

***Our Only Home***  
**Boyer Lecture 2011**  
**Geraldine Brooks**

I began to write these words on the island of Martha's Vineyard, where I now live. It was a warm day in early July. Sunlight dappled the page, filtered through the leaves of an apple tree that was old before I was born. Not far away, but unaware of me, a muskrat browsed in the grasses by the brook. Red winged blackbirds swooped across the water and a goldfinch, like a drop of distilled sunshine, darted through the glossy branches of an ilex.

The muskrat, the birds and the holly tree are natives here. I am not. Only my dog, a liver-and-tan Kelpie, is a fellow exotic. Ten years ago, I plucked him from a paddock in New South Wales and set him down in another hemisphere. He is insouciant about this, as befits his kind. He is the quintessential Aussie canine whose legendary toughness begat the expression, 'That'd kill a brown dog.'

So while his warm flanks twitch in a doggie doze, it falls to me to reflect on what it means to live so far from our homeplace, so far, indeed, that the cold winds of July have been replaced by this soft and buttery summer air. I cannot explain to my Kelpie that the Indo-European root of that word, 'home' is 'haunt'. Nor can I explain to him how and why it is that I am haunted by absence and distance, by dissonance and difference, even if the alien corn that we will eat for dinner tonight is a sweeter variety than the starchy cobs of my Aussie childhood.

*Nothing is as sweet in the end as country and parents, ever. Even if, far away, you live in a fertile place.*

Odysseus said that. Or rather, Homer did. I know next to nothing about Homer—who he was, how he lived—yet I feel he knows my heart. Separated by three thousand years, by gender and culture and geographic space, this ancient shadow is able to put words to the feelings that I have on a sunny day on a little island, as I think of the larger island that is my native home; that sits, like Ithaca, 'low and away, the farthest out to sea', where the ribs of warm sandstone push up through thin, eucalyptus-scented soils.

Home. Haunt. I sit in my garden and look across to the house I have now; a house whose first beams were cut and shaped a century before the white history of Australia even began. When I run my hand over that rough-textured oak, I imagine the hand that planed it—the hand of a grist miller,

himself an exotic transplant, the second or third in a line of English settlers who had come to this place drawn by the power of rushing water.

If any home is haunted, this one should be. In 1665, the very first miller, Benjamin Church, bought this land from the native people of the place, the Wampanoag. He dammed the wild brook they called the Tiasquam, and set his grindstones turning. In so doing, he destroyed the herring run that had fed the Wampanoag each spring, when the fish known as 'the silver of the ocean' poured upstream to spawn.

*Benjamin Church dammed the brook.*

It is just one sentence in a long story. The story of human alteration in the natural world. It happened on the Tiasquam Brook in Martha's Vineyard, as it happened in uncountable places. As it happens now, in the Amazon, in Africa, in Western Australia, Tasmania, the Alaskan Arctic and innumerable corners of the world. A choice, a change, and the planet that is our only home reels and buckles under the accumulated strain.

Often, this story has also compassed stories of dispossession, in which the needs of the newcomers and their industry disrupted the imperatives of the native people. As Benjamin Church built his mill in 1665, an English neighbour fenced pasture for his imported livestock, and the Wampanoag were no longer free to hunt the deer and waterfowl that sustained them.

Another settler set his hard hooved beasts loose to trample the clam beds, and a band of Wampanoag went hungry that night. War followed, as war always has followed such acts of dispossession. In 1675, the Wampanoag on the mainland rose up against the English colonists. Benjamin Church, grist miller no longer, became a captain in the English army. His principal foe was the Wampanoag leader, Metacom. For six months, Metacom had the English on the run, destroying a dozen settlements. The colonial enterprise in New England teetered. It was Church, the former miller, who devised a way to turn the tide of battle. He enlisted Indians at odds with Metacom to teach the English their guerrilla tactics. On a humid summer day in 1676, Church led the force that trapped Metacom and shot him dead. He regarded Metacom's dead body and declared him 'a doleful, great, naked, dirty beast.' He ordered the corpse drawn and quartered and had the quarters hung from four trees. Church kept the head, which he sold in Plymouth, at a day of Thanksgiving, for thirty shillings. It was placed on a tall pole to overlook the feast.

Everyone knows the story of the first Plymouth Thanksgiving, in 1621. Metacom's father, Massasoit, attended that one, offering help and

friendship to the hapless, half starved English Puritans. Few know the story of the Plymouth Thanksgiving of 1676, presided over by Massaoit's son's decapitated, rotting head. We like that earlier story much better. Let's not do black armband history. Pass the turkey. Lets we forget.

But I can't forget. Though Benjamin Church's mill was torn down, this land bears his imprint. The Tiasquam brook remains dammed, the herring absent. And the grindstone is still here, set as a doorstep at the entrance to my house. Two metres in diameter, almost half a metre thick. When my foot lands on its notched ridges, words from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem echo in my head:

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; And all is seared with trade;  
bleared, smeared with toil; and wears man's smudge and shares man's  
smell...*

Benjamin Church's mill was built a hundred years before the Industrial Revolution that dismayed Hopkins. But it industrialised this landscape. And now I live where he lived, in an American home on Indian land, haunted by ghosts who lived and died unaware that my land, my homeplace, even existed.

I did not mean to become part of this story, to know, so intimately, all this history so very far removed, and yet so sadly similar, to our own. Metacom has much in common, after all, with Pemulwuy in Sydney or Yagan in Perth, guerrilla resisters whose heads also ended up on display—Pemulwuy's pickled in spirits and Yagan's shrunken and smoked. But that's black armband history, too, and as a schoolgirl in 1960s Sydney, I did not learn it. In those days, I could not have told you that the home I lived in stood upon Eora land, as does this hall in which we meet tonight. And I acknowledge the traditional owners of this place, and the continuing contribution of their descendants to the culture from which I am an accidental exile, a reluctant expatriate.

I am not part of that earlier Australian generation who set off on a deliberate search for fame and fortune in distant lands. My generation was the first that didn't need to. By the 1980s, when I left home, our culture had grown deep and wide enough to encompass all but the most rarefied of ambitions. I meant to leave Australia for just a year—a standard student adventure. But way leads on to way. Like Odysseus, I went to war—although as a writer, not a warrior—and then found my homeward journey diverted by quests and siren songs. What was to have been my brief foreign fling has become, by unplanned stages, my life.

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I have said that I live now on the banks of a little river that was dammed in 1665. When I first left Australia in 1982, a greater river, a larger dam, was very much on my mind. That river was the Franklin, in south-west Tasmania. A river wild from source to mouth, already a precious rarity in the smeared, bleared post-industrial world. Yet a river whose wildness was in clear and present danger. Works were already proceeding for a dam that would flood a pristine wilderness to yield just 180 megawatts of power. The last thing I did before I left the country was to hole up in Bob Brown's cottage in Liffey. Typewriter on knee, I helped him edit mounds of handwritten notes and shape them into the text for his book *Wild Rivers*. We had little time: Bob was needed everywhere then, as the spearhead for a movement that encompassed political lobbying, legal manoeuvring, advertising campaigns and the largest non-violent direct action Australia had ever seen. So we worked late, by candlelight and firelight, in that little off-the-grid cottage. Bob had decided that he couldn't stay hooked up to electricity provided by the drowning of that already-lost gem, Lake Pedder. I had started covering the Franklin controversy as a journalist in 1980. Somewhere along the line, not too far along the line, I must confess, I did the thing that journalists are not supposed to do. I became an activist. The river itself had turned me into one. In February of 1981 I rafted part of its length, on assignment for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, following Don Chipp, leader of the Australian Democrats. That river journey was, at the time, the hardest and scariest thing I had ever done. I was not what you would call an outdoorsy type. To paraphrase Woody Allen: I was two with nature.

Until I started covering environmental issues for the *Herald*, I'd never gone bushwalking or slept one night in a tent, much less steered my own small rubber raft over heaving white water. That first night on the river, having carried gear all day up and down a sheer, slippery, rain-lashed mountainside, I lay wet, aching and apprehensive, wondering what mad ambition had led me to sign up for this. The rains came down as only rains born by the Roaring 40s seem to know how to fall. Sometime in the middle of that long night, a plaintive male voice emanated from the nearby tent which Senator Chipp shared with his wife, Idun. 'Jesus Christ, darling. Don't wake me up to tell me you're uncomfortable!' My misery, it seemed, had some distinguished company.

But that Franklin trip changed me, profoundly. As I believe wilderness experience changes everyone. Because it puts us in our place. The human

place, which our species inhabited for most of its evolutionary life. The place that shaped our psyches, and made us who we are. The place where nature is big, and we are small. We have reversed this ratio only in the last couple of hundred years. An evolutionary nanosecond. The pace of our headlong rush from a wilderness existence through an agrarian life to urbanisation is staggering and exponential. In the USA, in just two hundred years, the percentage of people living in cities has jumped from less than four per cent to 80 per cent. By 2006, half the world's population lived in cities. Every week, a million more individuals move to join them.

The bodies and the minds we inhabit were designed for a very different world from the one we now occupy. As far as we know, no organism has ever been part of the experiment in evolutionary biology which we as a species are now undertaking, adapted for one life yet living another. We are, in a way, already space travellers. We have left our home behind and ventured into an alien world. And we don't yet know what effects this sudden hurtle into strangeness will ultimately have on the human body, the human psyche.

As the American writer and activist Bill McKibben has observed, we have ended nature. There is no longer any true wilderness left on Earth. The carbon we have pumped into the atmosphere has ensured that the hand of humanity now reaches into even the most pristine alpine crevice or remnant virgin forest. In his 1989 book *The End of Nature*, McKibben argued that Earth's altered climate gave the experience of being beside a river a different, lesser meaning. He wrote: 'Instead of a world where rain had an independent and mysterious existence, the rain had become a subset of human activity. The rain bore a brand; it was a steer, not a deer.'

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When I was very young, I read John Wyndham's post-apocalypse novel, *The Chrysalids*. In it, one of the characters keens for her devastated planet: 'What did they do here? What can they have done to create such a frightful place? ... There was the power of gods in the hands of children, we know: but were they mad children, all of them quite mad?'

In my own mind, I create a character like Wyndham's, in the aftermath of the climate wars, eking out a mean existence in a harsh landscape, and trying to explain to her kids the mass insanity that led them there. 'And you know, they flushed their toilets with drinking water. They made durable things, like plastic plates and cups, and they would use them only once and then throw them away. They thought it was normal for one person to drive

around in a huge thing called an SUV. They used air conditioning, when it wasn't even really that hot outside...' I imagine her kids rolling their eyes and thinking to themselves, 'Mum. Always exaggerates. Nobody could ever have been that crazy.'

But how do you convince people, here and now, that these common behaviours are indeed crazy? Machiavelli observed that '[T]here is nothing more difficult nor more doubtful of success nor more dangerous to conduct than to make oneself a leader in introducing a new order of things. For the man who introduces it has for enemies all who do well out of the old order and has lukewarm supporters in all who will do well out of the new order ... who do not put their trust in changes if they do not see them in actual practice.' Or, as Yeats put it more succinctly: *The best lack all conviction, the worst are full of passionate intensity.*

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We are, by any world yardstick, a rich society and a decent people. Right now, by some metrics, we are the richest people on the planet. Rich enough to expend some of that capital and decent enough to know it is the right thing to do, the right time to act. What we do here matters. What we do here could be a model for the world. It is depressing to hear politicians say that our sacrifices should be 'in line' with what the US does. That's a mighty low bar. Why should we align our ambitions with a nation that harbours justifiable fears of its own decline, that has created a national atmosphere increasingly hostile to science and reason, and that is locked in an arid political stasis? Please, let's not line up there. What's wrong with leading the way? Shouldn't we aspire to set the line, to inspire, to become an example to the world, a byword for what a visionary country can be and do? We've played that role before, after all. We gave the world the secret ballot—the Australian ballot, as it was called—that did so much to raise living standards and improve conditions for workers worldwide. We were a leader in extending to women the right to vote. We were barely a nation when we set the bar for bravery and sacrifice by common soldiers in foreign wars. We grew up out of racism and misogyny and homophobia to become a mostly tolerant, successfully multicultural society in a world where, for too many countries, that seemingly modest ambition remains painfully out of reach.

We did these great things because we know that we are in it together. It is our core value as Australians. And at this moment in history, our core value happens to be the raw, aching truth of the human predicament. It may also be the only belief that can save us as a species. A species that will continue

to find comfort and delight in the companionship of animals, the miracle of birds, the colours of corals and the majesty of forests. We are in it together, on this blue, spinning marble in the cold and silent void. And we must act on that belief, if we are going to be able to continue to live a good life here, in this beautiful and fragile country, on this lovely planet, our only home.