



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Standing Wood

Abstract:

This is an extract from a memoir, provisionally entitled “Hoarding: a how to guide”, each chapter of which focusses on an object. “Standing Wood” explores the idea of more-than-human narrative through the relationships between the character of the Wood Cutter and the firewood he chopped and burnt. The piece explores the idea of giving voice to standing wood – long-dead trees, dead but still burnable. It narrates the movement of humans (as well as ice and seeds) across continents. Various types of timber are animated – bog oak and abandoned fish crates from the peats of Scotland, mallee root from the arid country of the Riverland – to explore the boundaries between subjectivity and objecthood. Standing wood is not just a metaphor for human characters in the piece, but is also metonymic and literal. It uses creative non-fiction to try to map some practices, relationship and stories that weave together and co-constitute these humans and the firewood that warms, comforts, shames and defines them.

Biographical note:

Nicole Matthews grew up on the Murray, spent over a decade on Merseyside, and now lives near Dyarubbin in Garigal country. She is an associate professor in the media and cultural studies at Macquarie University. She has a longstanding interest in mediated autobiography, and her research has been published in *Media, Culture and Society*, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* and in *Digital Storytelling in Health and Social Policy*, written with Naomi Sunderland. Her own autobiographical writing has been published in *Life Writing*, *Hecate* and *The Saltbush Review* and in *Placing disability: Personal essays of embodied geography* (Springer, 2024).

Keywords:

Memoir, creative non-fiction, objects, environmental humanities, addiction

Standing wood

On winter evenings, from the kitchen, we heard grunts and curses and the thud of splinters on glass. Fists were raised in the pool of light that fell from the window. A shirt torn off and thrown to the ground; the clink and spatter of a wine bottle toppling; more curses: the love language of the axe. Then the door would burst open and the woodcutter would stand there, panting. He had a tale to tell. But it seemed as if, with all that swinging of the blade, his tongue had turned to steel. It just clanged in his empty mouth. His children looked at him blankly. His boots shuffled and boomed, his arms waved and pointed. Words flew out but fell in a pile on the floor around him, like woodchips and sawdust.

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It took the woodcutter finally leaving our rickety house beneath the big trees to discover the secret stories of firewood.

Now he's gone, it's my job to chop logs for the slow combustion stove, and I've got my own firewood stories. These are epic tales, at least when I'm on the tools – shaggy dog stories full of plot twists and side quests. There's a lot of repetition. Nothing happens very fast – there are more set-backs than you could possibly imagine.

By the time the stump, your enemy, lies in pieces round the chopping block, it feels as if you've been on a rugged but tiny adventure, like a termite that's gnawed its way for an age along a line of weakness in the grain. At the start you're naïve. You see a split in the smooth surface of cut wood, like a door ajar, and think – I'm in! It's the perfect place for a wedge. You try to smash that sucker open. Again, and again your blade falls but your entry's blocked. You're dejected. The log bucks and spins. Is it trying to evade you, turn its back, protect its underbelly? Most times your axe misses its target. But so far, it hasn't found a toe or a finger. You're thankful for closed shoes.

You set out again to find a way to the tree-stump's heart. Perhaps if you're steadfast you can inch inside, peeling the years back, layer by layer. After what feels like days, you're surrounded by bark and shavings, staring down at a petulant lump of a thing, so battle scarred it hardly looks like part of a tree. But still it resists your probing and poking. Skirting the stub of a branch, with its circular defences, you plunge through a patch of rot that's soft to the touch. You realise you can come up from behind on that very same crack. You smile, raise your arms above your head and split the log open with a crash.

It takes an hour just to break up that one block of firewood. You've been out of the house so long the kids have started to worry. With all that grappling, prising and levering, you've come know the damn chunk of timber personally, even intimately. And then, at last, when you hack it up small enough to fit the firebox, you watch it burn.

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Of course, he wasn't just a woodcutter. He was a forester – a fence maker, path builder, tree planter, weed puller, a poisoner. And a plate wrangler, bag hauler, fruit seller and whelk picker. And a messenger. When I first met him, he lived in a tent in the forest and washed in cold water. He ate from tins on a little gas fire and kept his savings in a jar by the edge of a stream and every day he put on damp boots to plant seedlings on the blustery hillside.

Long ago, when the ice melted back from the land, birch and hazel, pine and oak found their way across the sea to Scotland to make the great Caledonian Forest. Little by little it was felled – most of it gone by Roman times. Cut for timber and charcoal and tan-bark, eaten by deer, drowned in peat. Now hardly any remains but the man in the tent in the pine woods was working to bring it back.

Once a week he would wait by the side of the road for a lift, to go see his pal in the city, to wash his clothes, pick up his post and have a beer or two or many more at the Variety Bar on Sauchiehall Street. I first met him there, in the town. He told me about the place he lived – where three roads come together under Ben More, the big hill – but he never expected a visit. When I stepped off the highland coach and walked into the forest, he was amazed.

Stories of wood can also be stories of water. The woodcutter spent three months in a stone cottage under snowy mountains, a bothy with a roof but no light and no heat. Drinking from the burn. Driftwood from the beach. The water of the Gulf Stream lapped the coast there, bringing flotsam for the fire.

The best were fish crates from the trawlers, washed from the decks in bad seas. Some had stern messages: "Return to Lochinver. No Unauthorised Use". But if a crate slipped away from its companions into the swell, it rarely returned. What did that crate see, tumbling through the night waves on its way to the shore? Who can know how it felt, cut loose for a time from the world of humans, their land, their work and their needs? Did it feel alone or did it feel free?

The fish boxes were long and low, with a cut-out for the big hands of the fishermen that heaved them off the boats and carried the shimmering layers of whitefish – haddock, whiting and cod – to the covered market for auction. Then the crates came back to their home on deck, stacked out in the weather, waiting for dawn and seagulls.

One fishbox would keep you warm for an evening, or two if you just wanted the fire for company, to stare into the flames. You could use the planks as tinder, the corners as logs. You'd have to burn a side – the cut out blazing with orange light – to dry out the next piece. There was a rhythm to it, a kind of meditation.

The North Sea boats stopped using wooden fish crates by the eighties. Plastic lasted longer and after the oil crisis, petroleum companies guaranteed their earnings by pushing more and more of it on us all. They said it was clean and hygienic but you couldn't burn those plastic boxes, or you shouldn't. One night the woodcutter set fire to one of the new fish crates. The weather

was cold and dreich, there was nothing else on the beach. It burnt a strange colour with a fast, hot flame. So hot that the stone chimney, carefully repaired, cracked again. He was ashamed, though no one knew what he had done – there was no one around to see. He said that was the loneliest he's ever been. He would go out on the sand between the tides, gather shellfish, walk for three miles down the track to the road, then hitch to the nearest town to sell his pickings. And then back to the stone hut, and if he was lucky, a wooden crate to burn, something left in the bottle of whisky and a glimpse of an otter catching fish in the bay.

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Women don't collect firewood, the woodcutter said, except Australians. On the day when all the streams froze, my siblings and I were outdoors in the uplands, in the woodcutter's country. My sister, long legs clad unwisely in denim, wouldn't leave the hearth, but the rest of us went out into the snow, looking for fuel. It was New Year's Day on the West Highland Line, a day with no trains, so we walked along the railway tracks. We trod carefully on the ice-bridge and climbed the fence – the woodcutter; the gravedigger, silent as always; my brother, the long-haired teacher; a brusque French polisher; and a professional talker, a woman, of course. That was me.

The woodcutter told us we might find bog oak out on the moor. It was something special – what's left of the Caledonian Forest, remnant roots or fallen timber, long forgotten underground. Blackened wood, dense too, preserved and tainted by the peat. With no borers or termites, no light, no air to age it, an old tree kept in the dark so long it's almost become a fossil. Bog oak is hard to find, but it was still there, in the peat hags of Rannoch Moor. It was rare and precious. Like the woodcutter, I thought: I was in love. The Tudors made fine dark-hued furniture from bog oak but you could also burn it. In a treeless land, that might be all there was to burn.

I asked the woodcutter who taught him about bog oak and where to find it. He said no-one – he just knew.

Maybe the ancient oak, alone in its acid bed, spoke to him. A root that with a curl remembers long ago, being entwined, and held, and touched on every side, being woven into the deep footings of the forest. What else does it remember? Like the bog men that sleep in the peat, being cut down in its prime? Ripped from its kin, drowned and abandoned, a sacrificial victim to the crofters, the smelters, the ship builders.

What did the bog oak whisper to the woodcutter, from its place of rest? "You who stutter and stammer, stop your sentences before they begin, sever one word from the next: keep quiet. Sorrow belongs underground. If they pull you from the dark, it will burn. Reveal your dwelling place, and you will be extinguished completely. Protect your secrets: the guilt of existing when all those who loved you have been taken away".

Bog oak is hard to break, the woodcutter said. You can jump on it, and it just bounces back. But it splits. You can make kindling from it with only your pocketknife, it falls apart so easily.

The gravedigger found the antlers of a deer and tied them to the top of his haversack. I have a picture of him, my future brother-in-law, tall and expressionless, staring at the grey horizon, the horns stretched out wide on each side of his head. We walked along the track looking like old gods but went back to the bothy as thieves. We discovered no bog oak that day, but instead pilfered the sleepers that lay beside the line.

What was the mission of the railway lumber we took back to burn? What had it been brought there to do, to mend or to replace, on bog so deep that train line – “the iron road to the islands” – has no solid foundations, floats on a raft of brush laid over fathomless peat? We didn’t understand the timber’s purpose and we didn’t really care. I wonder if those stolen railway planks wrought a stealthy revenge. Was it soaked in copper chrome arsenate – a poison that could have crept into our skin and our hair? Maybe that hearth-wood addled us more than the night’s bottle of fire-water. Or maybe not, because, what, after all, do you know about the life of long-gone firewood? Can you ever really know the tales that firewood would want to tell at all?

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The woodcutter taught me to search for standing wood. At the abandoned village, its inhabitants fled across the sea so long ago – my favourite place in all the world – we went on a fuel hunt. Along the pebbly beach. Past the sheep, the great-great-great-great grandchildren of the ones that replaced all those people. Through the ruined buildings, down the track between the old fields, across the murky drainage ditches and into the grove of trees below the rocky hill. “Look up” he said. Sometimes, when a branch breaks, it gets caught and hangs amongst the boughs. Or slips straight down, and leans against a trunk, standing clear above the leaf-litter. You have to pull it free from the tree but it’s not live wood. It’s dead, but not yet buried. Even in rainy Scotland, it stays dry and good to burn.

Standing wood is still worth finding, even on the other side of the world. Decades later, on a wet weekend beneath fragrant eucalypts, I told my new sweetheart to look for forked and twisted sticks for kindling. Pick the twigs that have hardly touched the ground, I said: they’ll burn. The branchlets with their garlands of gum-leaves sparked up straight away – it was almost too easy.

The woodcutter would have thought so anyway. His fires were jealous and demanding: they needed meticulous preparation and constant attention. He could think and deal with nothing else while tending to their needs. Meals were a distraction. The kids and their babble were brushed aside. His hearth-fires were hard to start, but he was incendiary, especially when doused with alcohol. He was as brittle as the driest of standing wood. I bought him a book on anger management once – he threw it in the fire. It was an affront that I could light the combustion stove for the night and walk away. I had all the advantages, it appeared to him, or

so I guessed. How could you know the true story of a man more likely to ignite than talk? I guess it was true though: I had good luck, a chipper attitude and combustible Australian timber.

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Like mallee roots.

More than twenty years ago, before he gave me my children, the woodcutter came halfway round the world to set eyes on a mallee stump. He loved their outlandish shapes and their unflagging hearts, the way they burnt, just like bog oak. Did he think, then, that he could really do it: leave his mountains, make a family, survive in a faraway land? At the time, it seemed to both of us that he might.

We drove down onto the plain, two generations of my people, returning to the big river and the rustling land it gathers round it. I saw the mallee country, the saltbush and the spinifex, with new eyes, eyes that had overflowed with European green. Those stubby trees that I had once thought so little of seemed beautiful to me. On a bright winter night, the woodcutter stretched out beside me in front of long-burning coals, talking timber. My father laughed at the idea of splitting mallee stumps. They were indecipherable knots of wood, as convoluted, as cryptic, as the human brain, capable of outwitting bushfires and grazers and the axe.

Settlers who came from overseas, promised wealth from fields of gold, came to hate this mallee country, its relentlessness. It had to be cleared, which meant crushing the trees' profusion of stems by dragging a heavy roller across the scrub behind a team of beasts. Once the smashed trunks had dried, it meant burning what remained to the ground. Without a doubt, it meant so much more for the Ngaiawang and Ngawait, the Nganguruku, Erawirung, Ngintait, the Ngaralte and Ngarkat, the first peoples of these river lands. But this is a settler story, a story of avoidance and denial.

Under the sandy soil the blackened eucalypts' swollen lignotubers were patient, full of purpose. The roots of a European tree can distend, if it's under stress – if it's coppiced, trunk and branches amputated; allowed to grow; and then hacked back again and again. But the burls on the roots of the mallee have always been there. And that furled and twisted grain is gorgeous. Back in the thirties, the *Adelaide Advertiser and Register* marvelled at this “wonderful wood” that seemed to absorb the hues of the soil, making “iridescent ... luminous, and many-colored grainings”, infinitely varied patterns like “lovely clouds and flames and fantome figures”. When polished, it looks, it has been said, just like marble or jasper or some other kind of precious stone. But mallee stumps are so hard to dig out, so much an immovable part of country that at first, farmers just left them there, sowed wheat over, and through, and around them.

What do I find so poignant about that great Australian contraption, the stump-jump plough? It was invented on the Yorke Peninsula, where my mother grew up, limestone country with pink lakes and endless beaches but no running streams, described by nineteenth-century gazetteers

as full of “undulating sandy rises and salt lagoons and swamps”. The “problem” of the mallee was especially bad there it seems. Mallee trunks so tough they had to be hacked down, one by one, by axemen, and then there still remained fields filled with scores and scores of the trees’ stubborn underpinnings.

The story goes that the stump-jump plough was invented when the obdurate ground snapped the bolt holding a ploughshare steady, while farmer Richard Bowyer Smith was tilling at his place at Kalkabury, north of Maitland. Smith found to his surprise that this broken plough did a better job of riding over rocks and roots than a whole one: the loose ploughshare swinging up and over obstacles like the finger of a pianist striking and then lifting briskly from the ivory keys. In 1876 Smith took this invention – the Vixen, a three furrow plough – up to the Moonta Show for everyone to marvel at. That same year he exhibited a model with another improvement, the bridle draught, a chain that dragged the ploughshare back down into the dirt just as soon as it leapt clear.

Smith never got a patent on the stump-jump plough – it was his brother Clarence who made money manufacturing it; other farmers, on the Peninsula and beyond, contested his conviction that he was the first to have the idea. Perhaps it’s fitting that no human inventor could make a solid claim. For surely, the thought of stump-jumping could only have come from the loops and whorls of a mallee-mind, and in any case, it was a mallee root that made the real breakthrough, when it snapped that crucial bolt.

What touches me about this historic ironmongery, a machine that you might come upon, painted glossy red and black, near the children’s playground on the clifftop at Ardrossan that overlooks the warm waters of St Vincent’s Gulf? It reminds you that there’s something hidden under the earth, massive and shapeless and strong, gripping the soil. You could tackle what remains below ground, set out with spades and picks and crowbars. But that half-known hazard is so damn tough it’s easier to let it be. Leave it. Till around it and across it. The ploughshares escaping an encounter with the thing you won’t confront and can’t ignore. Thinking of this evasive moment, repeated over and over and over again, makes me want to weep. The stump-jump plough did the job: it worked, for a while. But big things can’t stay underground forever, no matter what a cash-strapped farmer or an exiled woodsman might believe.

The mallee sprouted faster than the wheat. “The shoots are nearly as high as the crops and the reaping machine looks like a ship in a storm as it rocks about going over the stumps” in the words of a curious visitor to the Adelaide Plains. The mallee’s potent leaves mixed with the harvest and goaded the ploughmen, the cockies, and drove them to drink. When, down the track, they – or their wives and children, whose time, somehow, was never measured – grubbed up the stumps, the roots were left in piles in naked fields. In plague times, the mice took up residence, until their homes were torched. C. H. Souter, writing between the wars, mourned the “wealth now being burned ... millions of tonnes already wasted, for firewood in the city or on the farm, just to get rid of it” when farmers might have “reaped a handsome profit” from the “unsuspected beauties of the humble mallee stump ... a hitherto despised and unprofitable product”. The ashes of the mallee were transmuted into willy willies, filled with the finest of

sand, that stung faces and made little ones cry. It took poverty and war to think of selling this waste-wood, to put a price on the head of the enemy.

In the terrible dust storms that came after the clearing, so much topsoil was blown away that sometimes a mallee root would be found sitting right on top of the ground. The dirt had been stripped back, showing what had been lost, and what had always been there: a root crown burl, buckled and crumpled and warped. You could see every contour now, of the thing that escaped you and defeated you. And suspect what it had done for you, when it was alive but hidden: held all kinds of things together. You needed to know what lay under this thin crust of red dirt, but knowing, in the end, wasn't nearly enough.

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After the woodcutter was sent away from our ramshackle house between the trees, I tried to talk to him on the telephone. It was hard to pin him down, to get him to answer, as I guess it had always been. "I'm gone" he said, when I caught him for a moment, "I'm in the wind again".

*

There's home grown wood in the combustion stove this year, chunks of my very own trees. I love my backyard jungle but these just had to go. One was a huge old pine, the victim of a lightning strike. It was dead wood – it had been like that for as long as I could remember. My neighbours and I all knew it was waiting to fall. And then, one by one, its friends, the pines beside it, dropped their needles and turned up their toes. It seems that without their boon companion, snatched away so suddenly, it wasn't worth going on. The life of the garden continued around them –cockatoos chewed on their pinecones; a family of kookaburras moved in; baby sparrowhawks hatched and fledged and learned to hunt right there in their branches – but none of that made a difference, it seemed. That row of pines had thrown in the towel.

From his new territory, the big back deck with a view of the national park, the woodcutter stared up at those looming pines. In his cups, he would threaten to best them. He could climb up there, it was easy, he had ropes, he could borrow his good friend's saw. He'd been a woodsman, he'd been a climber, he knew exactly what to do. That was years before he was really grog-sick, his hands shaking so hard he couldn't write his name, but even then, if he'd tried to climb those giant trees, I wouldn't have let him go. Meanwhile, out front, near the street, the hydra-headed off-shoots of a lofty robinia, a gold-leafed weed, were coming up everywhere: along the fence-line, down the unmown driveway, through the garden beds with their hidden, emptied bottles of wine. I snapped them off, snipped them with my secateurs, but those suckers were unstoppable. The woodcutter knew his poison. He was a professional killer, as he often said, but the robinia's will to live was stronger than his. Nothing could move him. Meanwhile, out of sight, the weed tree and its nefarious ally, our neighbour's bamboo, pushed up the concrete, entered the drains, encircled the house.

In the end I paid an arborist to bring those big trees down. They were laid low with such tenderness. I know the guy – he really loves the bush, does his best to save the suburban giants that remain on the ridgeline. I’ve never seen workmates as caring as the big fella on the ground holding a rope for his boss, way up in the canopy. “Good one mate!” and “Well done Dan!” he called in an implausible Russian accent as each branch came hurtling from the sky. I guess you need love like that, as well as rope, a harness and a strong man below, to swing through the air with a roaring chainsaw. To be the best woodcutter you can be. But sometimes even loving care can’t protect you. The day after the arborist took down our pines, I read that there’d been accident. A young guy – one of his climbers – had fallen from high up. It was a windy day, they had to work. I never heard what happened next. I didn’t want to ask. Some firewood stories you just don’t want to know.

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The night after I told the woodcutter to leave our run-down house forever a storm came in from the west. This place shelters behind a hill, is flanked by our beautiful trees. Only the westerlies blasting up the gully can really reach the joint, whirling leaves and jangling branches that scrape at the walls like the possum scratching away in the chimney. After the wind died, at the bottom of the garden, we saw the white cedar had come down. It leaned drunkenly on the children’s trampoline, its roots splayed out, its dusty heart ripped open and scattered round the yard by Betty and Franny, the free-range hens.

This is not just a metaphor for the end of my long, long love. I didn’t make this story up. I couldn’t do that to the woodcutter, or to the tree. It happened exactly in this way.

The white cedar had been on its way out for fifteen years, ever since we came here. On first glance, it seemed the perfect size for children to play in. I built a brightly coloured ladder that took you right into its green embrace. We hung a plastic baby swing. But every September, without fail, a huge spiky army of caterpillars would come out of hiding, inch their way up the twisted trunk. They’re called white cedar moths, I discovered: their arrival was inevitable. If one fell on you it would prickle and sting. No surprises – the kids never wanted to swing or climb in that tree. A few of those critters made their way into the house, on shoes or on towels from the washing line. Perhaps the little bastards even crawled under the back door.

They were rapacious. One day in the middle of summer you would look out at the yard and see that suddenly every single leaf on the white cedar had vanished, long before the liquidambar and the Japanese maple turned red and gold. Later, termites moved into the cedar too. If you knocked on the branches, they were hollow. Even if the kids had wanted to make a cubby there, you wouldn’t have let them. Five years ago, another one of those westerlies tore open the cedar’s trunk. A crack scored it from bottom to top, and you could see all the way inside. It still cast midday shade, of a kind, but we knew the end was nigh.

That tree was too far gone to be burnable; I won't be chopping up it for the slow combustion fire. My woodshed is full of old palings that I can smash for tinder and what's left of last year's felled pines: I have plenty to burn and I've almost learnt to use an axe.

With effort and a pruning saw, I dragged the corpse of the cedar off the netting round the trampoline. I held it to my breast like a rough-skinned dance partner, spun it then tipped it slowly back until it touched the ground. It will go no further: it's staying by the edge of the frog pond at the very back of the yard. There's only so much weight one person can carry. It's taken a very long time to work this out, but sometimes it's best to let things lie where they fall.

The cedar doesn't seem unhappy resting there. I'm sure it doesn't miss the swarm of caterpillars on the march. I know the children don't. There's deep moss round the pond, and the prickly rasp ferns with their pink new fronds are more gentle to the touch than they sound. The evenings are called in by the warm drumbeats of the eastern froglets and the steady drips of the striped marshies. Sometimes you can hear a boobook owl.

The grass is soft. It's weeping grass, bright and strong but bent over with the weight of its elegant seeds. The woodcutter brought it here from the wild places he works in. It came caught up in his socks, and year on year it spread, despite the long shadow that lay across this place half the time. Our eldest asked me to plant a lawn, or at least something green to sit on, so I ran my fingers down the stems of the weeping grass, gathered the seeds and scattered them. She comes down here most days, to sit on the grass and talk to the chickens. She's a sad girl but they help her, settling on her lap and pecking at her cheek and her tight-cropped hair as she murmurs to them. They're good company. The fallen cedar never got as close to her as I would have liked; she didn't play in its arms like I always hoped she would. Still, I like to think that from its damp bed amongst the lomandras, it listens.