

PHILIP NEILSEN

THE IMPORTANCE OF WOLVES

It was in winter, when the peach tree in our backyard was bare, and asthma kept me from school for days at a time, that the wolves first came. You could hear them after dark, howling from the forest that covered Mt Gravatt.

“It’s just dogs,” my sister would say with patronising weariness. “There are no wolves in Australia.”

My mother defended me. “Maybe he is the only one who can hear them.”

The pack patrolled our tidy streets too. I found two paw prints in mud by the laundry door one July morning. It was the only time they made such an obvious mistake—and I told no one about it.

I didn’t fear them at all. I had read *The Jungle Book* over and over—I knew about Mowgli and how he was raised by Raksha and Father Wolf. I wished that I could sleep in the crook of a comfortable tree like him, while my adoptive parents guarded me below. The jungle air would bring sounds and scents that they had taught me about—the musky odour of the giant snake, the sharp sweetness of fruits and berries. The wolves and I would be respected by the other creatures of the forest, and be content.

I did my best to emulate Mowgli. In summer I fished for eels down at the Council horse pound near Marshall Road, or shaped beautiful spears with my knife. I learned to walk barefoot without making a noise. Sometimes, for no reason at all, the horses would leave their paddock and gallop single file along the narrow paths through the paperbarks. Because I could hear the rumble of their approach, I always had time to get out of their way. It was exciting to stand behind a flaky paperbark and watch them pass by so close.

But it was the wolves that mattered most. They were the animals I first allowed inside my world—giving it a face, making it greener, sharper, full of attention. More believable than the tame rows of petunias in the garden, the sweet-pea trellis, the silly cocker spaniel that hid under the house next door whenever the wolves howled. They were special because they knew they could leave at any time, but never did.



Wolves are territorial animals. Wikipedia

The Council pound was one half of my domain—the other was the dry Sclerophyll forest covering Wellers Hill. At the edge of the forest was a scout hut. It was painted light blue like a fragile bird's egg, and surrounded by neatly mown lawn.

I watched from the trees as the scouts played silly games on that tentative lawn. I was high on Eucalypt mist and the golden sun of late afternoon. I saw their fear, and knew it was good for them. I left chalk messages on the door of their hut.

“The forest is full of eyes,” said one. “Beware of the wolves,” said another.

One summer weekend, I lit a small fire to cook sausages. In an instant the grass was ablaze. I thrashed frantically at it with a leafy branch, but it was already a monster. The fire reared and raced over the crest of the hill and towards my primary school, only stopping at the wire fence. But no police knocked at our door, and a few days later, heavy rain came; and a week after that the blackened bush was vivid with green shoots. It soon became easy for the pack and me to conceal ourselves again.



Wolves have difficulty adapting to change. Wikipedia

My favourite place was under a big Scribbly Gum near the top of Wellers Hill. But one day I left my bike in the bushes and climbed up to find a girl was sitting near my spot and singing to herself. She had a pale face and dark hair. I recognised her from school.

“Hello. I hope you don't mind me sitting here.”

“No.” I wasn't used to talking with girls. I tried to think of something impressive to say. “It's where I come to think.”

I looked away, hoping she would have the good grace to leave.

“You're the wolf boy, aren't you?”

“What d you mean?” I was both startled and flattered.

“You know—you gave a talk on wolves at school. And you were always getting the cane for looking out the window. And you made that really weird howling noise whenever they made you stand outside the principal's office.”

There was no adequate reply. I suspected she was teasing me, the way girls on the bus did with boys they liked, or maybe didn't like—I was unsure of the exact dynamics. And she was a year older than me, which gave her a lot of power.

“Why don't you sit down,” she said.

So I sat and waited.

“You are the wolf boy. And I bet you've never had a girlfriend.”

She didn't say this as an accusation, but in a neutral, summing up kind of way, like the doctor. She was clearly a professional when it came to conversation.

“Well, I'll get one when I feel like it,” I mumbled.

There was silence for a while—a bush kind of silence—just the wind in the treetops, the croaking of crows, tiny unidentifiable clicks and scuffling of insects or lizards.

“I like wolves too,” she said.

This was exciting. “Have you read *The Jungle Book*?”

“Of course I have. It would be good if there were wolves here.” She glanced around at the trees and undergrowth in a cursory way.

“What makes you think there aren't?” I said.

“If there are wolves,” she said, “it would explain a lot of things.” Then she laughed.

It sounded like something I would understand when I was older.

She stood up and brushed the leaves from her skirt. “I'm going now.” And she walked down the hill. For several weeks, every time I went back to the tree, I hoped she would be there again—but she never was.



At that time I discovered a writer who definitely understood wolves. Pasternak's Dr Zhivago was in love with a mysterious young woman—the one he wrote a poem for at night, while listening to the pack howling in the snow-calmed trees. And many years later, when he saw Lara again from the tram and tried to call out to her, he had a heart attack, and lay on the

street while she kept walking, oblivious. I took this lesson to heart. To understand things is to be alone—the outsider. And loss is the inevitable result of too much attachment.

But when I was almost 16, the girl with the pale face, Helen, reappeared. She had longer hair now and lots of bangles. She sang at the folk club night in a church hall beside St Luke's at Ekibin. She was brilliant and played on steel strings like me—only a lot better. She sang about injustice, which was a big issue for everyone in the folk club then.

In my case, this was intensified by something that happened in Amulree Street one morning. I had been on the footpath talking to my father as he loaded up his builder's ute. He was dressed as usual in his ironed khaki shorts and shirt and canecutter sandals. An older man in a dark suit, white shirt and tie walked up the street towards the bus stop to catch the 5E to North Quay.

"Lovely morning," Dad said.

The man pointedly ignored him. I could see my father was stung by this, but he said nothing. Class distinction had slithered into Amulree Street. The sickly sweet miasma of jacaranda, hibiscus and frangipani couldn't hide it.

Soon after the night when Helen sang, the Ekibin folk club organised a car rally to Mt Nebo. I didn't have a car yet, or a licence, but got a ride in someone's white and grey FC Holden. At the picnic she came over to me.

"So, how have you been, wolf boy?"

"I'm good," I said. She was so beautiful—but in a mortal way, not a remote, goddess way.

"A good wolf? I don't think so. Wolves are wild and unpredictable and scary. I bet you've been up to all kinds of terrible things."

"Well, if you count stuffing newspaper in the school bell—yes, I've been a bit wild. But only because the moon was full."

I was hoping to make her laugh, and it worked. We were sitting together again with comforting trees around us. I realise now I'm older that she must have known I was smitten, and how kind it was of her to take me seriously. She listened intently as I told her in a tumble of words how horrible it was at an all boys' school, and about the snob in the suit who thought he was superior to my father and how I would like to slaughter him.

She was indignant on my behalf. "What a toad! And you catch the same bus as this toad in the suit every morning? I'll tell you what to do. You sit right behind him on the bus and you concentrate your mind very hard on the back of his head. Then imagine a dark deep well, and

imagine him standing alone at the bottom of it. He reaches out his hands to touch the walls of the well, but he can't feel anything. He knows he is standing in water, but he can't feel that either. And when he looks up, the little blue circle of sky reminds him of something, but he doesn't know what—except that it is something important to him and good, but he will never reach it.”

“What will that do?”

“Nothing bad, but nothing good either. After that day his life will be colourless, you see, just like the well.”

That didn't sound like sufficient punishment, but it was something. “And you've done this yourself and it worked?”

“Oh yes—it worked. My father left his girlfriend and came back to us.”

That was proof enough for me. “What do you call it?”

“Let's call it ‘the curse of the wolf’.”

When it came time to go back to Brisbane, Helen arranged it so I sat with her and a guy called Robert in the back of the car. The three of us with her in the middle. Robert was athletic, good looking, acne-free and obviously her boyfriend, because I saw them hugging before we got in the car. After a few minutes she found my right hand and his left and held them both. No one spoke and I was blissfully happy. It was such a small thing, but to me it was generous and fine and adult.

I didn't see her at the folk club for a couple of months. Then out of nowhere I received a white and gold card—an invitation to her wedding. The whole club turned up for it. Gossip raced around the crowd outside the Wellers Hill Presbyterian church; they said she was pregnant and *had* to marry Robert.

It all felt as if she was being sacrificed to larger, irrational social pressures. As if sex was a dangerous thing—invisible, treacherous and everywhere. We lined up to kiss the bride when she came out of the church, smiling but looking tired. I hesitated, so she leant over and kissed me on the cheek, her perfume holding me like a spell. She whispered in my ear, “I'm very happy, wolf boy.”

We milled around the church grounds. Robert's brother came up to me where I was standing awkwardly with some people I didn't know well enough to talk to. He shoved my shoulder hard.

“What are you doing here, freak?”

I tried to speak, but he shoved me again. “You won’t be sniffing around Helen any more, little dog.” The statement rushed into my brain and fired up the chemicals, making the synapses stutter. A couple of people giggled.

“She’s my friend,” I protested.

Then an invisible fist, which must have been his, smashed into my nose and I fell backwards onto the patchy lawn. A church elder stepped in and took me to the church basement where there was a kitchen. He wet a tea towel and made me press it against my face to stop the blood.

“You’d better go home, alright? This is meant to be a happy day. Stay here for a while, then go home.”



Helen had given me a great gift and I decided to use it.

I sat behind the suit snob on the bus and went to work on him. I stared at the neatly combed hair on the back of his head. I had him down in that well, groping, looking up at the blue circle in the darkness, his trousers heavy with water. The cold and damp rose to his chest, closing it off. I concentrated very hard on this.

Nothing happened for a while. But then he stopped coming to the bus stop. I mentioned it to my father.

“Yes, I heard the poor bugger died. He was a clerk in the public service. Just dropped dead at his desk.”

That was all he said. And my father had expressed sympathy for him. Maybe that should have made me feel ashamed or guilty—but it didn’t. And that night the moon was full to bursting.

The next evening, before it waned, I concentrated hard and thought about Robert’s brother, and I visualised him standing down in the deep well, and I made the water rise until it choked him and he drifted downwards forever in the charcoal black.



The grey wolf inhabits a very small portion of its former range because of widespread destruction of its territory. Wikipedia

We could no longer live at 12 Amulree Street. The government took the bottom of the street away to make room for the South East Freeway. If you go there now you can only walk as far down as 23 Amulree Street, and then there is an ugly high fence that is supposed to be a sound barrier, and a sad attempt at some landscaping, the whole scene summed up by weeds and low morale. And beyond that a great chasm, with the ghost of our house hanging in mid-air.

The Council pound had to go as well. And my special tree on Wellers Hill. A concrete reservoir squats there now, covered in graffiti and litter.

I suppose I should tell you that my cursing of Robert's brother worked, despite my doubts. That Helen broke up with her teenage husband after a year or so of increasingly bitter fights. That her parents let her move back home with the child. That she studied at night and got a degree, then became an occupational therapist at RBH. That I met her there again when I was a patient in the motorcycle accident ward (which I actually was for a week).

But what really happened was that I saw her and Robert in Woolworths five years after the wedding. They looked happy and had two children. I hesitated, then walked up and said hello.

"You probably don't remember me—we were in the folk club at Ekibin."

She gave a cry of surprise and hugged me. "The wolf boy! How are you? What have you been doing?"

And Robert shook my hand, and she and I promised to catch up some time.

No. I'm sorry. That's not what happened either. I did see them in Woolworths, and they did look happy; but I was at the other end of the biscuit aisle and kept my distance until they walked out of the store. It wasn't really a Dr Zhivago scene either. It just seemed to me, in that moment, as if the present shouldn't be allowed to trespass on the past.

And I don't mind that I was the only one who ever saw those paw prints in the mud as a kid. The wolves were mine and no one else's.



I did Arts/Law and then just Arts at university. One day, as I was driving home from uni, they said on the radio that people were shooting wolves in Poland and America again. Hunters in Idaho claimed their numbers were growing too large and they shouldn't be protected any more.

I got on the South East Freeway and drove to the reservoir. There was no one else there, nothing but a couple of crushed drink cans. I climbed down lower to where the bush was thickest and looked for a good place to sit. The private clicking of insects and warning call of crows were the same as ever. And the pale yellow moths, lifting off from tall grass and settling just as quickly. I was pretty sure I recognised one big ironbark with a crooked branch.

I sat at the foot of the ironbark, then howled once, twice. It had been a long time. I felt self-conscious straight after—a bit foolish to be indulging in this childish behaviour—but also excited. The light was still thick with promise, the sun slow, and some shadows down in the gully began to move towards me. I kept still and did not look them in the eye, for that would be to break the code. The moths were gone, the cicadas too. I leaned my head back, watched the circle of leaves that framed the sky, and felt the lingering warmth of the tree, like a rough tongue against my hand.

