

# Killing and Beauty

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## **Abstract**

Inspired by some ecofeminist work, this essay attempts to grapple with some ethical issues to do with killing. Opening with a piece of creative prose describing some of my subjective experiences of logging, sawmilling, and woodwork, I then reflect on those experiences. My relationships with trees, in this account, fit Lourde's definition of 'erotic perception'. Death can be seen as a major transformation which has a fierce beauty about it, with the killer acting like a 'shaman' in the process. The act of killing suggests domination, but does it always involve domination? I argue for an 'ethic of beauty', in which an erotic perception of beauty is ethically significant as a telltale of deep connection - a feeling of the Earth's abundance and our place in that abundance. Thus an important criterion around killing is whether the experience of killing connects us more deeply with the being who is killed.

3,815 words

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## **Tree**

The old ute, the smell of old car, the familiar shapes from childhood. Malcolm's laconic wrist on the wheel, the other elbow out the window. Quietly rumbling along shaded leaf-strewn quiet tracks.

Trawling through the bush, sniffing the forest. Puttering along, putting the antennas out for slope, aspect, soil, microclimate, species mix. Then stop, get out, dive off the road and under the canopy, into the presence. Sniffing out the stand of the species you want, walking into a stand that is just delicious: cool and wet and moist and fertile. And the trees - vibrant, erect, juicy, free, sprightly. Fresh, young, clean. New. Perfect. Good enough to eat.

A good truck load there? Yep. Back home to get the truck, the tractor, saw, fuel and lunch. The expedition sets off. Malcolm bumping along ahead in the truck. I'm ambling slowly along behind on the tractor, open to the wind, the sky, the trees above me. Drinking up the air, being wrapped and stroked by forest as I lazily trundle through it, the tractor chug-chug barely intruding on the bliss of brushing through that energy.

The deep rich strong majestic THERE-NESS of tall forest.  
Drink in every moment  
the vivid richness  
uplifting earthy cathedral  
damp-smelling excitement of pleasure.

How I long to be a part of it,  
take my place among the trees,  
become timber,  
become elastic juicy wiry fibrous tensioned tall trunk thrusting earthwards thumping deep  
in damp rich earth entwining long sinuous winding fingers through aromatic pungent earth  
pulsing right down down down to the smallest tips of each finger root.

The layered trunk building up over years and years. Every year under the protective coating of the bark each sheath of fibres lovingly wrapped around and round pushing out under the bursting bark, more pathways more girth more strength more resilience. Over time. Stretching delicious tension thrusting upwards downwards delicious tension taut and loose sinuous sensuous luscious tension reacting stretching upwards downwards. The heavy growing crown high aloft atop my single mast, whipping round in winds and gales, my lithe and fibrous stem writhing in excitement pulling the fascia of fibres one against the other joyous as my trunk comes alive with movement tussling against

those wild and airy forces breezes winds and storms and winds, breezes gentle airs and lazy rustlings...

Up above

Skywards

open reaching outstretched yearning

high atop that single trunk, drinking in the air the light the heat the sun the wind the cloud the open yawning vacant zenith of the sky.

Drinking in O feed me let me suck you through me through these thin and rattling fingers leaves that cook and cook and juice me up and pulse their richgreen flavours through and through and through and through and through .....

Take it in through my skin, feed at the bounteous cornucopia of rich live forest, live it, live in it, breathe in the sweet sharp singing moments of earthly beauty, breathe them in through my legs my arms my shoulders the top of my head. Breathe the singing charge of air so sweet so fresh so full of tree breath.

All in a day's work.

Back at the mill.

Breaking down the log.

Covered by sawdust as it's thrown from the log.

Wet wet wet it is, with the smell of the timber the sap the life force of that tree dripping from it, dripping all over me, covering me in that fog of tree-ness. The smell, the taste of the sap, the blood of the tree.

That intense moment when the two halves of the log fall from each other and the insides are exposed. That intense moment so confronting, like all my guts suddenly exposed before my eyes.

Like the moment the needle breaks through the skin.

Reading the flitch from the break-down cut. Taking in the outer skin: bumps, direction of grain, bends, faults, gum holes. Taking in the cut face before we flip it over onto the skids: punky heart, straightness of grain, ringy, sap pockets, heart knots. Glance at the ends of the flitch: end check, crack, punky heart, fire rings, growth rings. Put my hands on the flitch, heft it onto the trolley. Feel in my stomach how it sings, tense or dull, loose or cranky, free or tight. The song of the is-ness of that species that tree that structure resonance fibrous trunk blackbutt different to Rose Gum different to Blue Gum different to Pink Bloodwood tallwood camphor sally wattle beech and ...

different and ...

good enough to eat.

With the flitch between my hands, its end thrust against my stomach, balanced solidly on the trolley. The feeling of the saw as it bites into the juicy meat of the soundwood.

Feeling the log move, writhe under my hands as the saw cuts through the tensions held in the growth rings, and each half of the flitch takes on a life of its own.

As we push the flitch back and forwards across the bench, convert it from half a tree into a pile of sawn timber, the history of the tree lays revealed. Where there was a small branch that self-pruned when the tree was young. The bit round the butt that got seared in bushfire that year. The place where it was hit when a nearby tree fell one year in a big storm, and the struggle to heal that wound. The gum pocket created to isolate and drown some invader. The scribbly borers that got in a few years ago but then died. Or simply just lost in admiration for the free open sprightly grain that comes from good water, deep soil and the protection of nearby tall healthy fellows. Good enough to eat.

Hungry for the essence of tree in every sense: wanting it's body to be mine, wanting to feel its body as my body, wanting to enter into it's body to experience the world as tree in forest. (My brother and I lying across the fresh-cut stumps of 400 year old ash trees, my

body actually within the space inhabited by that tree for years, decades, centuries up until only yesterday) Wanting the stillness the solid plantedness the rooted to the spot reaching for the sky beingness of that tree.

Wanting it's body to be mine. Wanting that incredible substance timber in all its myriad shapes, shades, weights, smells, structures, colours, tastes, species, age, sawing pattern. Which tree, where the tree grew, which part of the tree.

Wanting the timber green off the saw, that heavy but lively fresh sensation. Like a fresh-killed and butchered calf. New. Wanting the timber air-dry for use in yards, gates, verandahs, steps and seats. Wanting the timber kiln-dry, that hollow solid resonance, resilient dry but flexible, peeling off buttery under the plane, the sharp edge cut with the chisel, end grain clean translucent. Wanting timber aged in the sun, that silvery soft graceful sheen belying solid fresh clean grain underneath. Wanting old timber, weathered ends split to show tired and dry splines of fibre stripped of juice and hard as nails.

Take kiln dry timber and shape it further with machinery into boxes, windows, things that work, things that have new names, new lives, new creation. Chair, door, gift, carving, sideboard, table. Now new, now no longer new, now ordinary, now beaten, now old, now shined with years of habitual use.

Wanting the body, wanting to be the body, wanting to be in the body of the tree. Wanting the body, wanting to work with the body, touch it shape it get my hands on it, love it as much as I can in every way possible.

And the vital transforming step in there...

Killing.

Death.

Taking the saw to it and cutting down the tree. Cutting down the life that lives there where that tree now stands.

Chainsaw loud and heavy, stinking the fresh air with fumes. Intense as it's biting into the fibrous trunk. Tension heightens - this is the most dangerous moment and the most intense - the moment when I can only focus on the saw and the cut, can't see above me can't see what the tree's doing. Then the tree falls - there actually is no clear moment of death like with a person or an animal. The whole tree comes slowly majestically crashing down to whump! on the ground. Branches, leaves, debris still falls for a few moments. The moment of stillness just then feels like the crushing end to a life, Majesty defeated. The moment when suddenly it is obvious that death is forever. The fresh cut stump sprouts accusing from the ground, the presence of the tree's ghost shimmers in the air direct above it. Its mates shiver too - a hole in the fabric of their community lets in light, lets in new opportunities and new dangers.

My heart-wrapped desire to live with the life and energy of that tree, of that species, of that piece of forest, of that being of Earth. I long to use my hands, my wisdom and my care to transform that dead thing lying there, to love that huge dead body as richly as I can. To take it up, to draw it to me, draw it through me. Draw the luscious beauty through somehow into what I do with the body. I am in awe of that tree's body, how its life has produced for me this vast resource of fibre crouched silent waiting to be unfolded from the trunk. In awe of being the agent of this deathly transformation, in awe of the power that I enact by killing and cutting up the body.

I want to cut and slice your body; I want to live with your soul forever.

## ***Erotic Perception***

The above prose piece is an amateur attempt to give a flavour of what primarily motivated me during a 15 year working association with timber from logging through all intermediate stages to high-end manufacturing. Some experiences I would be aware of every time I did the actions; other experiences were more rare. Sometimes the exhaustion from just plain hard physical work dulled the ability or motivation to connect.

When we were not milling or logging I spent a lot of time in the forest just being there, “drinking in” my surroundings, exploring ways of connecting with individual trees and with the forest/land/beings. Even when I was manufacturing, I frequently went out to the forest where our timber supplier sourced his logs. It is difficult to find words for what I perceived and experienced; overall I feel a deep intense longing to connect, and an openness to connecting in a way that Audre Lorde describes as erotic:

... the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we feel in the doing. (Lorde, 1984: 54)

... the erotic - the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meaning. (ibid; 56)

## ***Death***

The really huge issue in there for me is the death of the tree: how does it fit in? Does it fit in? In some ways it doesn't seem to make sense - it jars. How is it possible to feel so much passionate longing for a being and also kill it? I still find I can't make sense of it, and can only say that it fits while I stay with the erotic mode of experiencing.

What is really central for me is that sawmilling was a way for me to get physically and sensually closer to the tree species I particularly love. I feel that the more I know of a tree species “from the inside” by cutting up lots of them, the easier it is for me to “walk inside” a standing tree in the forest. The connecting link is undoubtedly the erotic sensuality of both the sawmilling and the “walking inside” the tree. There is an iterative loop operating here: the more I drink in the beauty of the tree in its forest, the more I want to bring awareness of that beauty through in the milling and subsequent usage of the timber. And the more I see and feel the beauty of the guts of a tree and experience the incredible gift that is timber, the more I desire to connect with the source of that beauty and that giving: the living trees and the living forest. The killing of the tree is an integral link in this iterative loop.

## ***Thinking about Death***

A helpful way of thinking about this iterative loop I have found is to consider death as a process of major transformation. From at least my viewpoint, but certainly not that of the tree, I could think of myself as a shaman enacting a ritual of death-and-rebirth: killing a tree and giving new life to its body in the form of human-useable objects that each go on and have a life (however inanimate) of their own.

For me the magical part is the desire to “bring through” the beauty of the forest into whatever it is that is made with the timber. This is successful to varying degrees, of course; what I feel is important is the **desire** to do so. This is not to suggest any justification for killing. I am instead inviting an awareness that death is a major transformation, and that the killer is a key player in that process.

Recently I was with my step-son as he died of a brain tumor. He was nine. Many people spoke of his death as a tragedy. For me, as I watched him going through the few weeks leading up to his dying, I thought there could be no more beautiful sight than being with a child as he prepares for his death. During that short time there was nothing else - just now, and impending death. There was something ultimate about it. The beauty was FIERCE! It was Life in the most intense way that I have ever been with!

I closely watch my cat as she catches and eats a mouse. She is FIERCE! And the mouse isn't fooling - it's running for it's LIFE! She catches it, toys with it (cruelly!), then for no apparent reason decides the time has come. And picks it up in her mouth, kills it by crushing its skull with her teeth, slowly tears it apart and eats the whole thing. What a thing to do in one's mouth!

From these two stories I suggest the idea that there is a fierce beauty in death. Again, I am not justifying killing. I am instead inviting an awareness of that dimension of death and killing.

## ***Killing and the Ethic of Beauty***

One of ecofeminism's central concerns is the twin dominations of women and nature. An important consideration then, is the ethical question of how best to relate to nature. If we currently dominate nature, what would a non-dominatory relationship look like?

I suggest it is self-evident that other beings die in order that humans live, and it is thus inevitable that we must kill. My question, then, is: is it possible to kill another being without being involved in a dominating relation? My relationship with the trees I kill is grossly unequal, to the extreme point that I bring about the death of the other party to relationship. Are there ways in which such an event does not derive from the impulse to dominate, and if so, what does that look like?

Nell Noddings proposes that we can't have an ethical relationship with plants since there is no awareness there to receive our caring (Noddings, 1984; 170). I want to suggest that, although using Noddings' definition I may not have an ethical relationship with the tree I kill, at the same time there are very significant ethical dimensions in my actions.

Perhaps I can consider my relationship with my victims using the ethic of care, which considers relations in which the parties are unequal (Baier, 1994; 28). A lot of the content of my relating with trees and timber involves some key aspects of being one-caring. For instance, Houston discusses "engrossment" in the object of care (Houston 1992; 112), and Noddings suggests "an ethic of caring is perceptive and creative" (Noddings 19984; 159). Houston also suggests caring is about "the nurturance of the goodness of the cared-for" (ibid; 116), and about helping the cared-for to "realise their best self" (ibid; 117).

I feel as though I deeply care for the tree while it is alive, and also in many ways my engagement with the timber - after the death of the tree - reflects similar aspects of being one-caring. Where, then, does the killing fit in? Can I simply say that killing is a little jagged bit sandwiched in between caring for trees and caring for timber?

Something that I tried to get across in my creative piece is that the experience does not feel jagged. There is a continuum of desire and erotic charge that continues through all aspects of the actions. Perhaps I could tie this together and say that, throughout the process, I have a continual awareness of beauty - of the tree, of forest, of my own body, of the machinery I'm using. This beauty is not especially visual beauty (my body's no visual feast!). It is more a sensation of beauty that accompanies erotic pleasure.

In this awareness of beauty, at moments an extraordinary switch happens: I feel as though the earth is caring for me. The caring relation in which I engage so willingly suddenly becomes reversed. Sometimes I am so overcome by the intense wealth of richness that is offered, that thanks feels quite inadequate. A humble acceptance feels more appropriate.

I go back to Noddings' suggestion above that ethical relations with some beings is not possible since we cannot tell that our care has been received. Perhaps I can tell that my care has been received when that switch happens and all the care I put out seems to come back to me in a rush of beauty. Perhaps it is this awareness of beauty which could be considered to be ethically significant. And I may be aware of beauty not just in plants, but also in animals, in myself and other people, in inanimate things like rocks, in art and other made objects, or even in smells or sounds.

Perhaps an awareness of beauty signals an appropriate or ethical relation with one's surroundings and oneself. I suggest such beauty can include a sense of fierceness, as in the "fierce beauty" I describe above. This sense of fierceness perhaps may also be similar to the fierceness of windstorms, or of pounding waves, or of earthquakes: an overwhelming unstoppable force. As such, it can also encompass killing and death. And the beauty may be (or perhaps must be?) intensely erotic - experienced as body sensation, moving emotion and psychic charge.

Perhaps, then, we need something like an ethic of beauty, which may incorporate the ethic of care. There is much in the notion of caring for another that has to do with beauty. I am suggesting that expanding the horizons of the ethic of care in this direction provides support in exploring further some very practical and concrete aspects of our relations with non-humans - the moments when we kill them.

## **Conclusion**

My discussion above arises from a central ecofeminist concern: an understanding that our Western collective relationship with nature is dominatory. I have not addressed issues of gender directly in the discussion, so the question could be asked whether my discussion illustrates an aspect of ecofeminism, rather than other environmentalisms. Karen Warren suggests one boundary condition of ecofeminist ethics to be that all ethical theories "are concrete descriptions of sexist oppression provided by women situated in different historical and socioeconomic circumstances" (Warren 1988; 148). I am clearly right outside that boundary since I am not a woman, and it is doubtful that my work is a concrete description of sexist oppression.

Nevertheless, in grounding my discussion in the work of Noddings, I understand myself to be accepting ecofeminist work in ethics and to be (hopefully) building on that work to add something new. I am stimulated to do so at least partly because Noddings' work helps me to articulate concerns regarding ethics that arise in specific areas of my life. Those areas of my life are deeply shaped by my gender, for example I have never had to justify being a forest worker in the way a woman would have to. Thus I have had more energy available to explore other issues, and that exploration is deeply shaped by engagement with the ideology of masculinity. What I have to add to the discussion of ethical relations with non-humans arises from personal experiences and my subsequent reflection upon them. My personal experiences, recorded as a piece of creative prose, I take to be a valid source of knowledge. In doing this I am validating a non-scientific epistemology.

In conclusion, although I have not read any material that discusses this, I suggest that my creative piece and subsequent discussion illustrate ecofeminist process.

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