

[Megan Holbeck]



WILD THINGS

Ghosts, snow and mountain ash

Time travel via the trees.

The word 'bleak' seems made to describe Scotland in winter, when the wind sneaks in every crack, and dark clouds skim the ground. Add in being young, homesick, friendless, and living and working in a remote pub where locals come to perve and the other staff hate you on sight, and bleak quickly turns to dire.

I lasted three dark, cold, lonely months. I worked, read a lot of books, spent the short daylight hours exploring the lochs and hills on bike and foot. Most weeks I visited a gum tree I'd discovered in a nearby garden, its thin branches bobbing perkily in the gale. Crushing a leaf between my fingers and breathing deeply, I'd feel connected again. That eucalypt smell bypassed the conscious parts of my brain, side-stepped my misery, and reminded me that there was another world, one where it was sunny and warm, the sky kept its proper distance, I had friends and family, and knew how life worked. Even the sight of the tree took me to warm air, the mountain smell of dirt and gums, the warbling of magpies and the cacophony of dawn.

Eucalypts have spread around the world, but they spell Australia to me. I'm not a botanist, a gardener, or fussy: I'll take the spotted gums of the NSW south coast, evenly spaced and as splotchy as their dappled shade, or the mountain ash of the highlands, its skin dangling in extravagant ribbons. I love the huge white monsters in Sydney's

coastal parks, their smooth bark wrinkling at every fork and bend. There are rough ones with bark like the fur of a woolly mammoth, pink-barked gums that set off the blue sky, and those gorgeous trees that make the whole neighbourhood smell like lemons when it rains. Nothing captures the beauty of the Australian Alps like a gnarled snow gum, preferably growing through the cracks of a granite boulder, the sunset glow on wildflowers scattered in the grass. The smooth white bark of ghost gums contrasts perfectly with central Australia's epic red rocks, the delicate green leaves fluttering on thin branches like tiny organic prayer flags.

In short, I'm a massive fan of the gum tree. I'm not alone in my admiration: Murray Bail's award-winning book *Eucalyptus* is as much about the trees as the action; old-growth forests are loved by photographers, walkers and other visitors, as well as generations of loggers. Across Australia, neighbours fight about their trees: They drop leaves and limbs, block sunlight and solar panels, but are as much a part of the house as the family that lives there.

Eucalypts are not just in the bush. Majestic old gums are everywhere when you look: A blue gum stretching skyward at the centre of a suburban roundabout; a massive stringy bark surrounded by ramps and slides and packs of kids in the park up the road. There's one outside my kitchen window, garlanded with fuzzy flowers and

flocks of rosellas. I'll be walking to the beach, running in the bush or sitting in a friend's backyard and I'll pause to admire one of these elders, its trunk scarred by missing branches, its hollows forming high-rises for wildlife.

These trees have been there forever, or for what seems like it anyway, since before white people arrived. They're the scattered, remnant giants that were saplings before forests turned into suburbs. They've watched as the land changed from wilderness to roads and houses and yards and boundaries, the fauna replaced with people.

Like that solitary gum in Scotland, these scattered trees give me hope, reminding me that there is another, brighter world, although it does not yet exist. A world where nature matters; where kids don't strike for climate because governments govern for it instead. A future where the environment will be valued as much as the economy, and businesses will factor environmental costs into their decision making, and decisions will be made for the good of the planet instead of at its expense.

The existence of this world is far from certain. Dark forces must be overcome to get there: Not scary, shadowy armies but everyday baddies like ignorance, apathy and greed. And I doubt it will be quick: I won't live to see it, nor will the big old gums. But signs of it are emerging, like eucalypts sprouting after fire. In a couple of hundred years, who knows what these saplings will see.