RELEASED INTO THE WORLD ON THIS DAY

THE UNIVERSAL SIGH

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Frozen

Everything was normal and as it should be until one day I woke up and there was something wrong.

I didn't know what it was, but it was a kind of persistent thing that I couldn't quite ignore. Something was cold and it was inside, not outside. It was like a place where someone had poked me with an icicle. A splinter of winter.

The days passed like they do and I just got colder. The cold spread until I was like a sculpture of ice. I didn't sneeze any more, and I couldn't cry and if I tried to come it was like a tendril of porcelain. I was a solid man. You could throw rocks at me and it didn't hurt at all. I just splintered a little.

Perhaps fortunately, no-one noticed and everything carried on being normal and as it should be, all around me.

But I was frozen.

Fairy Dust

God's got the fairy dust out again. Scattering every which way. His giant fingers touched the end of the street and slowly but completely every living and inanimate thing fell into sparkling and twinkling. A frozen ending. A wicked witch's spell.

I'm waiting here patiently for His finger to reach inside me and freeze my blood too. Allow my functions to grind slowly but surely to a halt. The drums slow in tempo until nothing. All of these feelings finally paralysed by the fractal forms crawling inevitably over every living surface.

Then all can become normal again. And I can set about forgetting.

Out of it, in it, out of it.

Walk up a long ago road covered with moss into the woods. There is snow forecast. I want to lose myself in a blizzard. No snow here though. Just distant traffic and birds speaking to one another.

Sit on a dead tree. Grey sky. Grey feathers spread across the moss. A beak: bloody flesh still attached. Red against pale green. A siren, far off.

All around the crows shout about me. Snagged by brambles. Whipped by thorns.

I dread other humans. Tiny flakes fall. Cold dead skin. Push through spiny undergrowth. A muddy plateau. Frozen ruts. The sound of traffic and aeroplanes. Hard to think. Leaning against barbed wire. Two flocks of birds, above the bypass. An unattended fire dying. A circle of hot grey ash.

A bird dips then plummets. A cold east wind.



Into the woods. A snowy path. Walk into an abandoned quarry. Caves everywhere. Warm air that smells of blood drifts out and I'm too scared to go very far in.

I lose my way. Emerge blinking from the woods. A golf course. I'm hungry and I know I am far from food. I wish it would snow.

A dark pubic thicket in the crotch of a beech. A ruined house. A sign; private woods no access.

Branches glow in the sunlight. Look out at the sky from the top of this hill. I think I'm surrounded by blizzards.One swoops over. Walk into it, the sun still out. My shadow clear as summer but Snow down my neck. Watching valleys full of snow blow towards me. No shelter; eyes watering from the cold wind.

Snow faster and faster, tapping on my coat. Falling fast. Hypnotic. I'm becoming a snow man. Hands too cold almost.

Sun in the distance. This will be over soon. The cloud departs: a trailing ghost.

Haunt

Desire company, lack self-esteem and want to prove self.
Feel the disappointment and unhappiness that was present in childhood. cannot understand what is wrong. Irritable and dissatisfied. Friendly and open, yet feel that nothing is right. Restless, dislike routine, need stimulation and have trouble getting up in the morning.
React badly to shock and have intense fears, especially of being in a crowd, and dislike going out.
Spend hours frantically sorting things out, but tend not to accomplish much. irritable, nervous, restless and hard to please.
Restless, hopeless, morose and have a morbid imagination. No matter how ill, deny that anything is wrong and refuse to see a doctor. Prefer to be left alone.
Fit and healthy, strong, energetic mind and body. lively and entertaining. when ill, become violent and obstinate. May hit, bite or kick. Illness characterised by restless, agitated behaviour, with extreme sensitivity to light, noise, movement or being touched.
Set high goals. driving ambition leads to workaholism. an excessive sense of duty, always feel as if haven't done as well as should. Sensitive to others' opinions and easily hurt. May become despairing. Can lead to clinical depression and suicide.
Very materialistic. See life as a struggle for financial security. Great fear of poverty even if financially successful. Clean-living, critical, meticulous, reliable.
Fear the supernatural, prefer daylight to darkness, have very fixed ideas.



ACROSS A GREAT DIVIDE!

Good morning Mr Magpie, how are we today?
Now you've stolen all my magic and took my melody?
You got some nerve coming here.
You got some nerve coming here.
You stole it off give it back.
You stole it off give it back.
Good morning Mr Magpie, how are we today?
You know you should but you don't,
You know you should but you don't...
Open our mouths wide.
A universal sigh.
"So why does this still hurt?"
Don't blow your mind with why.
Why does this not add up?
Don't let it blow your mind.

Across a great divide.
A giant turtle's eyes.
Jellyfish float by.
Your rules do not apply.
As open as the sky.
The holes we measure out.
It's what keeps me alive.
Why does this not add up?
A spider to a fly.
A universal sigh.
A giant turtle's eyes.
Don't blow your mind with why.
The current's just too strong.
Don't let it blow your mind.
Across a great divide
The words between the lines.

None of this stuff is mine.
I throw my arms wide.
Open your heart and smile.
Don't look so serious.
No need to pull that face.
Always I'm before you.
The cards that have been dealt out.
Moving out of orbit.
Turning in somersaults.
Ours not to reason why.
I'm reeling with this feeling.
Where er'r the current flows.
Precious little time.
Distances and time
The wind takes all the leaves.
And then it will take me.
The parts we have to play.
I cannot help but laugh.

It's like I've fallen out of bed from a long and vivid dream.
The sweetest flowered fruits were hanging from the trees.
Falling off a giant bird that's been carrying me.
Like I've fallen out of bed from a long and vivid dream.
Just exactly as I remember.
Every word, every gesture.
I've my heart in my mouth.
Like I've fallen out of bed from a long and vivid dream.
Finally I'm free of all the weight I've been carrying...
Slowly we unfurl as lotus flowers.
All I want is the moon upon a stick.
Just to see what is.
Just to see what if.
I can't kick the habit
'Just to feed your fast ballooning head.'
"Listen to your heart!"
Good morning Mr Magpie, how are we today?
Now you've stolen all my magic and took my melody?

Don't let it blow your mind.
Across a great divide.
A giant turtle's eyes.
Jellyfish float by.
Your rules do not apply.
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The cards that have been dealt out.
Moving out of orbit.
Turning in somersaults.
Ours not to reason why.

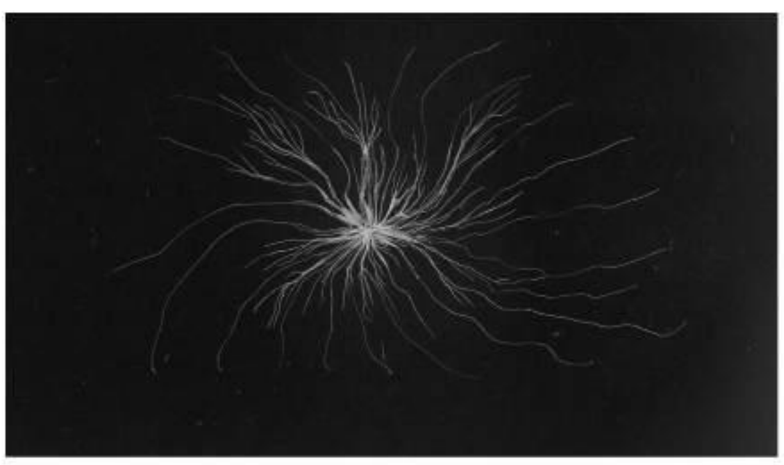
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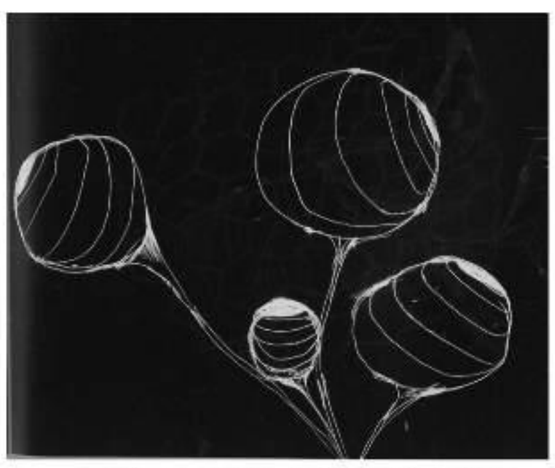
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'Just to feed your fast ballooning head.'
"Listen to your heart!"



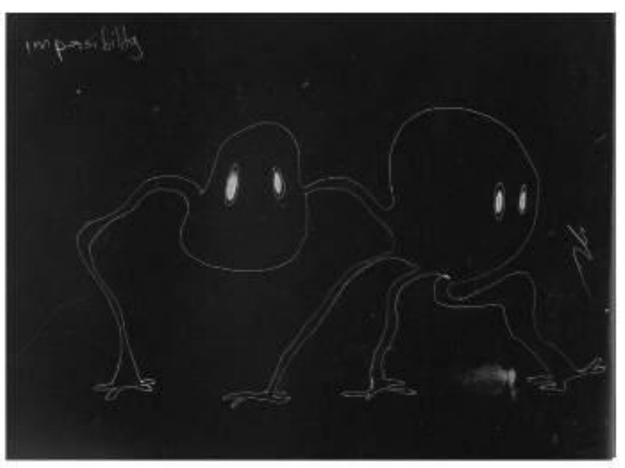
ROOT OF ROOTS



RAGNOROK



URPFLANZE



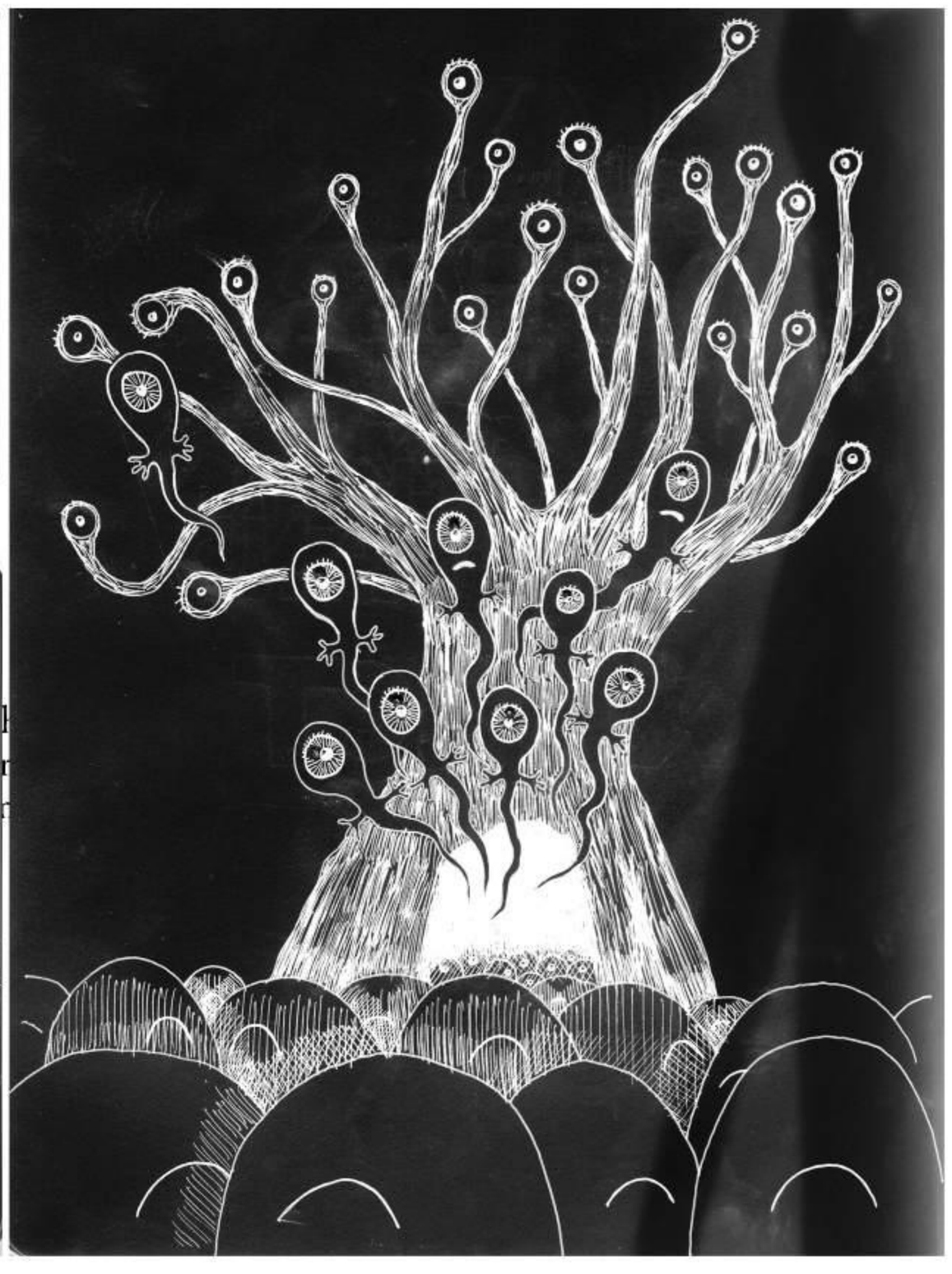
THE KING OF LIMBS



CODEX



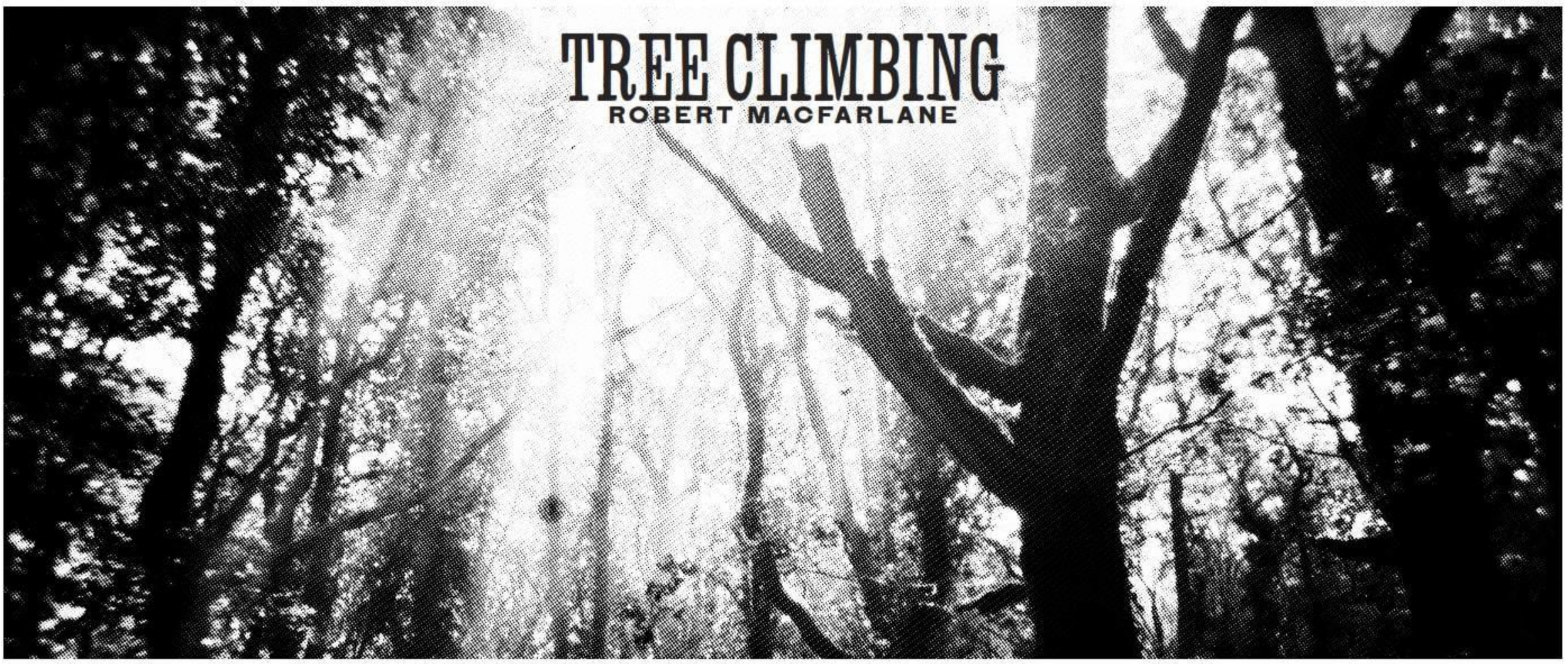
AXIS MUNDI





TREE CLIMBING

ROBERT MACFARLANE



The wind was rising, so I went to the wood. It lies south of the city, a mile from my home: a narrow, nameless fragment of beechwood, topping a shallow hill. I walked there, following streets to the city's fringe, and then field-edge paths through hedgerows of hawthorn and hazel.

Rooks haggled in the air above the trees. The sky was a bright cold blue, fading to milk at its edges. From a quarter of a mile away, I could hear the noise of the wood in the wind; a soft marine roar. It was the immense compound noise of friction - of leaf fretting on leaf, and branch rubbing on branch.

I entered the wood by its southern corner. Debris was beginning to drop from the moving canopy: twigs and beech nuts, pattering down onto the coppery layer of leaves. Sunlight fell in bright sprees on the floor. I walked up through the wood, and midway along its northern edge I came to my tree - a tall grey-barked beech, whose branches flare out in such a way that it is easy to climb.

I had climbed the tree many times before, and its marks were all familiar to me. Around the base of its trunk, its grey bark has sagged and wrinkled, so that it resembles the skin on an elephant's leg. At about ten feet, there is a branch that crooks sharply back on itself; above that, the letter 'H', scored with a knife into the trunk years before, which has ballooned with the growth of the tree; higher still is the healed stump of a missing bough.

Thirty feet up, near the summit of the beech, where the bark is smoother and silver, I reached what I had come to call the observatory: a forked lateral branch set just below a curve in the trunk. I had found that if I set my back against the trunk, and put my feet on either tine of the fork, I could stay comfortable there. If I remained still for a few minutes, people out walking would sometimes pass underneath without noticing me. People don't generally expect to see men in trees. If I remained still for longer, the birds would return. Birds don't generally expect to see men in trees, either. Blackbirds fussing in the leaf litter; wrens which whirred from twig to twig so quickly they seem to teleport; once a grey partridge, venturing anxiously from cover.

I steadied myself in the observatory. My weight and movement had made the tree-top rock, and the wind exaggerated the rock, so that soon the summit of the beech was creaking back and forth, describing arcs of five or ten degrees. Not an observatory that day; more of a mast-top crow's-nest in a sea swell.

From that height, the land was laid out beneath me like a map. Dispersed across it were more fragments of woodland, some of whose names I knew: Mag's Hill Wood, Nine Wells Wood, Wormwood. To the west over corduroy fields was a main road, busy with cars. Directly north was the hospital, its three-piped incinerator tower rising far higher than my hill-top tree. A deep-chested Hercules aeroplane was descending towards the airfield on the city's outskirts. Above a road-verge to the east, I could see a kestrel riding the wind, its wings shivering with the strain, its tail feathers flared out like a hand of cards.

I had started climbing trees about three years earlier. Or rather, re-started; for I had been at a school that had a wood for its playground. We had climbed and christened the different trees, and fought for their control in territorial conflicts with elaborate rules and fealties. At home, my father had built me and my brother a tree-house in the garden, which we had defended successfully against years of pirate attack. In my late twenties, I had begun to climb trees again. Just for the fun of it: no ropes, and no danger either.

In the course of my climbing, I had learned to discriminate between tree species. I liked the lithe springiness of the silver birch, the alder and the young cherry. I avoided pines - brittle branches, callous bark - and planes. And I found that the horse chestnut, with its limbless lower trunk and prickly fruit, but also its tremendous canopy, offered the tree-climber both a difficulty and an incentive.

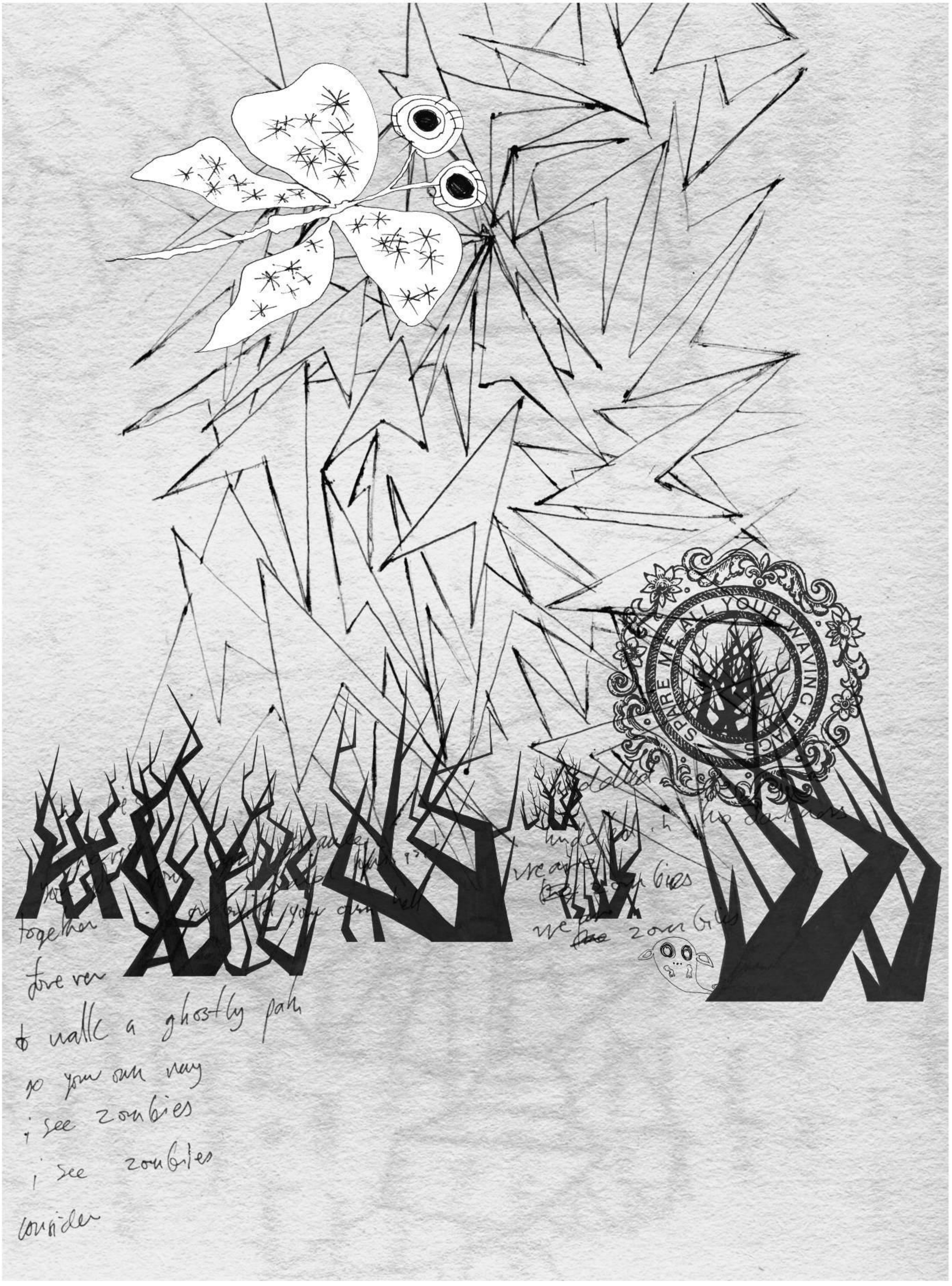
I explored the literature of tree-climbing: not extensive, but exciting. John Muir had swarmed up a hundred-foot Douglas Spruce during a Californian windstorm, and looked out over a forest, 'the whole mass of which was kindled into one continuous blaze of white sun-fire!' Italo Calvino had written his magical novel, The Baron in The Trees, whose young hero, Cosimo, in an adolescent huff, climbs a tree on his father's forested estate and vows never to set foot on the ground again. He keeps to his impetuous word, and ends up living and even marrying in the canopy, moving for miles between olive, cherry, elm and holm oak.

I also came to admire some of tree-climbing's serious contemporary exponents, in particular the scientists who research the redwoods of California and Oregon. Sequoia semperivens, the giant redwood, can grow to over three hundred feet high. Most of that height is branchless trunk; then comes a flaring crown, dense with branches. These latter-day spider-men have developed exceptional techniques of ascent. They use a bow and arrow to fire a pulling line up over a firm branch. This is then used to raise a climbing rope into the tree. Once in the canopy, their rope-skills are so great that they can move about safely and almost freely. Up there, in that aerial world, they have discovered a lost kingdom: a remarkable and entirely unstudied ecosystem.

There was nothing unique about my beech tree, nothing difficult in its ascent, no biological revelation at its summit, nor any honey. But it had become a place to think. A roost. I was fond of it, and it - well, it had no notion of me. I had climbed it many times; at first light, dusk and glaring noon. I had climbed it in winter, brushing snow from the branches with my hand, with the wood cold as stone to the touch, and real crows' nests black in the branches of nearby trees. I had climbed it in early summer, and looked out over the simmering countryside, with heat jellying the air and the drowsy buzz of a tractor audible from somewhere in the vast nearby fields. And I had climbed it in monsoon rain, with water falling in rods thick enough for the eye to see. Climbing the tree was a way to get perspective, however slight; to look down on a city that I usually looked across. Above all, it was a way of defraying the city's claims on me. Anyone who lives in a city will know the feeling of having been there too long. The gorge-vision that streets imprint on us, the sense of blockage, the longing for surfaces other than glass, brick, concrete and tarmac - the need for a wild place of some kind.



Robert Macfarlane is the author of 'The Wild Places'.


SPARE ME ALL YOUR WAVING ARMS
together
forever
to walk a ghostly path
to your own way
i see zombies
i see zombies
consider

GATHER UP THE PITIFUL



I AM SPITTING CLICHES
I SOUND LIKE A MUG
I AM A DISSOLVING
LIVING GHOST
HOUSES ARE CRUMBS
FIELDS WALLPAPER
ROADS ARE LIKE SCARS
HURTLING THROUGH VAPOURS
ALL THOUGHTS ARE TRANSPARENT
SOLIDIFY DISSOLVE
YOU ARE A LIVING GHOST
I CLAW AND I GRASP
CLING ONTO A RAFT
TURN ON A TURNING WHEEL
THE PEOPLE ARE ANTS
HOUSES ARE CRUMBS
FIELDS WALLPAPER
ROADS ARE LIKE SCARS

The Book Of

the book of forgiveness
the book of request
the book of the dream
that was ok
the book of the dark
underbelly
the book of apologies
the book of replacement
the book of unreal
the book of autosave
the book of wallpapers
the book of disconnect
the book of teleportation
the book of
my own thoughts

ANOTHER COIN FOR THE MERRY GO ROUND

JUST SAY

WHERE YOU WANNA BE

I'll take you anywhere
you want to go.
I can turn you on and
I can make you happy.

OPEN. NO MORE HIDING.

someone has cut a hole
and thrown the first stone
with no effort at all

the bottom of your chin
the straightening of your neck
a laugh stretched on your lips

i am back a child
the future open mouthed
and anything is possible
p o s s i b l e
p o s s i b l e

before we turn to ash
with a lightness of touch
unwrap this page in me
scatter the ink
scatter the ink

dumb words are all I have

feeble and undressed

windows in the dark

lost to the wind

I fail to comprehend

what compels me on

jump between the lines

along the underground

WEATHER COMING THROUGH THE WINDOWS
HAVE TO GET THESE WINDOWS REPLACED
THEY FLAP IN THE RAIN AND WIND.
THERES NO ONE LEFT IN THE HOUSE
BUT YOU AND HER.
LIE DOWN, I SHALL BE BACK FOR YOU.

YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR DEPTH
PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER

I WILL TAPE MYSELF UP
BUILD MYSELF A RAFT FROM WHATEVER IS HANGING AROUND
AND PUSH OFF FROM OUR IMAGINARY DESERT ISLAND
THAT I FORGOT TO TELL YOU EXISTED, AT LEAST TO ME
WISH YOU WELL LIKE A BRAVE TIN SOLDIER
WITH ALL THE STRENGTH I HAVE LEFT IN ME
LET THE CURRENTS AND FORCES OF NATURE DO WHAT THEY WILL
HAVING NO INTEREST IN THEIR WHOLESOME FUCKING WORTHY FLUORESCENT REALITY

FORESTS OF THE MIND

JAY GRIFFITHS

'Yes.'

I remember saying that word as if my life depended on it and perhaps I'll never know it did.

I didn't even manage to say it loudly. I said it with my eyes shut, as someone might plead for help, or as a child would make a wish or as a singer might close their eyes at the most significant note of the song.

It was a heartfelt yes, but whispered because whispering was all I could manage. It is the whisper which often starts the story. Hush. The noise of traffic fades. Station announcements fall silent. Trains grow quiet. Quiet. Quiet as the pause when you wait for the right word. Zurrumurru - whisper, in the Basque language. Hush. Step out of the station, step sideways into the woods. Step across the boundary and the trespass of story will begin. Just say yes.

My story began when I had been suffering depression for months. Many people know that lifeless place, where every way you look seems closed off to you: No is written on all sides, on every path.

I was lost in that bleak, hollow emptiness, haunted by thoughts of suicide, all my vitality gone. Then, one day, into this abyss of lifelessness someone threw me a rope, a lifeline.

An anthropologist who knew my situation telephoned me and invited me to go with him to the Peruvian Amazon to visit shamans who worked with the formidable mind-medicines of the forests.
I had to say yes to the journey and yes to the story because sometimes the tree of life may be a literal thing.

From Lima, we took a small plane, then a car, then a peque peque: one of the little motorized dugout canoes which zip up and down the rivers of the Amazon. From the river, we walked to the shamans' centre, through the forest, which stings you, bites you then strokes you with leaves soft as a kitten's ears. One tree's bark smelt of nutmeg, and the air was alive with smells, from honey-scented flowers to the zinging smell of sap and the sour smell of a mossy fetid pool. I could almost smell the sunlight. Palm fronds rattled in the hot moist air, and the whole forest surged with life.

As evening came, we settled into the shamans' hut; and a long night of the mind began. The medicine they gave me was like drinking hemlock and stars, as bitter as the one, as brilliant as the other. Cicadas and a whirring night bird feathered the night with noises and all the forest seemed mating and purring, rustling, cocooning and watching. I was surrounded by the warmth and breath of the forest, green and vital, and it was as if I were drinking in something of its essence, its spirit, its soul - and I needed that so badly because I had lost my own.

Before I visited these shamans, I would never have used the term soul-loss, but that was what I felt, my psyche unhappily lost and lonely.
Shamans consider that their job is to travel in the landscape of the mind, to search for someone's spirit and to bring it back strong.

.....

There are some terms of psychological well-being which can sound like descriptions of trees: to be 'grounded' and 'well rooted,' able both to 'stand firm' and also to 'branch out'. Forests have long been linked to the psyche, and it seems a human universal to see trees as good ways of seeking truths. Across the world, people have trusted trees for their solidity and steadfastness, both literally and metaphorically. Intriguingly, the words 'tree', 'trust' and 'truth' are all related words, as if the human race has always trusted trees to embody truth.

One Amazonian elder says the Amazon is 'a wide expanse, similar to a perceptive human head.' We speak of the 'tree of knowledge' and trees have long been associated with wisdom; the Buddha meditated under a tree and in India, Sadhus have always retreated to the forests for wisdom. Native Americans honoured the idea of a Sacred Tree. I've been with indigenous people in the Amazon when they have watched their forests cut down, their lands obliterated. They wept. 'Destroying the forests is the same as destroying us,' they said. 'We are the land.' The deforestation of the Amazon is also a deforestation of the human mind.

Shamans are the forest's doctors and therapists; their medicines are a free pharmacy. The Amazon has its artists, musicians and philosophers who intricately link the forests with the pathways of the mind. Forests are rich in all the psyche's expressions of art, music, language and culture, and the destruction of the Amazon is like napalming the Berlin Philharmonic; burning gas flares through the Louvre; slashing every copy of Shakespeare; bulldozing the Sydney Opera House and torching the scores of Mozart.

Meanwhile, as I lay in the shamans' hut, the forest night was quite literally en-chanted. One of the shamans chanted incantations, the songs or icaros which are the songlines of the Amazon. Ethereal, quiet almost to inaudibility, the songs are sometimes whistled, sometimes voiced, and sometimes they sound like panpipes from miles away, music half-heard from a source unknown, where melody is more like scent, a sweet resin in the air from an unseen tree. I felt as if I was not only drinking the forest but hearing its essence.
The shaman fell quiet for a while, and then began another song, from his own locale, the specific trees and groves of forest. He was singing one of his own songlines. Although it is the Songlines of Aboriginal Australia which are the most famous, I would argue that the whole world is wreathed in songlines, people's love of land made into music.

The song lay in hot silence for a while, unsung, then from the shadows, came a tiny leaf sprout of song. All the songs seemed sung in the key of green. The song seemed alive like a plant, and in a whistle I heard a wisp of slender stem, and then the music grew, elastic and gently energetic as a sapling sprung with green meaning; the songline twined like a vine, melody winding into leaf. This music was green and vivid and was so strongly suggestive of plants that I felt myself plantlike, rooted in brown leaf-mould and thirsty for



the sun. The music jumped up to the light, clambered like a vine, streaked for the heat of noon and wetness. Then, at its height, the music descended a few tones as a leaf would drop, swinging down from the canopy to the forest floor.

It's common knowledge that the Amazon is the source of huge numbers of medicines for curing diseases of the body, but it is also a cure for the mind. Not, I would emphasise, in the form of chemical extraction, turned into pills, but the true and whole curing, resulting from the totality of medicine, shaman, song and forest. What they amounted to was, in a word, life. It is this which can be found in the forests of Britain or Australia, the forests of the Americas and beyond: wherever there are forests there is life. And the shamanic role? It is findable, wherever there are musicians, artists, poet-seers and writers willing to go to the trees for wisdom; willing to listen to earthsong.

That the forests are the lungs of the world, we know. That the world needs the forests in order to breathe, we know. But forests are also sources of spirit, as I found when my spirit was so lost. The terms for 'spirit' and 'breath' are linked in many languages: anima - Latin - means both 'breath' and 'soul'; psyche - Greek - means 'breath' and 'soul.' My acute feeling of soul loss, of being dangerously de-animated, was cured by the animation, the spirit, of the forests.

The forests are a place of transformation, of shapeshifting. In the woods, the spirit can stretch and change, can move like a willow, elastic in spring. The whole tone of a day can be shifted by taking a walk through the trees in the park, even in a city-centre. Woodlands can absorb bad moods and calm headaches. They change us. In the woods, you may be lost in your thoughts, willingly lost, creatively lost, which allows you to enter the mind's forests, where the wind within can blow you somewhere sought and as yet unfound. A child may go to the woods to dream themselves into a different character, to effect their changeling masquerades away from the eyes of adults. In the wild dreamwood of childhood, children can play disguise-games which begin 'Let's pretend' and if children can't pretend, then they are condemned to reality.

Scented with story as it is with wild garlic, the woods may be a moment of beginning, the pause on the threshold before the journey, and then the woodlands may tell an unending story. A child, leaning against a tree, may listen to a blackbird, watch a rabbit, a fox or - if they are very lucky - a badger. In the forest is a child. But inside the child, will always be the forest. Breathe the forest deeply enough in childhood, and the birds will still be singing seventy years on.

After my stay with the shamans, I felt happy as a grasshopper. The depression I had felt did not return for years. What was so effective? A combination of the shamanic treatment and music, but also the sheer shining vitality of the forests which, as all wild places, was in itself a tonic for the human spirit.

Our minds need what is wild, that unmistakable, unforgettable, elemental thing, wildness the universal songline, sung in green gold which we recognize the moment we hear it. We come from this wild song and we are most fully alive when we resonate to its wildest pitch with intense and necessary love.

All humans are essentially wild creatures and hate confinement. We need what is wild, and we thrill to it, our wildness bubbling over with an anarchic joie de vivre. We glint when the wild light shines. The more suffocatingly enclosed we are - tamed by television, controlled by mortgages and bureaucracy - the louder our wild genes scream in aggression, anger and depression.

Walk. The drum begins. Follow it. Follow the drums of thunder. Follow the sun. Follow the stars at night as they lean their long slant down the far side of the sky. Follow the lightning and the open road. Follow your compulsion. Follow your calling. Put your boots on. We were made to walk through our lives wildly awake: our minds mobile, quick, changeable. To be a nomad in one's mind is in our gift: to move and learn, to be a student always. The mind, let loose, is a walking, asking, searching thing, questioning, questioning, whose root, of course, is to seek, to go on a quest.

It is as if a tragedy has been written into the world. People prey to depression feel that tragedy individually, but I think there is something far wider happening, the tragedy of divorce from the essential wildness of life, and separation from its fundamentally comedic nature. Tragedy works through crushing the spirit, in overwork, commuting, rush-hour exhaustion; worries, debts, bills, stress and the bad news which we all know. But tragedy is not the whole of the picture.

For still, in spite of it all, there are still the trees. Still, the wild reverie of the woodlands is within ourselves and the forests are enchanted; sung. Among all the tragedies of destruction, still, comedy erupts on the wild side, growth an absolute demand, new shoots thrusting up, yearning for sky. For, at some level, we have never really forgotten the comedy of life.

The spirit of comedy is the spirit of life, both leguminous, a vegetable exuberance. It is playful, this spirit. Wildness and comedy share a love of rudeness, tickling the pink with the horn of plenty. The comedy of life is rebellious, in the riotously festive nature of nature. Everything and everyone is a player in this harlequinade. Comedy unfurls through life, with its generous, regenerative grace, fill it till it spills and lick it up again. The earth is hot with, bursting with, fermenting with, dizzy with, hooting with - life, life which will always walk the wild way, the curly way, in fecund riot and feral grace.

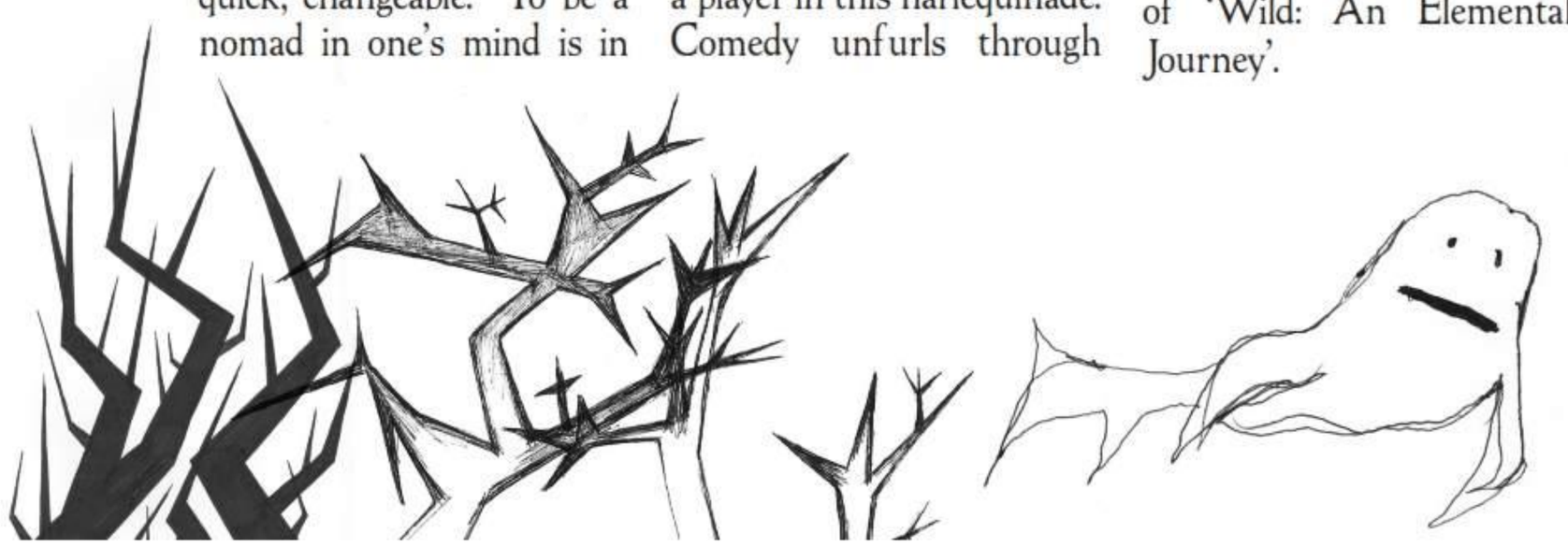
The forests are, for me, the opposite of depression. Where depression is dull, the forests shimmer with vitality. Whereas depression is a congealed stasis, the forests wriggle, dance and jump. Where depression is a horribly lonely illness, the heart of forest-wisdom is the irrefutable interconnectedness of all life. Having felt condemned to depression, I experienced the shapeshifting transformation of the forests. Having felt the cold, silent approach of something potentially fatal in depression, I found in the Amazon something which spoke of the warmest opposite, a riot of language in irrepressible gusto, life growling, flowering, leafing, hooting and budding, flickering in a forest fiesta of verdant and noisy verbs, the forest chattering with language, a whole universe laughing with life.

And what it says is - yes.



Jay Griffiths is the author of 'Wild: An Elemental Journey'.





INFINITY

SELL YOUR HOUSE AND BUY GOLD

STANLEY DONWOOD

There was disaster coming; that was obvious. Life had been almost ridiculously easy, and now things were going to get worse. Much, much worse. I couldn't believe that I had ever thought otherwise. I couldn't believe that I'd ever thought that there could be any other outcome.

But I had.

I had disregarded a thousand different types and variations of warning for years.

I had believed implicitly in the power of the Authorities to deal with any situation that may have worried me. My bookshelves were full of books, packed with scientific explanations, and I had taken out a variety of insurance that implied my life was worth money.

I did not think that my life, or more precisely, the manner in which I lived it was effectively an inexorably lengthy suicide, although, of course, it was. Small things were changing, but I had preferred to remain oblivious. I did not much miss the butterflies, and birdsong had only reminded me of mobile phones or car alarms anyway.

Disaster I thought of in inverted commas; "DISASTER".

It was something that, if it were to happen, would look like extremely expensive special effects.

Because the world was big, and seemed to alter only in the details, I slowly became comfortable in many assumptions. I fossilised into what I saw as an eternally stable sediment.

In this state I engaged actively with property, clothing, money, culture, and had a vested interest in continuing to do so.

In this I was not alone.

Even though I had often observed newly-born swarms of mayflies smashed to pieces by a sudden and unexpected showers of hailstones, I often used credit cards. Even though I myself had mercilessly crushed legions of ants beneath my feet, I took out a mortgage on a house that I then renovated, decorated and bought furniture for. And even though I had seen on the television many harbingers of disaster, I carried on acting as if nothing was wrong.

All of this was an error.

No. Not just an error; it was an immense mistake.

When, at last and unequivocally, I had to admit to my deeply comfortable self that disaster really was coming and that its coming was inevitable, I took certain steps.

Everyone that I knew of lived in houses, and it rapidly became clear that all of these houses were either too old, too dangerously situated, or in any number of other ways inappropriate. We used our diverse and highly-developed skills to research the question of what to do.

We decided to build a new house that had none of the drawbacks of previous habitats. We selected a site and had the house built. The disaster was definitely coming, but money still worked as it always had, as did credit, mortgages, property, and all the other things we clothed ourselves with. There seemed to be no particular urgency regarding the disaster; only a dull sort of inevitability. Our new house fulfilled all the requirements we sought, but there was one thing we had not thought about.

One thing we had not got right.

We built a house with too many shadows in it. It wasn't the sort of thing that you notice at first; oh no.

The shadows did not become evident until it was too late.

Of course. Not until it was much, much too late.

And soon it was clear to us all that the disaster was almost upon us. This we deduced from the undeniable fact that many of the things to which we had become accustomed began to stop functioning.

The telephones became unreliable, and there was often no money in the holes in the walls. There was no more petrol, which led to some very unpleasant scenes, both on the roads and elsewhere. People had certainly been guilty of selfishness before, but the stoppage of petrol made a lot of people act extremely thoughtlessly.

In addition to our frequent and increasing daily troubles, the always awkward-to-reach call-centre employees whom we relied upon for many things were frequently completely absent, and when the telephone systems did actually work we were usually rebuffed by recorded voices that enticed us through several options before becoming silent.

One evening the television had nothing to show us.

And then, almost suddenly, it was no longer possible to buy newspapers, or indeed many sundries including soap, dish-washing tablets, razors, lightbulbs, vacuum-cleaner bags, or toilet paper, as the family who had owned the shop had gone. We tried to find other shops, but the families who owned them had gone too.

We now had to think about the how of getting, rather than the how much to get. This was a strain. It occurred to me, not infrequently, that our civilisation had, of late, begun to make the simplest things extremely tortuous. We had perfected what now seemed a psychotic level of complexity around simple human activities like eating, keeping clean, and moving from one place to another.

Our supply of electricity became erratic. At the end of a day filled with minor panics of one sort or another it was apparent that there was no more of it at all.

That was where our real problems started.

Looking back, I can see that they began long before that. Our problems began a long, long time ago, when they were invisible, and continued during their gradual appearance.

The problems grew and were nurtured by our casual indifference, our sneers, and the ignorant manner in which we chose to live. Our gestating problems were the dark, inevitable spectre that accompanied us to the cashpoint, into work, to the supermarket, and into our gritty, tortured beds.

And after the end of the electricity, the shadows conspired against us.

The dark corners began to scare us more than the coming disaster. The disaster was imminent; that was clear from the disappearance of many things which we had assumed to be vital to our being. But the threat from the shifting shadows in our house was worse, far worse.

We began, almost imperceptibly, to panic.

However much we reassured ourselves that we were safe, that the disaster would flow over us, that we had stockpiled, that we were defended and guarded against every eventuality, the insistent shadows illuminated our vulnerability.

When night came, we fell to a brooding quietude, eyeing each other with suspicion, inventing justifications for our dark feelings.

We cloaked our hidden desires; we conspired with the shadows.

Nothing seemed to be happening.

The television, I realised, had been a sort of terminal that connected me to a wider understanding of events. And without newspapers it was impossible not to write my own internal headlines during my sleepless nights. Worry became constant; worry and enforced exile from everything I was accustomed to.

I had never envisaged a sort of loneliness that did not involve people. But in fact it was the lack of small items that I had previously taken for granted made me lonely. I missed tea, toothpaste, remote controls, coffee, ballpoint pens, margarine, AA batteries, and easy credit in high-street stores. I missed my favourite magazines.

And the dead silence that encloaked the telephone and the television made me lonely. And the hollow look in the eyes of the people - oh....

After the end of electricity, the nights lengthened.

We had to wait in the dark, listening.

Life had quickly become intolerable for some of us.

It wasn't that I found my existence more tolerable than theirs; only that I felt that I had a sort of fortitude, a sort of - wisdom.

Nobody was happy.

The light in the house became less and less; the shadows, darker and darker. Still we waited for the disaster.

And when I looked, when people moved in front of the windows in the grey light, their shadows cast quickly clattering dark talons across the floor. This only became worse as the light faded.

I forbade them from moving, as it had become impossible to tell shadow from shadow. Or shadow from human.

Mine was a necessary act, an act which intended to prove that we had to be strong and united against the looming disaster.

The man had always been unreliable, but certain events had proved to me that he was a liability. If it had not been me it would have been another who would have had to take that awful decision.

Nobody witnessed anything; not that it would have made any difference if they had.

I was not ashamed, and after a certain amount of uproar I explained my reasoning and my actions to the others. But I did not go into the details; if I had told them about his struggling, and how long it took, there would undoubtedly have been problems.

We carried his carcass beyond the perimeter wire and left it in a ditch. Inevitably, there were people who objected, and they were next.

When disaster is coming it is difficult to see clearly, but somehow I could see through the shadows to the light.

A long period of unpleasantness followed.

As the people in the house became fewer the shadows seemed to increase in number and in density. Often I perused my fading bank statements, lost in a reverie of long-gone financial transactions. I disliked being disturbed. Yes. I disliked that.

The disaster was coming. That was clear.

There were shadows everywhere.

When I was at last alone, when the people were all gone, I waited for the disaster on my own.

On my own.

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