

# THE QUARRY

## Mother Nature

Laura Bax

My suburb is, according to most people, a quiet one. It's almost entirely suburban, has a primary school, high school, a few parks and decent local shops, even if the Coles is, according to my mother, 'the worst Coles in Australia'. It also has a small bush reserve running through it, which is home to snakes, possums, a few trails and a small creek.

My mother is not most people. She is a guerrilla soldier, a one-woman army, a crusader against anything that disrupts her peace. Before my sister and I were born, she slept like the dead, apparently. Now she has earplugs and blindfolds and whoever chooses to go to bed after her has to slink like an enemy spy through their own home. I'm not sure when her crusades began, but they are a recent enough development that they don't appear in any of my childhood memories.

The Battle of NorthConnex is easiest to date. Three years ago, a small patch of the bush near our house was chosen to become a base of operations for all sorts of machinery and

contractors while they worked on widening the M2. Shrubs were flattened, concrete was laid, trucks and all manner of heavy machinery came and went. Then they really got to work. The sound barriers that lined the motorway were removed so they could chip away at sandstone in order to widen the road. The gentle wash of noise generated by the thousands of cars that travel along the M2 each day, which had once been soft, only noticeable if you were really listening, became distinct. The steady thrum that was once almost mistakeable for trees in the wind was now punctuated by distinct hiss and rumble of compression breaks, heavy trucks, and the occasional horn. Of course, there was little my mother could do to change it; she even begrudgingly admitted it was inevitable and necessary. But she kept a close eye on the project. She read every memo we ever received, emailed the project managers, and visited the community information centre.

My mother's War on Unilever is harder to date.

The boundary between our house and the bush was always quite distinct. A leaning wire fence wraps around our property, guarding a sharp drop down to the nature reserve. As a child, it seemed like a cliff; now I realise it is only a rock wall, maybe five feet tall. Bindi-filled grass grows right to the edge of the rocks, while the other side is full of towering ironbark trees and sandy earth carpeted with years of leaf litter. On the other side of the trees is a small collection of factory units, including Unilever's headquarters. Unilever, which has a groundskeeper who used to run a leaf blower and mow the grass before six in the morning. On Saturdays. That could have been what started mum's crusade against them. Or it might've been the time they didn't properly insulate the industrial cooling units, letting a low, fridge-like hum reverberate up the valley, through the trees, to our house. But it was probably the alarms that really started it. A persistent, aggravating, impossible-to-ignore 'woop' noise, followed by a robotic woman announcing the need to evacuate. That ran, on repeat for hours, before someone finally shut it off. Hours, because the only contact number for Unilever, anywhere on the internet, is to a call centre in the UK.

Unsatisfied with the scripted, emotionless apology email she received, Mum went into full Cold War mode, enacting trade embargos. We were all given strict instructions on what we could not buy—an ever-growing list, including, but not limited to: Rexona deodorant,

Flora margarine, Omo laundry detergent, most shampoos and conditioners. All Dove, Lipton, and Vaseline products. Most heartbreakingly, Ben and Jerry's ice cream. All owned and made by Unilever.

I must confess, I didn't really care about the noise. But, as the noise pollution wore on my mother's (and, by extension, my) sanity, I began to pay more attention.

The bush behind our house, when viewed from above, looks like a dark scar against the beige suburban grid. A scar is probably too negative a term for something that is undeniably alive; it looks like a river, a forked bolt of lightning, a creeping vine, a patch of lichen, or the veins on the inside of your wrists. There are little ridges in each pocket of bushland, areas where the canopy of gum trees is split by water – trickling creeks, slow moving streams, all snaking together to form Parramatta River, which in turn snakes its way out to Sydney Harbour. The spidery threads of bushland join together to form an unbroken chain of trees that ebbs and flows from Carlingford, curving up and around the Hills District. If you zoom out on the satellite image, you can see where the forest would have once joined the National Parks to the north.

The pictures look lush and healthy. From the ground, it is a different story.

Satellite pictures don't show the oil drums, scattered like rotting logs among silvery gum trees, or the shopping trolley, half-submerged and rusting in the creek, far from any road access. It sits overturned, wheels to the sky, like the rotten carcass of some bizarre creature, a steel-boned wildebeest.

The highlight of my school holidays as kid was walking along trails in the reserve behind our house. My mum and I would descend the rough log steps and she would help me as I clambered over rocks. We would follow the path, criss-crossing our way along a small stream until it met up with the main creek. As a child, it seemed like a vast, rushing river, and every crossing was fraught with danger. More than a few ended with wet socks and muddy shoes. Once across the water, we could head right, up steep hills and out into winding suburban streets and on to McDonalds. This was my favourite trail to follow, as it held the promise of ice cream, but I also had to walk home after.

But if we took the path to the left, we would go to the dam. Technically a water retarding basin, the thirty-metre tall walls were covered with ever-changing murals of graffiti. As the trail approached the base of the concrete megalith, the dirt track joined a path of metal grates, the creek trickling through under our feet. Each step I took generated a metallic scrape, ringing and reverberating as I ran along it. The path lead into a dark tunnel at the base of the massive wall, the arching walls painted dark green, dimming the sunlight that reached the bottom of the valley, creating a cave-like atmosphere. The air was cooler, and every noise, from your scraping metal steps to your quiet whispers would echo around, surrounding you like some strange symphony. Sometimes, I would run shrieking through the tunnel, making as much noise as I could. Other times, I would creep slowly, hand-in-hand with my mother, whispering to her and hearing my own voice whisper back. Broken shards of beer bottles would gleam from patches of moss like dark crystal stalagmites. When we emerged from the tunnel, I would examine the colourful walls like a little art critic, or, if the weather was warmer, take off my shoes and wade through the sandy pond where the concrete basin ended and the bush began again. When I got tired, or hungry, or bored, my mother and I would make our way up the hill and loop our way home. The trail from the dam ends in a cul-de-sac, and we would make our way past the factories, past Unilever, and through a narrower strip of bushland, all the way home, a big circle.

The creek in this narrow strip is a sad little thing, disappearing almost entirely when the rain stops. When there is water, it is murky and dark, frothing oddly around rocks and against the muddy bank. The world reflected on the water's surface looks wrong, the colours not quite right. Sunlight is dappled and diffused by the canopy, but where the odd ray hits the creek it seems to glow, the water not translucent but cloudy and almost grey. Standing on a bridge over the water, when the wind blows the right direction, you can smell something sweet and clean, cloying and artificial – shampoo-like, coming from the factory hidden by the trees.

Of course, big corporations like Unilever aren't the sole perpetrators of environmental damage. Dogs, feral cats, garden run-off, invasive plants and weeds can all be blamed on individuals. That is to say nothing of the plastic bags, caught in high tree branches like the nest of some alien bird. While it is impossible to live in our modern world without causing some damage, in the last few years there has been a shift towards minimising the harm we do. Plastic bags have been banned, and reusable coffee cups are becoming fashion items, from

boutique, handmade porcelain affairs to mass-produced sparkly plastic. And while people inevitably do litter, most of us wouldn't want to be caught dead doing it.

But corporations aren't held to the same standards, or expectations of guilt that we are. In 2017, a report found that just one hundred companies were responsible for over 70% of the world's carbon emissions – yet they face minimal consequences. For accidentally leaking chemical waste into the nature reserve behind our house, Unilever, a billion-dollar company, was fined \$15,000. A bit of leaked soda ash and fifteen grand is nothing to a company like Unilever, which has, in recent years, been accused of using illegally deforested land for palm oil.

When I was in the final stages of writing this, editing and drafting, cutting and pasting paragraphs, trying to carve a story out of bursts of memory and short rants, environmental damage made the headlines again. In early October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released a report on the current state of global carbon emissions. Solemn-faced men in suits calmly addressed reporters, announcing that with our current rate of pollution, our planet would be 2 degrees warmer in 40 years. Their report found carbon emissions must reach zero by 2050. Newsreaders delivered the planet's death sentence with their usual cadence, concerned-but-not-overly-so, swiftly moving to the next story.

Two degrees seems like nothing. But even that tiny amount would lead to huge environmental damage, including the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef and the Amazon Rainforest, not to mention immeasurable destruction to human lives. Longer, more intense droughts, supersized storms, unprecedented bushfires and hurricanes will all occur. Food will become scarce as crops fail to handle increased temperatures and carbon dioxide. Warmer temperatures will see the tropical and mosquito borne diseases become more widespread. And while experts warn massive numbers of people would be displaced by rising sea levels, there are other, unforeseeable consequences of ice caps melting. Two years ago, there was an outbreak of a rare form of anthrax in far north Russia, which led to the deaths of two people and thousands of reindeer. It was caused by permafrost melting, exposing a long-dead reindeer carcass, which held dormant spores of the deadly virus. Other diseases can survive in ice for millennia, while the world's largest deposit of mercury is held tenuously in place by permafrost in the Arctic – rising temperatures will see it released, seeping into food sources and poisoning water supplies.

Recently, I went walking through the reserve for the first time in years. The thin dirt tracks are covered with a soft carpet of greying leaves, fallen from the eucalyptus trees above, which dampened the sound of my feet hitting the ground. Every few steps, the dull, uniform colour was broken with a splash of yellow, fresher-but-still-dead leaves, or fragments of plastic, broken and splintered, their original forms unrecognisable. As I approached the creek the path grew wide and the tightly-packed dirt trail became loose and silty, shifting beneath my feet. With the lack of rain, the water was low and the stench of rotten seaweed filled the air. A bright blue bottle cap sat half-buried in the dirt, a faded coke can nearby, like strange shells. A plastic bag bobbed in and out of view, an alien jellyfish held half underwater by a heavy branch.

As I stood on the edge of the water, I realised something. Despite the obvious signs of human civilisation around me, the noise of the factories and the constant hum of the motorway had faded, replaced with the soft whisper of wind through the remnant gum forest. I'd developed a sort of nihilistic tunnel-vision, stewing in the fact that individual attempts to reduce environmental degradation meant very little when corporations can (and do) get away with causing irreversible damage.

It's not a view I hold alone. In recent years, science fiction has embraced a dystopian opinion of our future. Books, television, movies, feature humanity escaping from or surviving on a decimated planet. Even in the real world we focus on missions to Mars, on ways of leaving our planet behind instead of fixing the damage we've caused. The idea that we have broken the environment beyond repair seems to have been quietly accepted some time ago, slipping silently into our culture's psyche.

But nature is, in a sense, its own corporation. It's big, everywhere, and entirely apathetic to individuals. There is the constant swish of wind through trees, river-like, similar to the hum from the motorway, but at a different frequency. Along the trail, there are thick, ropey vines, twisting, climbing, and covering eucalypts and rocks alike. They are triffid-like, long thin stems reaching straight up to hook around branches. I'd presumed at first, that they were invasive, choking out native plants, but later learnt they were a native water vine. Along my street, houses are framed by wattle and magnolia, grevilleas and cherry blossoms. Bright yellow freesia spring up around the base of a bottlebrush tree. Recently, taking a shortcut home at dusk, I stumbled upon an echidna foraging for ants beside the chain-link fence of one of the factories. Despite the damage we have done, given a chance, life finds a way.

I think of my mother, and her crusade against Unilever. It seemed pointless, at first, illogical, even. But a fine is still a fine. And it is one Unilever never would have had to pay if my mother hadn't emailed the EPA, demanding they look into it. The state of our planet is undeniably dire. But if we give in to our apathy or let the destruction of our planet become background noise, then we have already lost.