

Cats and dogs

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As a small boy, I lived on a farm outside Melbourne. Unfortunately, my father was not a very successful farmer and it wasn't long before we had to sell up and move to the city. My beloved cat, Tabby, came with us. None of us had wanted to leave the farm. My father never quite got over his sense of failure at losing it. But we learned to adjust, because we had to. Not so Tabby. She was livid. And, after a week, she disappeared. The food put out for her hopefully each evening remained untouched. Even today, plates of abandoned food strike me as terribly poignant.

Weeks later, we got a call from the people who'd purchased our farm. (You've probably anticipated where this story is going, haven't you?) They'd found Tabby on the doorstep one morning, bleeding and half-starved. Miraculously, she had found her way back, using that mysterious inbuilt navigational system that some creatures possess. I was assured that Tabby had been nursed back to health by the new owners and was a contented cat again, but I cried and cried, until my mother promised to take me to see *Ben Hur* by way of compensation. Although I wouldn't have admitted it, I was crying partly in anger that Tabby had clearly thought so little of me. I never trusted a cat again.

Dogs have been my animal companions of choice ever since. When my partner and I moved from Melbourne to Hobart seven years ago, Max, our German shepherd, was bundled into a cage and put on the ferry and, in the morning when we fetched him, he wagged his tail and barked excitedly, not giving a damn where he was, so long as he was with us. Max would happily sleep in a cardboard box in a railway siding so long as we were there. He has no intention of swimming back over Bass Strait. He obeys that ancient pack instinct that says, 'stay with your companions, no matter what'.

My guess is that all of us in this room are basically dogs rather than cats. Faced with the choice, we'd go with our loved ones even if that meant living somewhere less than ideal. The cats of the human world are those tribal peoples or peasant farmers whose

interpersonal connections are bound by rigid conventions and can't be changed: people who are tied to the land and don't usually have the option of moving outside their prescribed territories.

But I needn't push the analogy too far. There is, of course, a bit of cat in all of us.

Yet, when people talk about their attachments to place, I'm always a little wary, particularly if the word 'spiritual' is employed at any point in the discussion. I'm only too well aware of how easily such comforting notions of belonging, of feeling at home, can calcify into slightly scary notions of Homeland or Fatherland—enforced loyalty to the group, the ideology, or the nation-state. How quickly that warm and fuzzy sense of place can slip into jingoism. Belonging is just as often an obligation as it is an option: forced on people as a means of social control. The Highlands and the Lowlands, the River Liffy, the birch trees, the tundra and the mighty deserts: these things, we believe, are in our souls, they are a part of us and if we leave them we will shrivel up and die. Well, perhaps, but it's not hard to see how such sentiments can be encouraged—even sometimes manufactured—in order to exploit people. Consider, for example, how the genuinely patriotic and nostalgic German notion of *Heimat*—or Homeland—was twisted by the Nazis into a violent blood-and-soil nationalism. It's brilliantly captured in the song *Tomorrow Belongs to Me* from the movie *Cabaret*, when a sweet innocent youth—the very embodiment of natural purity—morphs into a murderous thug right before our eyes.

Tomorrow Belongs to Me, in this context, sounds decidedly sinister, doesn't it? Consider, then, 'This land belongs to me.' Also a bit grasping and proprietorial. But 'we belong to the land' is generally supposed to be a good thing. 'Belonging', though, always implies ownership: it to you or you to it. And I'm not sure that ownership or being owned has much significance in itself. What I want is a relationship to a place: one that is freely chosen and can constantly be renewed and reinvented. The fact is that we ('we' being those of us who live in post-industrial societies characterised by social and geographical mobility: those for whom *leaving* and *arriving* are part of our destinies), have the luxury of being able to choose. If we're lucky or very clever, we can arrange it so that we are both with our loved ones *and* in a place we feel deeply attached to, thus satisfying both

our cat and our dog instincts. Just as often, though, circumstances thrust us into unfamiliar or uncongenial places—places in which we feel ourselves to be strangers—and we have to *learn* to love those places. We have to work at it and adapt. This is something my father, with his resentments and his feelings of failure, never learnt to do. He remained a stranger to the city all his life and thus a stranger to his family as well. At least Tabby had her priorities sorted out.

In 2001, I published a book called *Making Nature* (now, sadly, out of print). In the manner of Rousseau, it described six walks around a rural property my partner and I had in the Victorian highlands. The book was a somewhat rambling attempt to understand what Nature is and why we interact with it as we do. I wrote it because those 30 hectares of eucalypt forest affected me in a deeply atavistic way that I didn't completely understand, and in fact still didn't even after writing the book to try to explain it to myself.

Soon afterwards, at a conference much like this one, I spoke (I thought rather convincingly) about the book and my feelings for the place that inspired it. Then the next speaker, a writer who identified herself as Aboriginal, rose and rather pointedly put me in my place by declaring that no 'white person' could possibly understand the land in the way 'her people' did. Perhaps she was right, but I was a bit taken aback nevertheless. What I really couldn't understand, but of course refrained from mentioning at the time, was the basis on which she was constructing her identification with 'her people', given that she lived in Sydney and taught at a university. She seemed to be implying that a connection to the land is something inherited through the genes. Clearly, though, like culture itself, this is something we have to learn.

In retrospect, I think she and I were just talking about two different things. She was articulating perceived cultural connections—group identity, if you like—while I was talking about my visceral individual response. I think her disdain for 'white people's' attachments to the land was based on the fact that they do tend to be personal and individual and therefore don't lend themselves so well to being constructed ideologically. In a sense, my book was a way of finding some common ground between our two

approaches by trying to put my individual response into a cultural context. To use a gardening analogy, my personal experience was a cutting I'd taken from a mature plant and my writing was the hormone powder that would help it to establish roots and grow.

Perhaps I just have a short attention span, but I tend to attach myself to a particular place, to warm to it, to feel a part of it, and then, when I start to feel too comfortable—about 10 or 12 years usually does it—I want to up-stakes and move somewhere else. Somewhere not too dissimilar: I'm not interested in going to Tierra del Fuego or Northern Honshu, not to live anyway. At the very least, I need gum trees within cooe. I'm not an adventurer.

I want to range across a particular territory—one that I feel some connection to—gradually building a composite picture of it from experience of its component parts. I do attach myself—to the unique smells and sounds of each place, to the plants that grow there, the weather patterns, the colours and the quality of the light—and my experience of previous places informs, enriches and deepens my experience of each new one. This periodic renewal prevents me, I like to think, from hardening into intolerance.

I have lived in and felt myself to be part of the inner suburbs of Melbourne, the harsh goldfields country of central Victoria, the pastoral plains of northern Victoria's irrigation country, Sydney's northern beaches with their sandstone cliffs and wild seas, and the forested mountains of the central Victorian highlands, where *Making Nature* was written. From time to time, I get heartfelt pangs of nostalgia for them all. But I have no desire to go back.

Now I'm living in—and growing into—Tasmania, which is proving to be more like a foreign country than anywhere I've lived before (and not just because our premier keeps behaving like a Burmese general).

The way I attach myself to these places, the way I assure myself that I am not just a visitor, is by learning their histories and situating myself in their stories. I don't want to live in any place whose story I don't know. I would feel as though I was just camping, living on the surface, without roots to feed me.

My most recent book, *Australia's Quarter Acre: The story of the ordinary suburban garden*, came into being as a result of just such a quest.

It was a bit of a shock, initially, to find myself in suburbia again when we first moved to Hobart in 2001. I hadn't lived in suburbia, at least not this kind of classic middle-class suburbia, since I was a child. This was going to take a bit of adjusting to. So I started searching out its stories.

I discovered that, by some happy twist of fate, our house had been constructed nearly 100 years earlier by the son of Tasmania's first government botanist, who wrote the standard text on Tasmania's native flora. In one stroke, I'd forged a meaningful connection. I talked to his daughter, now 87 years old, who was delighted that someone was taking an interest in her stories. She gave me photographs from the 1920s and '30s of her father's flourishing garden. One shows a frail, newly planted sapling, supported by a stake and mulched with straw. I see this sapling every morning from the bedroom window when I wake up, now grown into a huge, spreading walnut tree that dominates the back yard and attracts hoards of cockies every year at about this time. I think there's something touching—something affirming—about the fact that I've seen it at the very moment it was planted.

That walnut tree suggests that it might be possible to establish some kind of dialogue with my predecessor. And because this tree and the particular story it presents is unique to this place, this is a dialogue that nobody else can have. It establishes a kind of friendship over the generations between me and the man who planted it. But, of course, for that friendship to develop, I have to get to know who he is.

It occurred to me that if this little suburban garden had a history, then so did others. So did the suburban garden as a whole. And so the book was written. As was another, on suburban houses, which will be published in a couple of months.

As a writer of non-fiction, I'm working on the assumption that by starting with the specific—whether it be a bush block in the Victorian highlands or a house in Sandy Bay—then spiralling outwards, I will be able to avoid ideologies and abstractions: I'll have

something to anchor me. At least until I want to pull up anchor again.

My sense of place and home, therefore, is pretty much utilitarian, although no less deeply felt for that. And I reserve the right to transfer it to a new place, a new home, whenever I feel the need. For me, it's not so much *being* somewhere that's important, it's the arriving and departing.