

Geometry of Echoes*

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And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle. Gaston Bachelard

Robert and I sit at the kitchen table while Ben plays a computer game in the next room. My right elbow rests near the darkened ring I made years ago when I put down a hot casserole dish to answer the phone. Further round is a chip in the bevelled edge, caused by the side of a ladder Robert was carrying after he retrieved a dead rat from the roof space. There are plenty of texta marks, too, where Ben's scribbles have overshot his paper. The table is now in Robert's new house—or rather, the house he is renting from our friend Janet.

'The house looks quite good now, with furniture and everything,' I say. 'Given it was rented out for a decade I'm surprised it's in such reasonable shape.'

'There's a few dodgy lights and so on. But it's okay.'

In the pause that follows, we hear a character from Ben's computer game singing in an American accent.

'I'd forgotten the colourful paintwork here,' I say. 'Cheerful, isn't it? Especially the lounge room with the blue and gold.'

'I like it,' says Robert. 'Remember when we danced in that room? When was it?'

'Thirteen years ago.' It was when we first met.

'Thirteen years! Gone, just like that!' says Robert, waving his arm over the table. We sit in silence for a while and I imagine the story of our marriage and separation laid between us on the table, taking very little space, leaving only cracks and marks behind. And Ben, of course.

'He's been alright then?' asks Robert, jerking his head towards Ben.

'He's been fine. Just as usual, really.'

Robert nods. 'He's a tough kid.'

When we first told Ben that we were separating, we didn't even use that word. I just said that mum and dad had decided we would each have our own house and that dad would be moving into his new house in a few days.

'Will I live alone until new year's day?' asked Ben.

We reassured him that he would always be with one of us. Then he wanted to know all about dad's new house and go to visit it. I'd prefaced this conversation by saying to Ben that we had to tell him something that might shock and upset him, but he hadn't seemed shocked or upset.

'It isn't real yet,' I said afterwards.

'He's hiding his feelings,' replied Robert.

The next morning, Ben came into my bed and said, 'I'm too sad to go to school today. All I can think about is this two house business.'

'I understand,' I said. 'It's very hard, this sort of change. But don't worry, mum and dad will still be with you lots.'

'I'm too sad to go to school,' Ben insisted.

'I'm sorry but you still have to go to school, Ben.'

'What if I'm naughty because all I can think about is this two house business?'

'I'll talk to the teachers. It'll be okay.' I thought he would argue more, but he obviously knew he wouldn't be able to skip school so he dropped the idea and went to watch a video. I noticed he chose a cartoon version of Hansel and Gretel.

As we walked to school, Ben asked me, 'Do you have anything to tell me today that will shock me?'

'No, Ben,' I said, 'I won't be shocking you today.'

Ben was at school the day Robert moved out. When I collected him from school, I reminded him that Dad had moved out and that he had taken a lot of furniture.

‘Has the sofa gone?’ asked Ben. He’s always loved jumping on that sofa.

‘Yes, I’m sorry darling. Dad’s taken that to his new house.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Ben, ‘now I can play in the space behind it.’

Today is Ben’s first overnight stay at Robert’s house. I told him he could take with him anything he wanted, so we came loaded with three bags of Thomas the Tank Engine toys. For the last six months, they’ve been his favourite toys. When I think about it, a train set seems like the perfect transitional object. As soon as we arrived at Robert’s house, Ben put the Thomas engines in his bedroom, then ran into the garden to play in a jungle of nasturtiums and weeds, before going to use the computer.

‘I think he’ll like it here,’ I say.

‘Yes, he will,’ agrees Robert.

We’ve started agreeing a lot.

‘I’ll leave you to it, then,’ I suggest. Robert nods, so I say goodbye to Ben and drive home. For the first time, I walk into an empty house, knowing that Ben will be spending two nights with Robert. It’s 5.15pm on a Friday night and I can do whatever I like until Sunday morning. I sit in the lounge room (which now has only one chair in it) and stare at the wall. Invisible waves of pressure strike me. I didn’t expect this. I thought I would feel relief now that Robert had finally moved out and we could move on from the failed negative space between us. I thought I would be glad to have some solitary time, free from the demands of husband and child. Instead, I am in pain. I desperately want Ben back here with me. My body feels hollow and fleshless. I try to make sense of this. I remind myself that I want Ben to spend time with Robert; it’s a good thing. But it feels wrong. Eight years old is too young for

a boy to leave home. The grief I feel is the primitive feeling of a mother animal when her cub is torn from her body.

Darkness opens in front of me as I realise the enormity of what I have done. I have taken away Ben's home.

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What *is* home? Is it the place we live, the body of our mother, a myth? Is it, as Edward Relph says, 'the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being'? If it is this 'irreplaceable centre of significance', how can we help our children feel at home in their world? Does a parent have to belong first in order to help her child belong?

Although I use the term home to describe the house I live in, I use it only in the most everyday sense. 'I'm off home now', I say when I leave work, or 'I've got a copy at home', about a book someone wants to borrow. I never think of my house as Home (with a capital), just the place I live. And although Perth has been my place of residence for the past twenty-one years, I don't feel a huge sense of attachment to it. I like living here, appreciate its beauty and benefits, like being near family and friends and having a good quality of life on a lowish income, but I don't feel a strong connection to the place or the landscape. I've always thought of myself as someone, not exactly homeless, but without a homeland, as if I'm missing the bit of self that other people have that binds them closely and deeply to a geographical place.

Home in the sense of a structure or geographical place is familiar to me. Home as a complex, deeply resonant psychic space that connects to geography – that sense of home has always been puzzling to me. Puzzling in the sense that I never really felt 'at home' in one place more than any other, though at the same time I recognise that I feel a type of homesickness every autumn. Can you be nostalgic only for a season of your childhood and not for the place or time itself? Is that nostalgia evidence of connection to a home?

When Simone Weil declares that ‘To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul’ I half-agree, half-rebel. I imagine it must be powerful to have a strong sense of roots, a felt connection to and continuity with a family or community in time and place. But then isn’t this notion of roots, of a home and homeland, responsible for causing a great deal of conflict and distress around the world? On the other hand, the more mobile our society is, the more the idea of home as a source of identity seems resonant. The greater the exile, the more significant becomes the notion of return.

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I’ve come here before, in my dreams. I’ve walked along the final block of this cul de sac, past our special tree (gone now, or at least I don’t recognise it), and stood staring up at the house. Heavy and dark, its shadow falling across me, cooling the air. In my dreams, I have seen the blackberries growing wild along the low front fence, the forget-me-nots lining the path to the front door. I have held up my hand, as if to knock on the wood, and waited. But in my dreams I don’t enter the house. I turn from it – or perhaps the house turns from me.

I’ve come here before in waking life, too. We moved in soon after I turned two, left when I was ten to emigrate to Australia. That’s old enough to have clear memories, but in fact they aren’t clear, they are cloudy, incoherent, shapeless visions of a time that must have happened to someone else. Returning, for the first time in thirty-five years, I wondered how much I would remember about this house and small English village.

Earlier this afternoon, glimpses of barns, red brick houses and silver trunked trees leapt through the bus windows like arrows. I couldn’t say I recognised this place, but it moved me, some sort of pain was entering me. After twenty minutes, the driver nodded to me – this was Keele Village. I stood. The bus door opened. And I stepped out into the smell of my childhood. A powerful odour of woodland plants, mud, cow dung and damp air swept into my body and tossed me back in time, so that I stood by the roadside once more a child. There

was the field where we fed the horses. There was the village church. There was the Village Green. And there, at the edge of the Green was a pedestrian crossing, the black and white striped poles topped by orange spheres, like large lollipops. One of the lights wasn't working. As I looked at the zebra crossing, with its lopsided flashing, it was as if nothing had changed. The very same lights – one working, one broken – had been waiting all these decades for me to return and cross the road once more.

Would I know the way to our old house from here? I wasn't sure. I had a map in my rucksack, but I decided to give my feet the chance to find their own way. And they did, taking me along Station Road and then left at The Oaks and up a path to Church Plantation, the name of our road. So that I am standing here at the corner near number 5, ready to walk down the final section of Church Plantation to our house, number 1.

Everything is new. Everything is familiar. It is as though I have never been here and yet have always been standing here by the row of silver birches on Church Plantation, about to enter my own childhood. I walk towards the front door. The blackberries and forget-me-nots are gone. The front garden is now a neat grassy area, with none of the wildness I remember (if it *is* memory, and not dreams or imagination). The door, too, has changed. It is no longer the heavy ornate black and gold door of my memory but modern and painted green, with a gold stick-on number one and a buzzer instead of the lion's head knocker. The bricks around it are the same, though, creating a strange decorative entrance. My hand shakes as I ring the bell.

The door is opened by a teenage boy with white hair.

'Hi,' I say. 'My name is Grace. I used to live here forty years ago and I was wondering if you would mind if I took a few pictures of the house and garden, maybe had a look inside the house. I'm sorry if I've come at a bad time.'

's okay. I'm sick today, that's why I'm home.'

‘I’m sorry if I got you up.’

‘You can come in,’ he says and wanders back into the house, leaving the door open. I follow him in.

‘It’s changed a lot in forty years,’ I say, ‘not surprising’. The young man doesn’t answer, just leans against a doorframe, looking disinterested but not annoyed. I look around the ground floor. The walls have been painted, the floors carpeted, the windows replaced. There is a modern kitchen and laundry – no sign of the old scullery – and the wall between the dining room and living room has been knocked down, creating a larger, differently shaped space. The three French doors have been removed and an extension like a sunroom has been added, incorporating some of what used to be the back garden. My mother’s study has been turned into a home gym. I can see from all the clothes and gear around that several teenagers live in this house, as well as their parents. There is the stuff of modern life everywhere, making the house seem quite unlike the hollow echoing place of my childhood. Between the kitchen and the study/gym, I see three stone steps down to the cloakroom. This I remember. I stop and take a surreptitious photograph of my feet on the top step. Once down the steps, to the left there is still a toilet (though not the same toilet) and to the right a space for hanging coats and a washbasin. This room is immediately recognisable: in thirty-five years it has hardly changed.

Several weeks later, when I show my family the photographs of our old house, they laugh at this one of my blue-shoed feet and three cream stone steps.

‘What on earth did you take that for?’ asks one sister.

‘Oh, the downstairs bathroom,’ says another, ‘the steps used to be red tile, didn’t they?’ My mother says, ‘I remember when you were two, you used to sit on those steps and cry when I went to the toilet. You didn’t even like being that distance from me.’ And my

youngest sister says, 'Ah. That room, where we could go for privacy,' in tones that suggest that for her, too, that room was powerful.

It's true I went there sometimes just for privacy – a bathroom is a good place to be alone in a family of seven where bedrooms are shared. But entering the room was always a chilling experience. It was cold in there with the stone (or was it red tiled?) floor and no central heating or sunshine. And it smelt slightly dank and musty from the coats and boots in the corner. It was the last sort of room you would ever imagine wanting to retreat to, and yet I did. It was in this room as a young child, sitting on the toilet, running my fingers along the mortar lines between the cream tiles on the wall, that I dreamed of adventure, of magical creatures, of finding a passage to a world like C. S. Lewis' Narnia. I was always sure that this room, this cold, unforgiving nothing-place, would be the site of transformation.

Even then, I had some notion that you had to pass through the chilly dark places in order to enter the world of colour, the world I saw in books and wanted to have for myself, the mythic world of idyllic childhood.

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If home, like childhood, is part myth, then it is surely a double-edged myth. There is the idea of home as nurturing and protective and there is the idea of home as a place of confinement and darkness. 'For our house is our corner of the world' says Gaston Bachelard. The house of our childhood is inscribed in us, he says, in 'a passionate liaison of our bodies, who do not forget, with an unforgettable house'. The body of images that constitute our original house give us an illusion of stability, a place of refuge, a concentration of intimacy. Surely this notion of intimacy and refuge is dependent on a nurturing mother or carer? Is it not the interplay of the house and the mother's nurture that creates a home?

And what about the dark side of home, the house as a huge echoing place of empty shadows and impenetrable secrets? This, I think, has been many people's experience of home. How does this affect our experiences of belonging?

For women, perhaps, there is another dimension to the myth of a home. As children they may have witnessed their own mother's responsibility for caring for house and family and understood, at some level, the burden this responsibility entails. In my teenage and young adult years I was sure that having children would enslave me. Later, I began to think that my generation could have children but still be autonomous and liberated. It wasn't until I had Ben that I realised the complexities of the relationship between mothering and autonomy. It took experience, also, to teach me that the act of caring for another is a gift to oneself as much as to the other.

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Ben appears to be taking our separation in his stride, but still I worry about him. He seems to get upset or irritated more easily than usual.

'Ben,' I ask him before school, 'are you worried or upset about anything to do with having two houses? Or do you feel that two houses is too much work?'

'No,' he replies, looking puzzled.

'Would you tell Dad or me if you were confused about things or if two houses were too tricky?' I ask.

'No.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Well, I'll rephrase that. Ben, I'd really like you to talk to me or Dad or someone else if you ever felt worried about anything. Could you do that?'

'Okay,' he says, as he wanders into his bedroom, clearly not interested in the conversation.

After a short while, Ben comes back into the kitchen. ‘Mum, I want to ask you something important.’

‘Sure,’ I say, thinking he is going to talk about how he feels after all.

‘If Percy and Thomas had a race, who do you think would win?’

‘Oh,’ I say, ‘who do you think would win?’

‘I think Thomas would.’

‘I expect you’re right Ben.’

Later, when I pick Ben up from school, his teacher tells me he was sent to the school office for swearing. She’s very apologetic about it.

‘We know he doesn’t mean it, but we have to send him to the office,’ she says.

‘Oh, I agree.’

‘Poor Ben, he was shaking and white-faced when he got to the office and so the Deputy was very gentle with him.’

Afterwards I say to Ben, ‘Do you know why you swore at school?’

‘No.’

‘Maybe you were angry. Ben, if you get angry with someone, maybe with mum or dad, that’s okay. But swearing is not okay. Ben, are you listening?’

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Mum, what’s an angry face look like?’

I show Ben an angry face. Then he goes to get a big sheet of paper and starts drawing faces. At the top of the page he writes, ‘What are you feeling today?’. Each face has a different expression and the name of the feeling underneath. After he has drawn forty feelings, he brings the paper to me and shows me each face, asking me if he has ever felt that way. As well as the usual happy, sad, angry feelings, he has included dismal, smug, ambivalent and provocative.

‘Have I ever felt provocative?’ he asks.

'I would say so, yes.'

He's also included some made up feelings.

'What's "statey" mean, Ben?'

'You know, when you say to me, "Don't get into a state Ben".'

'Oh, I see. And what about "mongrateful"?''

'That's very grateful and happy. Have I ever felt mongrateful?'

'Maybe.'

'When did I feel mongrateful?'

'Well, when do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'Well,' I suggest, 'what about on your birthday when you got presents?'

'Yes. Now I'm going to make another face chart to take to Dad's house.'

Over the next few weeks, Ben spends a lot of time making face charts, standing in front of the mirror making faces and talking about the different faces we make with different feelings. I think it's his way of telling us he is experiencing powerful emotions without having to express the emotions themselves or understand where they come from. Often, it seems impossible for Ben to talk about or understand emotional things directly, but at some level he grasps what's going on.

Ben loves to give me multiple choice and true or false questions. One day, slipped in between two true or false questions about school is an interesting multiple choice question about Frog (Ben), Toad (me) and Mole (Robert).

'Mum. Here's your next question. Toad, Frog and Mole all lived together. But then, Mole moved out, leaving Frog and Toad alone. Did Mole move out because:

- a) Frog was sick
- b) Mole wanted to go to the moon

- c) Mole was tired of Toad nagging him about fixing up the house, or
- d) Mole wanted a house of his own?

'Oh, let me see,' I say, trying not to laugh over option c. 'I think, is it d?'

'Yes, correct.'

I love this question so much I ring up Olivia and tell her about it. She laughs too.

'He's so clever,' she says.

'I never nagged!' I protest, half-serious.

'But I love the moon thing because of Robert and his astronomy,' says Olivia.

'I know. And the way he hints that Robert might have left because he was "sick". Sort of like children who blame themselves for their parents separating.'

'Do you think he feels that? Feels that it's his fault or to do with him? Because he's autistic?'

'No. And we've told him it isn't. But at some deeper, unconscious level, he might feel that.'

'He seems happy, though, doesn't he?' says Olivia.

'Yes, I think he's okay.'

I'm always reassuring people that Ben is happy. Few adults can handle the thought of an unhappy child, even though our own memories should tell us that children are often sad.

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'Do you mind if I just walk up the stairs?' I ask the young man who now lives in the house that was once my own. 'Then I'll leave you in peace.'

'Yeah, okay.'

I walk to the top of the stairs, carpeted all the way to the edge now with proper underlay and glue, not the old way of half carpeting with tacks, leaving an edge of wood either side that had to be swept. I catch a glimpse of the bedroom doors. Only one door is open and I

don't feel that I can look into any of the rooms, even though I'd like to see the bedroom I once shared with Pauline and Olivia. I know it will be changed: they will have recarpeted and repainted there as well, and because it is above the new sunroom I know there will no longer be climbing roses by the windows. I walk back down the stairs and to the front door.

'Thank you very much for letting me look around,' I say. 'Do you mind if I walk in the garden for a moment and take a few photos?'

'Nup, go ahead,' he replies, obviously glad to see the back of me, but still remaining polite. As I walk back to the front door, I catch a glimpse of a small area of wooden floor where the carpet has been taken up, perhaps because it was damaged or because a cupboard was once there. I recognise it immediately. It is the elaborate golden-coloured parquet floor we walked on every day. This floor, more than anything, shows the passing of time. It is scoured and damaged, a dull mustard colour, the wood shrunken so that the joints between each shape are filled with dirt. Because I am on my way out and thanking the young man, I see this, but don't really focus on it. Only later do I realise the impact it makes on me. Only later does this square of damaged parquet enter my dreams, throbbing like a living creature, calling me in the darkness.

I walk around the house to the back garden, and see that it, too, has changed. The grey stone wall, the garden beds, the funny stone post that held up one end of the washing line, the thirty-two cherry trees and the baby oak tree I grew from an acorn – all of these have vanished. Instead, there is a lawn and a few shrubs, a sensible, low maintenance garden. It doesn't matter, though. Our real garden was the woods, the patch of trees and woodland plants that stretch from the boundary of our house to Keele Road on one side and the Village Green and Station Road on the other.

Before I go into the woods, I have one more place to visit. I walk down the path from our house to the 'hole in the wall', a place I would never go alone as a child, a place of fear. The

hole in the wall is a break in the brick wall that runs one side of Keele Road. To get to school, we would walk down to the hole in the wall, cross the road and then walk along the footpath until we reached the school. Once Olivia started school as well, my mother would simply walk us to the hole in the wall, help us cross the road and then leave Olivia and me to walk together to school. It was understood that we would hold hands and that Olivia would walk on the roadside of the footpath because of my fear of traffic noise. In my memory, huge trucks would hurtle past us, throwing up a wave of dust and leaves, their roar amplified by the echoing wall. I'm smiling now as I stand in the hole in the wall, waiting for a truck. It doesn't seem like a very busy road now, but eventually, a few cars drive past. I don't find them any noisier than cars on any other road.

Now is my time to visit the woods. This is what I have most wanted to do and I'm nervous that it won't live up to my expectations. I walk slowly, softly, along the muddy path into the woods, moving out of the sun and into dappled shade. I take ten, then another ten steps and I am here. The pale green light, the soft-edged shadows, the bird calls, the smell of rotting leaves and damp earth, the feathered touch of bracken on my ankles, the humid, slightly warm air – all of this enters my body and finds a deep and powerful echo. I find myself profoundly moved and can only stand here, drinking in every sensation. For the first time in my life, I feel I have discovered the landscape of home.

I walk in the woods for an hour. I see birds and a squirrel, no people. I see yellow and pink and blue flowers, stinging nettles and dock leaves, bushes with perfect places for a child to hide, moss and fungi on the roots of trees, the old brick hut that was the centre of our childhood games, the path to the Village Green that Pauline used when she took Olivia and me to feed the horses. As I see and smell and touch, words seem to float up through me. Long forgotten words that belong to this place. Tree words: sycamore, maple, larch, beech and hawthorn. Plant words: buttercup, horsetail, celandine, dandelion, willowherb and wood

sorrel. Bird names come to me as if called up by the sound of their songs: woodpecker, robin, house martin, wren, swallow, jackdaw, starling. I remember now the hedgehog we once left milk out for, the kingfishers we watched by the lakes, the white swans and their hisses, frog sounds on summer nights.

From the edge of the woods, I can look over our garden and see the back of our house. Our bedroom windows catch the afternoon light, like square torches signalling to me. I remember the inside of our bedroom with its three single beds in a row, Pauline's *escritoire* and my mother's dollhouse. Already, the inside of the house as it is now has slipped from my mind. Instead I see images from the house of my childhood, long held memories and also newly discovered ones, as if my body had stored them all these years and released them only when I entered the woods.

Eventually, I leave the woods and walk across the Village Green, recognising a horse chestnut tree we used to collect conkers from, passing the single flashing beacon at the pedestrian crossing and ending up back at the bus stop.

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It seems that I do have a sense of home after all. I just needed to revisit my childhood landscape to find it.

Like Bachelard, I found that 'We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the...impression of "going deeper and deeper" into a limitless world'. We may interpret the image of the forest to represent not just limitlessness but also the mysterious unknown, the unconscious. Here was where my child self did her playing and dreaming, the precursors I suppose to the adult writing. This small patch of woods seemed vast to me then. As an adult, in another way, it is still vast, or rather deep. If the house is what Bachelard calls a 'geometry of echoes', then the woods, too, have their own echo, like a deep-sea radar.

‘Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are “housed”’ says Bachelard. We never leave behind our first intimate space, our large cradle of the house. We carry it with us to every other house we live in and every new space we encounter. It lives on in the imaginal and in our night dreams.

As Mary Pershall describes it: ‘Home has become for me, as I suspect it does for most migrants who stay away long enough, a kind of myth. I can still have the myth, shimmering inside my head, while I get on with life in my current home.’

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‘What are you doing, mum?’ asks Ben.

‘I’m sorting through photos.’ It’s six months since I visited Keele and eighteen months since Robert and I separated. Ben goes back and forth quite happily every week. Ben and I still live in the same house. I wanted to move, but I didn’t think it would be fair on Ben. He loves the garden here: the fish pond and waterfall, the grape vines, the fig tree, the secret passage behind the jasmine, the two eucalyptus trees standing taller than he can see, even the overgrown vegetable patch and waist-high weeds please him. He’s almost the age I was when I left England. I want him to grow up with a sense of place, of belonging. To know what home means.

‘Why are you sorting photos?’ he asks.

‘I’m choosing one of you to print on a mug for dad for Christmas. As a present. What do you think? D’you think it’s a good idea?’

‘Yes.’ After a pause, Ben says, ‘Mum, families should have Christmas together. So I think you and me and dad should have Christmas breakfast together.’

‘That’s a lovely idea, Ben. I’m sure we can do that.’ I’m happy that he knows we’re still a family, even though we live separately. ‘Now, do you want to help choose a photo of yourself?’

‘No thank you.’

‘Oh! Okay. Well, do you want to look at these photos of Keele? You know, the house I lived in when I was a kid.’ I’m going to choose twelve photos to put on a calendar for my siblings.

‘Yes,’ says Ben, shuffling onto my lap. I cradle his back and rest my chin on the top of his head.

‘Your house was bigger than mine,’ he says.

‘Yes, you’re right. It was a big house. The garden was about the same size as ours here, though.’

‘Did you have a trampoline?’ he asks.

‘No, we didn’t.’

‘Did you have a pond?’

‘Not in our garden, no.’

‘Did you have a scooter?’

‘No. I’m not even sure they made scooters in those days.’

‘What did you play then?’ asks Ben.

‘Oh, we played in the woods. See these photos of the woods? That was our paradise.’

‘What does paradise mean?’

‘Oh. A paradise is a wonderful place. Somewhere really special.’ Ben thinks about this for a while.

‘Mum, this is my paradise,’ he says, waving his right hand, so that I’m not sure if he means the two of us, our house, the garden or just the world as he knows it, this moment, this place.

* *The names of all individuals in this essay have been changed for privacy reasons.*

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