

It might have been the large fallen water gum, suspended above ground by the same vines it had once held aloft in the canopy, which set things into play. Seeing it blocking the narrow foot-worn rainforest path which connected a waterhole to one of those new housing developments in the cane fields, I was reminded of a broken tree bole dangling mid-air that Ralph Eugene Meatyard had observed above Red River Gorge, Kentucky several decades earlier. It could also have been the large water cherry flanking the creek nearby which spanned the peripheries of my vision, its foliage cascading down to dance in the currents no matter how low the waters would run. Whatever it was, there was something during that visit 16 years ago which compelled me to pay closer attention to this stretch of creek that I thought I already knew.

At that time, about 800 metres upstream past the high timber bridge which gets swallowed by seasonal floodwaters, a plantation of hoop pines still grew thick upon a fertile alluvial terrace. Cultivated around the time of the Great Depression by Wurrmbul, a figure of Djabugay royalty, the forest evoked an uncanny blend of European gothic and Gondwanic splendour. A young rainforest crowded its darkened understory and the roots of countless orchids found purchase upon coarse Araucarian bark. Long untended as a monoculture, the pines now nursed the memory of the complex rainforest which originally stood there.

A camp kept by Chinese miners and market gardeners had earlier occupied this site. On the opposing creek bank, a mine shaft which had been carved metres deep through solid rock, bore testament to their gut-wrenching labour. They had left behind empty food and medicine bottles upon their departure, treasures which would be excavated from the pine litter by young trespassers close to a century later. Early histories from further down the valley chronicle Chinese settlers being forced off the land they had first developed due to covetous European interests. It's uncertain if the abandonment of the site around the turn of the 20th century can be attributed to the same entitled aggression, but it's difficult to rule it out.

Freshwater valley was folded from metamorphic stone formed by sediments which were once laid down on upon an ancient ocean bed. Giant Kauri Pines still perch high on some of the steeper slopes which eluded the reach of even the most ambitious timber getters last century. It's boulder-strewn creek banks are fringed by grand, tenacious water gums, gallery rainforests and half-hidden tributaries that form a shifting zone of associations suspended between place and imagination.

This landscape is also suffering. Some afflictions have persisted since colonisation whilst others are much more recent. Where reasonably intact ecosystems once occupied long unbroken stretches of the creek, backyards now breach allotment boundaries displacing remnant vegetation right down to the water's edge. Peri-urban vanities: canoe landings, barbecue settings and hydro-powered spit roasts punctuate the remaining vegetation. Via these ruptures, invasive ornamental weeds nucleate then irrupt along the riparian corridor in a tilt at ecological succession which, without considerable human intervention, will probably succeed. A bale of malnourished hand-fed turtles await a dinner of pickings from stale hot dog buns whilst the exotic pathogen Myrtle Rust appears to have afflicted every water gum for kilometres downstream.

The Hoop Pine forest is no longer there. Cleared and sold off as lumber over a decade ago, the site awaits reconstruction into an 'eco-resort'. Blocked pedestrian tracks which cross the creek's delicate wet season distributaries have been widened to accommodate recreational four-wheeled motorbikes (the jet skis of the rainforest). The once luxuriant Water Cherry which cast its branches over Zanzoo waterhole for well over a century has now been stripped back to the bole by thrill seekers demanding safe clearance as they plummet from its highest reaches into the water below.

Despite this ongoing unravelling, there are still pockets within this landscape where the 'dark element of withdrawal', described by environmental philosopher Frédéric Neyrat, becomes tangible. These vital, patchily distributed refugia are the critical zones where biodiversity still flourishes along the urban fringe. Within the sprawling, wounded eco-complex of the wet tropics of Queensland the most intact examples persist within topographies which have proven more resistant to opportunistic modification and ecological infiltration. When accessing these zones, oblique and indirect courses often provide the shortest paths. The descent of a high colluvial embankment down a spindly lichen-stained ladder, a barefoot traversal of a forgotten tributary or the cautious skirting of deep whitewater along a haphazardly scattered corridor of boulders.

Within such an area I encounter another fallen water gum, bridging the creek a little further upstream. Pulling down a large neighbouring tree as it collapsed, the disturbance has left a large canopy gap which will stimulate new diversity as understory plants which have lain in wait race to fill the space. A conspicuous rotten cavity in its trunk caused by the shedding of a large branch many decades earlier seems the obvious cause for the collapse. Moving in closer I observe the distinctive brown circles of Myrtle Rust emblazoned upon its leaves and I pause to wonder what might eventually fill its place.

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