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Growing place

Abstract:

Trees and their forest collectives have long been treated as landscapes for human activity in prose, often viewed as unintelligent and without agency. The ‘vegetal turn’ has brought new perspectives of trees and plants, supported by scientific research, recognising them as more-than-humans who lead complex lives. Inspired by field work in the Monterey/Radiata Pine forests of California and south-eastern Australia, and South Australia’s early forestry history, *Growing Place* is speculative fiction that focuses on the history and lives of Radiata Pine seedlings waiting to be returned to the soil, and their entanglement with the ever-changing-bark ones (humans). Through an observational perspective, tree agency, including awareness and forest memory, is explored alongside a human and their intentions.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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The pine seedlings stand above the ground, under a covering that lets in little light – a Forest without soil to anchor into. The air is a bounty of moisture from the drizzle that has lasted since the sun returned, refreshing Their needles and roots that are wrapped in the leaves of others. With the little soil that still clings to Them, the seedlings take in the air and the filtered light, to make sugars, enough to sustain Them. They are waiting, again, for a growing place that the Forest can claim as Their own – reaching towards the sun, releasing pollen and capturing it, nurturing the next, and those who come after.

The many seedlings are aware of each other, though it is more difficult without sharing the soil, and the support of underground helpers. Some were damaged when the ever-changing-bark ones eased Them from the ground in the beginning place where They shed Their seed coverings, grew Their first roots, and were watered with metal-touched-rain. The temporary home.

There is much to notice around Them – the salt, the particles of lost forests and chemicals in the air, the vibrations from the metal underneath them and the moving water. Forest memory written into the seedlings pulses with the place where many generations once lived, wrapped in sea fog, warmed by the sun, where rock met the moving water that changed with the night-light.

The air soon brings much of this new place as the moving water is left behind – particles of soil, stone, seed fragments of others, and the vibrations of messages by ever-changing-bark ones. The Forest is lifted up, further from the earth, then set down in another place that is not close to the soil. The shade of the covering is taken away. Light is taken in by the needles, and the work of making energy begins again, but water is snatched away from Their wrappings,

Their roots.

Drying quickly.

Threat.

Shade returns before the vibrations begin again, slower and lower this time. Forest memory pulses, the rhythm remembered – the movement of hairy ones who touch the ground with metal.

More movement, moisture in the air lessening.

Waiting.

The sun is high in the sky when They are relieved of the shade and receive the full light again.

Drying.

Another presence nearby shifts the air, the closeness of an ever-changing-bark one.

*The woman removes her straw work hat
to see them better.
Her plan is real now, and green,
after many letters to the Woods and Forests Department,
and waiting,
the farm money lessening
since her husband was buried
in the ground.*

*The Radiata Pines are finally here.
She can't believe
that a forest fits onto the back of a wagon.
A new beginning.*

The ever-changing-bark one remains still, casting a shadow on Them, cooling the air.

*She gets closer.
Their earthy tang reunites her
with home.
Laughter.
Sandwich crumbs.
Everyone together.
The pine forest, and her family, left behind
for her husband's life of wool and dust.*

The pine seedlings notice the dry of the inland, and the vibrations of leaf-pulling ones nearby.

*She takes in every one with
the brush of her fingers.
The soft needles
tickle her skin.*

The needles feel the pressing of the ever-changing-bark one, which leaves salt and pieces of itself behind.

Checking they are all alive,

that the full order has arrived.

Every seedling feels the close presence of the ever-changing-bark one – the air it draws in, and the wind it makes. They feel the full intensity of the sun now, more moisture gone, as the leaves around Them dry. There is little time before the roots begin to lose parts of Themselves – less for anchoring in this new place.

Threat.

They notice metal nearby. Forest memory pulses with the ever-changing-bark ones that struck previous generations, holding metal in their branches.

More threat.

*The green captivates the woman,
a relief from the variations
of brown and gold
around her on the island
where the trees were lost
to axes long ago.*

Water is needed, and soon.

*The sun bites through the cotton
of her high-buttoned work dress.
She reaches for the metal can,
shakes water across her head,
and turns it towards the pine seedlings,
making a light rain fall
on her forest to come.*

The seedlings receive the metal-touched-rain, collected by the needles who deliver it to the wrapped roots underneath. Moisture returns. No damage is noted. Threat subsides, for now. The shade of the covering returns.

As the sunlight fades and darkness comes, The roots wait for Their first encounter with new soil that might hold all that is needed, what They are waiting for.

*

In the first light, the seedlings feel the movement of the ever-changing-bark one again, recognising it as the one that brought rain.

The light is warmer and brighter outside the shelter of the covering, where the wind of this new place can touch Them and bring more traces of the soil below.

A seedling is pulled up, the touch of the leaf wrappings taken away, as They are lifted through the air, and separated from the Forest.

*The woman drops to her knees,
the pine seedling between her fingertips.
She settles into the tilled, heaped soil,
marked with the planting distances
given by the Department.
Her heart slows.*

They sense the closeness of the soil, the moisture it holds.
The waiting is almost over.

The waiting is done.

The roots touch the soil, then are enfolded within it, with the young trunk standing, taking in the light with Their needles.

*The woman's hands open up,
then press down the earth.
The hope of new memories,
of a new future.*

The roots begin growing along and down, cell by cell, the first to anchor here, to explore this new place. Metal-touched-rain falls on the soil, the roots feeling the patterings of drops before receiving them.

The first pine is planted.

As the sun travels across the sky, each seedling is lifted up, then encounters the soil that has been mixed with the air and touched by metal. Through the ground, They notice the rhythmic pressings of the many ever-changing-bark ones moving around Them, but there is no damage.

The light fades, and the air and ground begin to cool. They notice pieces of the leaf wrappings landing on the soil – these dried plant others returning to the ground also.

*The last pine is in the soil.
She can send the letter confirming
that the forest has been planted.
Lease payments from the Department
will begin.*

The waiting is over. Growing and learning about this place begins.

They feel the presence of each other again, standing further apart than in the place where They grew Their first roots. Connection will come soon with the work of the underground helpers.

With time, and the transformation of the air and light, there is much for the Forest to notice and learn about – the past of this place held in the rock, and remnants of past vegetal others that will support and sustain Them. Already, the roots have learnt much about this soil. Everything They need to grow and expand the Forest is here, and in the right balance.

When the sun-time is close to ending, the Forest notices new pressings of the ground, lighter than the ever-changing-bark ones that reunited Them with the soil.

*The pair of small feet,
muddier with each moment,
stumble through the new pine forest.*

It moves along the ground, the pressings quickening, then slowing before plunging its branches in and out the soil, as if this ever-changing-bark one wants to be enfolded by the ground also.

*The woman does not stop her daughter
from meeting the Radiata Pines in her own way.*

*These trees will stand in this place
and face what the seasons bring,
so must this sweet, young one.*

*The money will make it easier for her,
easier for both of them.*

*The woman lowers herself onto grubby knees
to sit beside the girl,
to speak to her.
'When the pines are bigger*

The messages of the ever-changing-bark one shuffle the air.

*they will touch the sky!
We can walk through them
together.'*

The vibrations taken in by the seedlings are gentle, like when the wind brushes the Forest floor – remembered in Their inner most cells, changed by them.

The Forest feels the touch and circling of the wind in this new place without the close shelter of each other.

*'And this forest is going to grow
for a long, long time.'*

Over many turns around the sun and seasons of rain, They will reach towards the sky together, the wind carrying the pollen, and scattering the seeds when the cones open.

More generations to come.

*She looks across
the forest –
five hundred trees
planted in lines,
to be harvested in sixty years.*