visitors to "Keep Out", as this land is owned by the Water Board and forms part of the catchment area for the dam. We are usually most obedient to this notice (as I am to all such authoritative signs), and have never ventured beyond the fence line, but last Sunday this changed. I edged the car off the road, and walked slowly along beside the fence until, suddenly, I was overcome by a desire to touch the trees, not just observe them from a distance. In the twinkling of an eye I had rolled under the wire, and was scrambling down the slight embankment to stand amongst the trees. I stopped in amazement; had I really done this? I mentally shrugged my shoulders: oh well, now I'm inside the fence, I might as well make the most of it lest I'm never brave enough to do it again!

The air was thick with the heavy, sweet smell of eucalypt blossom; all around the crickets shrieked in the noonday heat; my presence disturbed them not at all. This forest could have been anywhere in Australia, for there is a universality to gum trees. Some forests have more undergrowth, different shrubs and wildflowers, but the backbone of the forest remains the same: tall, straight gums. But this forest wasn't just anywhere. It was here and, as I wandered deeper into its depths, I realised that it couldn't have been anywhere but right here. These trees, in this particular combination of shapes, sizes and colours, belonged here and nowhere else. What also struck me was the awareness that, while each individual tree was familiar - gum trees are like old friends to most Australians - clustered together in this place they were strangers, unknown and unknowable. There were too many trees for individual friendships. I felt very alone and isolated in the encompassing crowd.

My impression from the car had been that all the trees were the same: variegated shades of beige and charcoal, with vivid slashes of terracotta beneath the splitting bark. This was what I had come to see. However, as I pressed deeper into the forest I started to see subtle differences: shades of silvery white, of ivory, lemon, peach, grey and ebony. In some places the trees were only centimetres apart, growing up where fallen seeds had sprouted; in other places the tree coverage was sparse, where the rocky shale presented an inhospitable terrain for tender shoots.

On some the bark hung in tattered ribbons, like dresses with handkerchief hems. Dead bark and dry gum nuts crunched underfoot, fuel for some future bushfire. I wonder

if the trees know or care about this potential danger? Or is it simply part of the life of the forest, like the endless cycle of tiny shoots growing to mature trees, aging and dying, trunks hollowing to create homes for the forest creatures, fallen logs providing food for termites? All around my feet ants scurried, in unceasing observance of their day's duties. In the branches overhead baby birds chirruped relentlessly, while the adults flew an exhausting relay to meet the chicks' insatiable appetites.

I had dared to defy the sign, violating my personal standard of compliance with authority, yet it meant nothing to the forest; its life continued as if my existence, and my personal concerns, were of no consequence whatsoever. The insignificance - the absolute irrelevance - of humans to this ageless cycle of life and death was patent.

I turned around and was suddenly disoriented. Which way had I come? In my panic it seemed as if all the trees around me were identical; there was no way I could tell whether I had already passed by this one ... or that one ... or ... Undismayed by my growing alarm, the trees stood still and silent. Then the sun moved out from behind the cloud cover, and in the distance I could see it glinting on my car. Oh the relief!

As I reflect on my experience, Frederick McCubbin's 1886 painting *Lost* comes to mind, where a small child stands forlornly amidst towering gum trees. The trees that surround the child are not threatening, but neither are they benevolent. They simply "are". Over the centuries trees like these have stood and watched other humans, their pain, their joy, their suffering, their pleasure; apparently indifferent to Aboriginal dispossession, to white struggles for survival, to concerns about climate change and land clearing, to my hopes and fears.

Are they truly indifferent? I know nothing of the interior life of gum trees: what stirs their sap, causes their leaves to quiver with delight, or tremble with fear. I wonder what confidences the forest keeps, what delights it has beheld, what tears absorbed, what anguish witnessed. The forest maintains a steadfast silence; it guards its secrets well. Curiously, though, in this eucalypt forest despite - or perhaps because of - the stillness and the silence, I sense something ... more.

And it seems to me that this is enough; that, in the words of Christopher Brennan, this "is the only revelation" and with that I must be, and I am, content.

- Patricia Rose -