

Starting Point

When the spectrum or rainbow of human cultures has finally sunk into the void created by our frenzy; as long as we continue to exist and there is a world, that tenuous arch linking us to the inaccessible will still remain, to show us the opposite course to that leading to enslavement; many may be unable to follow it, but its contemplation affords him the only privilege of which he can make himself worthy; that of arresting the process...

— Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

Heat is the first thing, or rather the afterglow of heat; the feeling that it has cooled. It is dark. What light there is comes from the moon and reflects in shadowed blues and greys off the shallow pools of water, the waxy hand-sized leaves. The points ripple and move with every step, coming and going through the vastness of trees. The brush underfoot is soft and unknowably dense – it is filled with creatures, or imagined so. Anonymous sounds travel and die in the darkness, sometimes close, sometimes far away. Buzzes, whistles, calls, wings, branches, breathing. Shapes emerge from the deep unseen and the thought quickly follows: *this has been constructed*. A hide of some kind, a shelter or a lookout. A nest. There is purpose where none was expected.

Here the week and the month are still uninvented. The year is known but unnumbered.

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The interruption of the familiar is a moment of potential. It is the muscle tearing. The countless invisible striations and the way they fuse and heal. In the interim, when all is paused and the structures of the world are visible for a moment, as through a sudden transparency, one might feel an almost overwhelming optimism: when it all comes together again, the hope goes, it will be better than before. How could this dramatic moment of stillness and resonance not alter the path before us? There are dolphins in the canal waters. The air is clearing. How could we fail to grasp the opportunity, so rare and brilliant, for change?

Civilisation is not so easily bent out of habit. There is a tremendous weight behind the old, desired outcomes; a great deal depends on the certainty of an unchanging world. This

expectation, which is collective and almost unconsciously determined, "insists itself into the present as an anachronism," as Judith Butler once put it. *The old dying, the new struggling to be born...* But what if the old refuses to die? What if all that was expected, depended upon – that which provides us with certainty, the certainty of our own intelligence, our own justification – continues to obstruct even the most necessary change? "The ethos refuses to become past, and violence is the way in which it imposes itself upon the present," Butler writes. "Indeed, it not only imposes itself upon the present, but also seeks to eclipse the present — and this is precisely one of its violent effects."

Is the glimpse of change, the vision through the momentarily clear pane, enough to force the question? To show that, in a time of crisis, the flows can be redirected, the guardrails thrown down, the impossible attempted?

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Who are these creatures and what are their ways? Have they lived in this place for a long time, or are they newly arrived? Natives or settlers? What uses have they found for what grows here? They lie in quiet little groups all around, almost dead. Is there an order to their gathering, a hierarchy? It is not obvious if so. None appears above any other, no leader emerges from the pack. They must move from place to place, but only when unobserved.

Sometimes they can be heard calling to one another, a low sound that isn't quiet but never feels loud either. It does not rent and carve the air, but rather moves along beneath it, keeping close to the ground, disturbing nothing but the dark green growth. The long bodies seem soft, covered in a light fur that conceals their true shape. They lie easily with each other and when one moves around their group, they are not unsettled, lifting black-tipped snouts to the gentle bustle of a peer on the move. Their eyes typically remain closed.

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How does the status quo, that which is, reject and overwhelm that which is not, which might be? The manner of this rejection is, today at least, one of dismissal, rather than, say, violent action. Such is the power of the orthodoxy, there is generally no need for such violence. Instead, there is a construction of impossibility, of naivety, of inevitability. The rejection works like this: a change is often first acknowledged as being preferable in some way — *that would be nice, of*

course — before it is deemed *unrealistic*, not quite *pragmatic*, something to consider *in an ideal world*. Which is to say, the alternative proposal does not account for all the variables and complexities for which the status quo must, in all its mature and hard-earned managerial wisdom, continually account. Such an alternative — indeed, *any* alternative — is nothing more than ingenuous fantasy; the musings of the well-intentioned, who really ought to have grown out of their childish beliefs by now. For *that*, whatever *that* is, is not how the world works. This is the force of what is, the force of how things are done: the horizons of what can be expected, aimed for, or attained, are set, known, and inviolable. No matter how pressing the need to respond, to change.

Power is active in the ability to maintain a moral or ideological arena in which anything that questions the assumptions of the existing arrangement can be allowed to say nothing about that arrangement while dooming the question, and the questioner, to laughable irrelevancy. Things are what they are, we hear; this is just how it works. That nothing works as it should is not a meaningful issue because this has been going on for so long that no-one truly believes it could be otherwise. This is how the horizon is drawn. To suggest anything different is silly, and the greatest fear of the managerial class who represent and reproduce power today — politicians, journalists, business leaders — is looking silly. The great challenge for anyone hoping to do something unexpected, something which goes against the grain of the age, is to reject this feeling of silliness, to persist in the silliness, to understand that the silliness is a necessary part of the seriousness one hopes to bring about.

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Their miniature society remains mysterious and compelling. Night falls across their unseen activity. The heat has died away, the dry, silent air is broken sharply when it is broken at all. Something low is audible out there in the darkness between the trees, moving about roughly in the undergrowth. It is part of the quiet. Is this when they hunt? What can they alone see?