

# Loneliness & Horror of the Familiar

Christmas Tree Creek

October 2021

There was a storm two days ago. In the hills on the urban fringe, the air is weighted and cool. The sky is a deep shade of blue interspersed by dark grey clouds. As you take to the trail, you hear water running, rolling over rocks and pooling in shallow basins, surrounded by decaying bark and the disheveled branches of needle-leaved plants. Around you, clusters of pink and mauve flowers are visited by innumerable flying insects. Murky puddles lay in your path. The brook passes under a bridge, and you follow the watercourse into a valley, past granite boulders sitting on slopes to the north. Ferritic gravel crunches under each step as you pass a waterfall. The torrent of water gushes through a narrow channel, over worn granite slabs, crashing onto dark boulders in the ravine below. You ascend the valley wall and catch glimpses of the city skyline forming a bridge between the outlines of two hills. A giant wasp hovers over the trail before disappearing into a bush.

Atop a small granite outcrop, you stand for a moment, look, and drink. Each gulp is earthy and sour. You kneel, re-organising your backpack. Lining the trail are tufts of green foliage, punctuated by minuscule pink flowers in the shapes of butterflies.



You skip over armies of ants maintaining colonies between the rock and past a newly dead monitor lizard. Amidst the fine black bands of scales speckled with yellow, you see a puncture wound on the lizard's neck. The ants are starting to scavenge from its soft tissues. At the lookout, the city is clearly visible now, with skyscrapers marking its centre. Emanating from these spires is a suburban sprawl that extends over 100 kilometres from north to south. The view to the west is, of course, intensely familiar, but subtly uncomfortable each time seen. You have walked this trail at least a dozen times, but never this late in the day, and never from this affect/perspective. The trail turns to the north, winding through low vegetation and wandoo, eventually descending steeply into another valley.

The rocky path demands attention to avoid a rolled-ankle or a misstep onto loose gravel, and you shift your awareness between the feeling of the materials underfoot and the tree-lined slopes in the distance. You pass grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*), and a pair of Australian ringnecks (*Barnardius zonarius semitorquatus*) fly out of the undergrowth, with one perching on the silhouette of a dead treetop.



In the valley floor, you listen to the caw of a raven, the hoot of a native pigeon, the chirping of wrens. In the distance, you hear the cries of black cockatoos. The sounds come from spaces between swaying wandoo leaves, the glowing edges of clouds, echoing out through the canopy. The calls seem to morph into a unified auditory tapestry, wherein each bird/sound merges into the next, separated only by shades and grains, distinct to their own kind but thoroughly alien to your own perception.

In-between each call is the feeling of ears-still-ringing, as if playing what had been experienced on-repeat, reverberating onwards until the awareness of the noise fades away.

The body starts to feel strange – both weightless and leaden. You cross an ephemeral stream and follow a vehicle track before encountering another ascent. Above you, there is a piercing sound that becomes a deafening roar, and a plane jets overhead as you reach a small granite plateau. Overlooking the valley from where you came, there is a feeling of tension in your chest and a churning emptiness in your belly – the beginnings of a sense of fear. In this place and in this context, the thumping of your heart and the strain of each breath constitute a dread rooted in an “unfamiliarity at the very heart of the familiar”.



Carpets of spiny pink, yellow, and red blooms, set against the light grey of granite and the dark green of sclerophyll shrubs, take on a warping, textural quality in the dull light of the afternoon. Angular hairs of flowers flow past the body as it floats along the trail, watching one foot move after the other, landing atop mottled red stones. The gaze follows the terrain intimately, as if of its own accord, and the body co-ordinates in turn. You look downwards and the vibration of myriad stones erodes the clarity of motion. There are sparkling flecks of quartz, white points of light and iridescent hues over the landscape, resonating with the placement of each footstep on the earth.

The trail narrows and the forest across the valley reveals the deepest of deep-green textures. The fear and tension have risen to occupy all your capacities. There is a primordial feeling of isolation, an awareness of the danger that comes with being outside and alone that speaks to the core of our evolutionary biology. You talk to yourself – the mind referencing itself, the mind referencing the familiarity of this space. You sit on a rock, breath deeply, and as you look, the distinctions between your gaze, each tree, each leaf, each rock, and each flower are slowly effaced, forming a single aesthetic field, penetrating and folding in on itself.



At this moment, there is only subjective horror. The uncanny situates you within a space where beauty/ugliness and pleasure/discomfort are indistinguishable from one other, where an irreducible anxiety points to the Real.<sup>2</sup> This is the juxtaposition of a deeply ancient fear and beautiful natural forms: you say you love nature, but these entities are cold and indifferent to you. For all the ideal arrangements of colour and shape, a lost body would be consumed by ants, flies, and fungi. Your dried-out bones would be bleached by sun and dissolved by the acidity of rain, absorbed into the mineralogy of the soil, and eventually taken up by roots of plants that flower in the spring and go on to die in the summer.

Your heart beats and you keep walking, winding through the rocks, roots, branches and the leaves blocking the narrow path. The pink butterfly flowers (Stylidium) seem to wave out to you as your feet swing past them. You come out into an opening carpeted by pink and white flowers, with the sound of a bubbling brook to your left

and waters hidden by lush green leaves. In the hotter months, this space is usually occupied by dry and dead shrubs, with the granite and sand emanating stifling heat.

In this moment, in the milieu of reproduction, colour, growth and movement, you are overcome by a sense of awe.



You sit at the outlet to the brook, with your legs dangling over a stone ledge. Water gushes through a drainpipe and tumbles over boulders. To the side of the outlet is stillwater, its surface rippling like a thin reflective membrane. Tadpoles and water fleas dart amongst the tree roots emerging from the stream bank. It is getting late in the afternoon and dark clouds now bathe the trail in dappled shade.

A layer of surface runoff flows downslope, threatening millipedes that have gathered on a single stone, clinging for their lives. When the trail reaches a crossroads, you calculate the remaining hours of daylight. Your shadow is long over the ground. The lone body chooses to ascend a steep incline that stretches into the horizon, knowing that it serves as a shorter path to the end.

Mechanistic force, one foot after the other, and the hill is cleared. You catch your breath as the trail meanders back downhill, past giant Marri – some dead and some alive – blackened by fire. The setting sun catches the corner of your eye, warming the side of your face. The afternoon light is filtered through the trees at a comforting angle. A group of kangaroos bounds through the forest. You walk more slowly now.

Again, you feel alone and isolated, but this time it is peaceful and calm. You realise loneliness, like sound, has different tenors and moods.



*“The uncanny refuses to concede to stillness, and instead presents us with something genuinely novel: an augmented familiarity , thus (un)familiar to the core (unheimlich). Close enough to be recognized as broadly familiar, the world of the uncanny nevertheless subtly manipulates that familiar screen, thus engineering a shiver down the spine of anyone caught in its rays. At the heart of this shiver is the sense that what has so far been thought of as inconspicuous in its being is, in fact, charged with a creeping strangeness.”*

- Trigg, D. (2012). The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny.

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