

Prologue

I SEE THE WORLD THROUGH TREES. EVERY WINDOW AND doorway frames trunks, limbs and leaves. My light is their light, filtered green. My air is their exhalation. Sound comes from inside the forest: birdsong, insect buzz and frog call. My cottage is perched on a spine, the ground falling away either side to fern-banked creeks that run in chorus when it rains. The height elevates me to the canopy, with the birds.

I have always been a tree-woman, although the trees of my childhood were set far apart, and there were years in between spent in cities and apartments. Finding this place has been a coming home. But this is not my blood's country. I am from somewhere else, and somewhere else before that – a fifth-generation descendant of white settlers. I was born down south, inland, out of reach of the sea's breeze, in a land of low hills, ironbarks and little rain. I'm self-sown, like the forest regrowth that surrounds me.

It was autumn when we moved here, the first morning's light shafting through trees onto the deck like magic beams. The season will always remind me of those first months, of gazing about in wonder. Wonder at the natural world is often described as childlike, as if it is something we should outgrow. If that is true, then I have never grown up. Each year, when that golden light returns,

it reminds me how thankful I am to live as part of the forest, and for the ways it has shaped my life.

In late 2007, N and I decided we would leave the city for the Sunshine Coast hinterland. We had fallen for its beaches, rivers and mountains. As writers drowning in the nine to five, tired of concrete, noise and traffic, we dreamed of a quieter life. We would head for the hills, where the air would be fresh and the world would be green. We would have an orchard, vegetable patch and chooks. It would be the perfect place to raise N's two younger children the way we had been raised – in the bush and free to roam. We would have a life together and time to write – a writing life. We figured we would be ready in about a year.

I set up an online search, just in case the perfect place came on the market, to keep the dream alive during those long days at the office. I sent N emails of this place or that, to get a sense of what she liked, none of which elicited much response.

Less than a month later, a picture turned up in my inbox: a cedar cottage in a misty forest, with an alluring by-line about a fairy tale. I was stuck on a conference call, which had degenerated into squabbling between regional offices about proposed changes to work practices – practices I had helped design. I needed an escape.

I followed the link, and the more I saw the more I liked: open fireplace, wooden floorboards, big deck and two separate studios – among ten acres of trees. I emailed it to N. This time she replied immediately, and with a single word. 'Nicey.'

We rang the agent and arranged to drive up and 'have a look'. I realised, as we got close, that I had done a drive-by the year before. It had been substantially more expensive then, but there couldn't be two stone-and-timber cottages on ten acres with a soundproof studio. I had come up the back way, and wrongly thought it too

out of the way and too far from Brisbane to commute. It had been dry then, too, dust from the gravel road coating the bush and giving the wrong impression. I'd already had enough dust for a lifetime, and drove on.

This time, it was green. I said, no matter how much we liked it, not to let me sit down. When buying my first home, in Canberra, I had been determined to play it cool, to appear uninterested, but as soon as I walked through the sun-filled cottage and out into its Tuscan-coloured courtyard, warm in Canberra's winter, I sat on the back steps and said, 'I love it.' It's difficult to drive a hard bargain from there.

We wandered down the driveway, shook hands with the agent, took in the trees standing all around, the chorus of birdsong and cicadas, and smiled at each other, green-eyed. We walked down the brick path, through the warm timber rooms and out to the back deck, where we could glimpse the Blackall Range. The light was soft and small birds bathed in terracotta dishes. I sat down on the back steps in a daze. It was like visiting an old friend.

We inspected the smaller stone-and-timber studio off the carport, and then the larger one up the hill, which had an upper and lower section and separate entrances. We told the agent we were writers. He nodded, and told us that the owner had had a reading done; the place was on a dragon ley line, a source of creative energy. The idea appealed. The studios needed work, but were surrounded by trees, offering total privacy and promising space and inspiration. Apart from the buildings, there was nothing manmade in sight. The train station was two minutes away, the university fifteen, the beach twenty. It was perfect.

We had a midday gin and tonic up on the range, in a pub looking out over the coast to the sea. We wanted the place, the dream. But it was too soon, and we were due to go away for a month the next

day, driving fourteen hundred kilometres interstate, on retreat, with no phone coverage or internet access.

‘We’re not ready,’ N said.

‘I know.’ But I had already imagined us there. ‘They say you should ask yourself how you’d feel if you found out it was sold. That someone else had bought it.’ We exchanged miserable looks over the table.

I called the agent and made an offer.

On the front of the recycled green manila folder housing the purchase documents, N wrote a quote from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

I still have that folder. Not long after we moved in, a beautiful hardcover copy of *Walden* arrived in the post. A gift. It’s hard to imagine now, but I had not read Thoreau’s account of his two years in a cabin in the woods by Walden Pond, nor the literature of nature that would be opened up to me through reading his work. Moving here and discovering that literature was the regrafting I needed. I was still unpublished then – I hadn’t found my voice, as they say. That was all going to change, and everything else with it.

After eleven months, I began keeping diaries of the days, thinking that by living through the seasons once, I knew the place, and could capture it all on the page. Almost a decade on, I realise how little I know. Through learning the nature of each tree, I work my way deeper into wood, soil and rock. Some days, I feel part

tree – or at least, I prefer their company. Yet the closer I get, the more inadequate my words.

English comes easily to me; I'm a word-woman, too. But English was born from landscapes far from here. My imagination, through language and literature, symbolism and myth, is rooted in Europe. And in another place, too: the landscape of my childhood, my family's property in Central West New South Wales – the dry, wooded hills where I explored and camped. As Wallace Stegner once said, the landscape where you grew up is the screen through which you always see the world.

Those dry hills and the language of Europe are not a natural fit. Nor do they transplant easily to the subtropics. This is Kabi Kabi country, with a history as long as human memory. In the relative blink of an eye, it has been stolen, logged, cleared, farmed, developed, bought and sold. Somewhere at the heart of things is my unease at loving a place while knowing how I came to it, and an understanding that whatever connection I might feel lacks the depth of culture and language. It's a lot to reconcile.

I don't work the land; words are all I produce. As I'm fighting back weeds, planting trees, waging war with the power company that wants to run its towers through, and the outside world seems intent only on destroying itself, there are times when it all feels pointless. It's only ten acres, after all.

What is this place to me, and what am I to it?

It is the trees who bring me the answers. Or, rather, the right questions. Trees have their own language, booming from the bole, singing in their sap, sighing on the wind – most of the time we're just not listening.

In many ways, this is their story.