

## **the tree**

I have thought always of my father as a beacon, and so long has this image been with me that I do not know where I even learned the word. There was a book of adventures for boys I read often as a child and one told of a lighthouse keeper and a mermaid, and this story is the likely source of that word “beacon”. Though I associate the word only with my father and I do not recall ever saying it aloud.

There is a story about a tree, and to tell it would make my father cry. Fathers do not cry and so the story is never told, as most are never told. Though really it need not be told to be known, and if not known at least felt. Felt deeply in the silence of my father. The story concerns my father and his father, my grandfather, though I have always known him by his Christian name Magnus due to his dying before my birth. Magnus owned and ran the farm as my father does, and in fact he bought the property after coming up from Orange as a young man. He brought his wife with him, who was my grandmother, and my father was their only child. Magnus planned always for his son to learn the land and to have the country beating in his chest and flowing in his veins, which are words Magnus himself would have used for he was a scholar and had written poetry as a boy.

My father was three years old when Magnus took him into the yard, to the corner nearest the coop that I can see from my bedroom window, which was my father’s room at the time. He took him to that spot and together they planted the seedling of a spotted gum, which is also called *Corymbia maculata* if that is ever useful to you. The spotted gum can live on infertile ground, and at the time some man – I think our neighbour Kim Robinson – said it’s bad luck to introduce that tree onto a farm. But Magnus loved the tree and he didn’t care about bad luck because he believed a man made his own luck, and in the case of Magnus it was usually good. So they planted the tree when my father was three years old and it was the first thing they did together on the farm. If I could read my father’s thoughts I would know that this is his first real memory. He remembers that it was a hot day, which was not unusual, but he remembers the stickiness of the heat on his neck, the soft crunch of the shovel in the dirt and the mud caked on his father’s boots. He remembers the seedling in his cupped hands and the patient instructions of Magnus as they planted it in the dirt and poured water from the can his mother used for the garden. He hears Magnus laugh, the deep and rollicking laugh which made him an appealing and popular man and a man who was much loved, and he hears his own laugh gurgle as he strives to emulate his father. He doesn’t remember what was

funny, and he shies from the possibility that they laughed simply from the blind joy of living.

The gum prospered there in the yard. It grew tall and straight and strong, and after twenty years it stood almost sixty feet tall. A towering thing of deep dignity that dropped branches on the chickens only when provoked by wind. The tree was a fixture on the farm, and many had a great fondness for it, no doubt enhanced by the fondness they had for the man who had planted it with his infant son. Even Kim Robinson glanced skyward whenever he came to visit, squinting up into the firmament to see the top of the tree and maybe the whole of heaven while he was at it.

By that time my father was a man of twenty-three and Magnus forty-five, not an old man but proud of the superior strength and vitality of his son. As they inspected the crop one morning, Magnus told my father of a circus that visited Orange in his youth. He told of the acrobats and animals, but he told of the bears in particular. He said he loved the bears. It was a word Magnus used liberally and without pause, where other men would settle for 'admire' or 'respect.' He said he loved the bears but was troubled by their shackles, confused by the binds put on a creature of such power and nobility. Magnus hesitated to call himself a religious man, but he had looked into the face of one of the bears and felt himself closer to knowing Christ than at any time before or since. The bear was terrified, but he could see in its eyes that it knew it was a bear. The chains had not changed that. And whenever he attended the Good Friday service and heard of Jesus' road to crucifixion he thought of the bear, and he believed that there was no greater triumph of the spirit than to find grace in the face of certain destruction.

My father grinned at Magnus, the older man who had time for sentimental stories now that his son oversaw most of the farm work. He asked Magnus if the sheep they'd sheared that morning still knew they were sheep or did it only work for bears, and Magnus had thrown his head back and laughed, laughed in that way that makes you stop and join in just to share in the pleasure of it. Magnus stood like that with his face to the sky even as his laughter subsided, and he trembled all of a sudden as if doused with ice water. If my father were to recall this moment he would insist a shadow fell across the face of Magnus, though it was a clear day and the sun strong overhead. Magnus's mouth went slack and then taut as he sank to his knees in the dirt, and he clasped his hands before him as if to pray or beg. Then there was a terrible groan as he crumpled forward and was still.

There was silence in the field.

My father yelped and fell down upon his father. The man his father who was already dead. His hands grasped at Magnus's wiry arms and he buried his face into the man's neck and he dared not turn him over to see that his eyes no longer glittered. He lay there for some time. After a while my father got slowly to his feet, like a man mortally wounded which of course he was. He looked around him and I believe in that moment he anticipated the end of days, or perhaps merely wished for it. He gasped and vomited in the field, and he faced away from his father lest the dead man should see. Then he made his way to the farmhouse. He walked with a purposeful and deliberate gait, though in truth he walked for fear that if he ran he would not stop.

He went to the shed, took the axe and went to the yard, all the while walking with the same grim steadiness. He appeared calm, in the way a trapped man holding his breath underwater may appear calm. With grace in the face of certain destruction. He came to the tree and the tree greeted him in its quiet way, with the patient detachment that had allowed it to prosper. My father placed his hand upon the tree and stood like that for a while, and it was as if these were two old friends joined in grief and not just a man and a tree. In those moments my father dared to feel for a heartbeat in the old gum. He waited for a sign, an indication, to allow him to divert from his chosen path. As any man in crisis will defer responsibility to the cosmos. No sign came. And so my father took the axe in both hands and exacted vengeance for his sorrow. If the story were to be told I would know that he screamed while he was doing it, that he bellowed like a drowning cow as he chopped into the powdery grey flesh of the tree and shreds of bark sprayed around and sap ran freely from the tree's wounds. I would know that he refused to answer his mother, and that he called for men to help him dismantle the tree, to bring rope and saw to tear the gum down. I would know that by the time Magnus was found face down and dead in the top paddock, the grief and rage of my father had already convinced him to close his heart, and to feel shame for having loved his own father so fiercely.

When Magnus was buried the following day the tree had already been felled. My grandmother made the funeral arrangements alone, so consumed was her son by the business of killing the tree. He and two of the Robinson boys and two or three others took the tree apart branch by branch and the trunk was escorted off the premises on Pat

MacFarlane's truck. For reasons known only to my father he left the stump in its place by the coop. He did not dig out the roots.

The years passed in a thick stream, eddied by the currents of triumph and disappointment. The farm flourished under my father's hand. My grandmother died a richer woman than she had ever been, though perhaps that was not saying much. My father was married and I was born, and I was held in the arms of my mother in the minutes before she died. The farm flourished. I became an apprentice to my father, and from him I learned to work the land, and to value that work. The years passed. The farm flourished. To this day we work hard and we are well known and respected, and that is enough. The farm flourishes but the work and the respect we command for it are enough. So says my father.

Often I watch him amble up from the paddocks, silent and steady as he passes the old stump without a glance. There is no reason to suspect the significance of the tree that once stood in the yard, and no indication of the frenzied anguish that brought it down. Though something of it lingers because I do not ask about the stump or the tree it must have been. And as the years pass and I forge my own road with quiet resolution I realise my father has taught me to be a man, in whatever sense a man may be. There is no discussion yet I feel myself becoming the beacon, taking the torch he has carried without a word and carrying on into the night ahead. I do not feel glad. Still there is some import to it that we could reflect on were there time or need, if my father and I were the kind for talking which we are not. We work, though I take the heavier load and he must stop more often to rest, sometimes with a look on his face not of pain but of desperation, which is worse still. I look away at those times and I continue my work, all the work that must be done. But sometimes I look back. And whether he is standing at the farthest fence or right before me all I know of him is distance.