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The Clearing

Sam Mayne

University of Western Australia

This short story utilises the tropes of the cybergothic to explore contemporary and historical crises of embodiment, particularly those that take place within the context of ecological disaster. The narrative takes place in the virtual equivalent of an intentional community, where the disembodied consciousnesses of humans seek refuge from an ecologically devastated Australia. The Clearing is an attempt to confront the vestiges of colonial identities in settler Australians, and to interrogate the material realities and anxieties that are often elided in techno-utopian responses to the climate crisis.

This work was written and conceived on the stolen land of the Wadjuk Noongar people. I pay my respect to their Elders, and extend that respect to all Indigenous Australians. Sovereignty was never ceded.

‘That’s the thing about Keith Richards though, he knew how to play fuckin’ guitar, but people don’t know he played the drums too. He played every fuckin’ instrument in that band... People don’t know. He played in other bands too. Any song from—from the Sixties, if you listen to it and it’s got some fuckin’ mint guitar, it’s probably Keith Richards...’

Nic pressed her shoulder blades into the bus seat, wondering if it was uncomfortable enough, if the air smelled right. They hadn’t needed buses, they hadn’t thought they had needed transport at all. But it had turned out to be a necessity. When people had arrived in The Clearing and found out that they could move from one place to another in no time—literally no time, seeing as they were all technically everywhere, all the time—they had come apart. She’d seen one man clip maybe ten meters—probably without even meaning to—and collapse, clawing his fingers into the ground, which only made things worse because the ground wasn’t quite done yet. Didn’t feel right.

‘I’m not here, I’m not here,’ he had wailed, over and over. They had to hang him up for a bit after that. That sort of panic was catching.

So they had made buses. They had started with private cars, luxurious and driverless, but people seemed to prefer being together. Mutually assuring each other’s existence. And the sort of people who ended up in The Clearing knew what a public bus felt like, so Nic had done her best to make it feel authentic. She wondered if the Cities ended up having to do the same. Maybe they had a way of keeping people more stable.

‘...Don’t give him any fuckin’ credit for it though. You know he got a degree too... In like, brain chemistry or some shit. Used it to make his songs more addictive, so it’s literally like doing drugs...’

She couldn’t take credit for Jax. Jax was an invention of his own making.

‘...And get this, every singer, every band every fuckin’ celebrity after the Nineties? Probably didn’t even fuckin’ exist. The media could just make up whole people, right? Digitally generated voices and faces, fuckin’ holograms. You remember the AI musicians becoming a thing before we went in? Started way fuckin’ earlier, mate, way earlier. Reckon maybe Kurt Cobain was the last real fuckin’ person. Probably why he blew a hole in his

head, hey?’

The bus stopped at Crossways Park and Nic got off. Margie was waiting for her, spread out on a picnic blanket in the sun.

‘Took you long enough.’

Nic pushed a lump in the picnic blanket flat with her foot. ‘Bus ride is longer now. Jax updated the physics engine for road traction.’

Margie reached over and reshaped the lump in the blanket. ‘Leave it like that. Looks better.’

A couple of kids ran past, chasing a magpie. Nic could tell that one of them, a little boy with coppery hair, was pure software, a Gen. She’d seen his template in a catalogue a while ago. The girl probably was too, come to think of it. The Clearing hadn’t ported in anyone new for a long time, and kids were normally keen to instantiate adult avatars as soon as they were allowed to.

‘Jesus, Nic, tell me that isn’t one of yours.’

Margie was pointing a crooked finger at a tree that had appeared in the centre of the park. A Norfolk Pine, the kind that had been strewn along the coast back home, transplanted centuries ago by some nonce who thought they would make good masts. They didn’t, but people got so used to them being there that beaches started to look wrong without them.

‘It isn’t.’

Nic made her way toward the newly-instantiated tree.

It stood in the very centre of the park, too straight and clearly not to scale, dwarfing the nearby Melaleucas and Jacarandas, its coarse green branches angled up at the sky in a shrugging tableau, as if to say: *don't ask me, I don't know how I got here either.*

Margie appeared beside the tree, having clipped from behind her. Margie was one of the only people in The Clearing that didn’t seem to mind clipping. She’d told Nic once that it was because she’d never felt she’d really been inside her body before anyway, never had the chance to get attached.

‘Whose is it then? I thought you did all the flora yourself?’

‘So did I. Adi would tell me if he had approved someone else.’ Nic approached the pine. They weren’t actually pines, Norfolks, they were conifers. She didn’t know why she remembered that. She placed a hand on its trunk. It felt as smooth and frictionless as a steel pole. She removed her hand, disliking the contradiction between the rippled bark that she saw and the cool, slick nothing that she felt. Something rustled in the back of her mind. A murmured rumour that she had heard from another founder, back when the City was still a topic of interesting discussion. She pulled at the bark, at the same time accessing the cloud of code that surrounded her, mentally decoupling the segments that read *barkbarkbark* from *basebasebase*.

She had been right. So had the rumour. Behind the thin layer of bark was no woody hypodermis, no carefully crafted rings to indicate an age, a story of being. Not like hers had. There was only a void, a violent white hollow of uncoded space. A necessary consequence of manufacturing tree after tree after tree to fill an ever-expanding world. The Norfolk hadn’t been crafted by anyone in The Clearing. It was a City tree.

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It had started with just a few of them. Her and Jax and Margie and Aditya. They’d met

through *Effloresce*—one of the smaller virtual worlds that people frequented back when the old world was still habitable enough to keep millions of physical bodies functioning. Porting was only something the elderly or infirm did. Everyone else visited using a Lens, or if you were rich, maybe a haptic chamber. It wasn't the same as being ported. If you stopped and focused a moment, you could still feel the slow flux of air in your lungs. An itch behind your ear. A kneading ache in your spine, tugging at your consciousness to remind you of the hours you had spent sitting in one place. She'd been on a glass-bottom boat once, when she was young. Try as she might to look down through the masses of woodbine algal bloom and bone-white fingers of exanimate reef in search of fish, her gaze would adjust every few moments and refocus on the surface of the glass, arresting her with her own reflection and obscuring the water below. That was what it had been like. Porting was different. Porting was diving off the boat and breathing in the ocean and leaving her befuddled reflection behind.

Nic spent every spare moment she had in *Effloresce*. She had earned her degree in Botanical History, and *Effloresce* was a world dedicated to hosting avatars of long-extinct plants. She had created an incredible garden, experimenting with cultivars of *Banksia Montana*, and propagating thick carpets of Esperance Dogweed. When the administrators of *Effloresce* had decided to introduce extinct animals to the server, they had asked Nic to be a beta host, filling her garden with an azure scattering of fairy wren and a cluster of koalas. The koalas had looked different from the pictures she had seen, with smaller bodies and bigger eyes. The administrators told her they had made some aesthetic adjustments. People preferred them that way, they had said.

Droves of visitors had filled Nic's garden. So much so that the traffic began to cause problems. She would find a patch of Spider Orchid rendering incorrectly, trembling in place as if the arachnoid blooms had been transformed into their namesake. Every now and then a koala would disappear from its perch in the elbow of a Eucalypt and reappear on the ground, its limbs twice as long as normal and twisted grotesquely. They weren't programmed with a pain response, so the malformed thing would just blink at her dumbly until the code self-corrected and respawned it elsewhere.

When Nic reported the issues, the administrators had sent Aditya to work with her. Adi specialised in bandwidth management and knew exactly how much traffic her garden could handle at a given time, accounting for the specific activities the visiting avatars were undertaking, the weather simulation program that the world was running, and the bioprocesses that each of her plants was mimicking continuously. He could also tell her in a matter of seconds what needed to be changed when the capacity of the garden was close to being reached—more often than not his suggestion was to temporarily relocate a number of the less-popular plants, the saplings and the non-flowering shrubs, to *Effloresce's* community storage. Despite his ruthlessness with her plants, Nic liked Adi. She had been disarmed the first time they had met, when he had appeared before her as a disembodied face, floating in place like a ghost from an old photograph.

'Less strain on the server' he had told her. 'You get used to it pretty quickly.'

'I don't know that I will' she had said, unconsciously touching her own face to ensure it was still tethered to her body.

She had gotten used to it, eventually, so much so that when she had met Adi for the first time in person it had almost been strange to see him with a neck, and thin, sloping shoulders, and a tangle of time-hazed tattoos across his entire body.

Margie had come next, also sent by the administrators. A sensory feedback expert tasked with writing scents for the garden. She had, to Nic's relief, arrived with a whole body, a blanket of coiled grey hair that she piled high on her head. Cheerful, creased eyes

that were almost the same colour. It had been rare for older women to show their age in their avatars. Nic had complimented Margie on that once. Margie had laughed at her.

'You think this is what I look like back out there?' she had asked. 'I bloody wish.'

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The trees found their way into all sorts of places. It wasn't long before Nic was receiving a new message every hour because a Norfolk had instantiated in a bedroom, a concert hall, in the centre of a painstakingly-curated aquarium, disrupting the strict itinerary of loops, figure eights and static pinwheel-turns that each digitally-generated Saratoga and Grayling ought to have been following. Removing them was no simple matter, Nic had spent most of the day explaining as much. The trees could be disassembled, sure, but that did nothing to alter the overall space in The Clearing that they took up. Whether they were hovering in meandering bytes through the atmosphere or kept in their existing figuration of leaf-twig-branch-bark, the Norfolks would still be the same unplanned strain on the carefully-managed capacity of their space. Better to keep them intact, for now.

Total deletion was out of the question, they never did that with anything, their world was too tightly entwined. One minor miscalculation might mean that instead of permanently removing a blade of grass, they gutted someone's consciousness. Collapsed their last memory of their wife. Severed them from The Clearing, from everything.

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Jax had come to them last, not an envoy from *Effloresce* but a regular visitor to the garden. Nic had found him inspecting a squat Morrisby's gum, its twisting branches slicing the simulated sky above them into blue and white terrazzo.

'How old is it?' he'd asked her.

'They went extinct on earth around two-hundred years ago.' A soft breeze arrived on schedule, sending a rhythmic undulation through the leaves. The silvery, fluid hiss that Nic associated with the movement came microseconds too early, and ended too soon, so that for a moment the leaves rippled in eerie silence.

'Nah, how old is this one in particular?'

Nic thought for a moment. 'I generated it as a sapling, and I've been growing it for six years.' Jax had stood, and now she got a proper look at him. Short and wide, like the gum. Hair to his collar. A mouth that trembled occasionally, as if to keep something from spilling out. 'So, six, I suppose.'

'Would it be normal, for it to be this size at six? Out there?'

She shrugged. 'Hard to say, but the plants we have more data on seem to grow at the correct rate, so I would think so.'

He had nodded and played his fingers against his thumb thoughtfully. His whole jaw moving rapidly, like he was trying to unstick something from his teeth.

'You gonna get ported one day?'

Nic had been struck silent. While it wasn't necessarily an impolite thing to ask, the question had come apropos of nothing and from a stranger.

'Why do you ask?'

He'd leaned in close and let loose a whispered spill of words. Porting, lodging their consciousness firmly in the digital world and nowhere else, was going to become a requirement for most people, he'd told her. Sooner than you would think. And the ports wouldn't be like *Effloresce*. They would be made for efficiency. As many people as possible on a server. Just pleasant enough for just enough of the population to be better off than staying behind. No good for people like him, he'd said. No good for people like her.

'I've found somewhere else we could go. People like you and me,' he'd said, opening his palm and projecting an ID card: *Jackson Reade: Senior Designer, U-Night*.

'This is the world I work for. They're one of the first that's going to be adapted to host the ports. I locked off some space a few years ago that I don't think the administrators know about. Used it for testing new designs, mostly.'

Nic knew about U-Night. It was one of the bigger social worlds. Not really her speed. She'd been thinking about trying to get the strange man booted from the garden until she'd seen the ID. It looked authentic, and she'd heard speculation before about porting becoming mandatory. Water rations were shrinking again, and the air had gotten so bad that you couldn't stay outside, even with a filter, for more than a few hours.

'Why are you showing this to me?'

'You want to grow your plants, don't you? Bring back the dead stuff? Won't happen in the new worlds. No personalised code. Only templates controlled by the city. Monocultures.'

Nic waited for him to say more, had wondered if she was certain about the ID.

Jax gestured at the tree. 'I want to spend some time here, make some observations. Maybe look at your code for the garden.'

'Why?'

'Time. *Effloresce* has one of the best time engines. They had to so that people like you could grow your plants realistically. On some of the worlds, time passes differently for everyone. You might feel like you've been on one of the adventure park worlds for two hours, while the mate you're visiting with feels like he's been there two days. But ported people need stable time. They go whacky if they don't have it.' He waggled his jaw again. 'Stops 'em from being able to pretend, you know?'

'Pretend what?'

'That they're not dead, mate. Dead and gone and turning to soup in a coffin back home.'

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The Norfolks stopped appearing after a few days.

Nic was relieved, as was Adi. He sat across from her at the table in Margie's kitchen, eyes unfocused, reading through the data attached to the most-recently manifested tree.

'It's lucky they are so well-optimised for space, being hollow and all. The load on The Clearing is going to be negligible. Maybe you should start doing that here, Nic.'

'Not a chance. The whole point of our trees is that they act exactly the same as the real thing. They're trees just as much as we're people.' Nic leaned across the table and grabbed a shortbread biscuit from a chipped blue plate at the centre. It tasted exactly as she remembered them tasting, but then her mind, through some association, drifted to Italian food and the fatty biscuit turned to tomatoes and veal and red wine in her mouth. The combination was not pleasant. Jax slipped into the chair beside her, pulling the plate

toward himself and inspecting the biscuits before leaving them where they sat.

'Maybe more so. You know your plants are perfect replicas because you designed them from the bottom up. We can't say that much for ourselves.'

Nic imagined cool, fresh water and in a moment her mouth was free from the lingering residuum of garlic and parmesan.

'I designed myself too,' she said, running her tongue across her teeth, halfway to ensure that nothing remained of the unexpected sensory data, and halfway to reassure herself that her teeth were, indeed, there, crooked and irrefutable.

Jax leaned back in his chair. 'Sure, but you did that once...' he drew his finger across his throat. 'Do you really reckon you had the presence of mind to give yourself an intestinal tract and lymph nodes and a millionty-fuckin-whatever cells? No chance.'

Nic didn't like to think about her arrival in The Clearing. That sudden painfully-awake and terribly-unmoored feeling, the same as being roused in the night by a strange noise and waking up in a strange bed. She'd arrived as a bodiless configuration of thoughts and impulses and memories, loosely tethered together by some strange momentum that outlasted her physical existence by a few seconds, and had been propelled into The Clearing. She'd had only moments to pull together the body she had now from the blank components that waited around her, ready to be formed into fleshy arms and bony feet and downturned brown eyes, like her mother's.

She thought about the City tree, a fragile façade of knotted wooden skin sheathing a colourless vacuum of data. Bloodless and indistinguishable from the untethered code that floated in the air outside of it. She imagined slicing open her skin and seeing the same.

Adi cleared his throat. An utterly unnecessary sound. He had no vocal chords, no trachea, no syrupy build-up of mucus and dust hindering breaths he was not taking.

'We still need to address the problem of how a vestige from the City showed up here at all. The administrators there should have plenty of space to dismiss unwanted items to, I can't see why—'

'Even if they wanted to chuck all their crap into our space, they shouldn't be able to,' said Jax. 'They don't know we're here.'

Adi paused.

'Perhaps they don't. But if we were wrong about how much the City might grow, they wouldn't need to. If enough of their code is being relocated, some of it is bound to hit us eventually.'

'What does that mean for us?' Nic was still imagining her body unfolded, a broken membrane trickling out the last of its innards. No heart or brain or blood, just countless pieces of unaligned data that happened to be caught in the space that she declared was her.

Jax shrugged, pressing his fingers into the edge of the table as if he wanted to push them all the way through it. He could, Nic thought. There were no electrons here, invisibly repelling *this* from *that*. The only thing that kept him from doing so was the unspoken consensus that he shouldn't. That *this* should stay *this* and *that* should stay *that*.

'Nothing much. The trees aren't coming anymore. I reckon we're right.'

Margie clipped into the room, too quickly, appearing at first as a legless torso in the middle of the table before reforming again as a sudden unfurling of curls and purple blouse and worry-carved face. It took Nic a moment to recognise the thing beside her. At first it seemed to be a distortion of the light, a twisting of the flat planes of the counter and the tessellated pattern of the wallpaper behind it.

The distortion moved and took shape, a button nose and a brown-tufted head balanced on a scrawny body with knurled knees and elbows like wood knots. A little girl,

maybe six or seven. She remained partially translucent, a smudgy silhouette that moved in jerks and sudden pauses, *look up raise arm freeze look down freeze close fist look up*. Nic saw her eyes properly on the third or fourth cycle of the strange routine. They were the same blank-paper white as the inside of the City tree.

'We have a problem.' Margie's voice was wavering. An arrhythmic melody to accompany the movements of the figure before them.

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Jax had not needed long for his study of the garden, but in the time he stayed he had managed to win over Adi and Margie. It helped that his claims about porting were given more weight when it was announced that healthy people could now volunteer to port, and that those who did would have compensation paid to their families. She began seeing advertisements for the new worlds that had been created for the ports, homogenous grids of apartment block public park social centre apartment block artificial beach gymnasium apartment block duplicated ad infinitum across a sprawling cityscape. *A new world awaits* a smooth voice with an unidentifiable accent would whisper at her from the screen, *port to Morai/Promised Acres/First Passage today*. Whenever the ads played in the garden, Jax would snort derisively and begin another coiling oration about how The Clearing would be different. These would always evolve into long conversations about how they would design their little world, Nic's dreams of ungoverned rambles of ancient natives, coursing between houses and wilding the edges of streets and pathways. How Adi would pluck his mother and uncles from the half-sunk vestige of Jakarta and build them a farm filled with wild kangaroos and mop-headed chickens that would eat the scraps from their vegetable garden. They had drawn the map, filled it with colour and expectation. The Clearing was theirs to make of it what they would, a blank slate that they could mould into a world which would fit perfectly into their angles and gaps, fill their wounds and wash the dust of home away.

And dust was a permanent feature of home. Dust and smog and smoke from the fires that were always burning somewhere. The day they decided to port to The Clearing, Nic walked to pick Adi up from the airport and there had been fires in three different directions. They had carried the cremated remains of bush and forest on the wind until she breathed them in. A necrotic amalgam of south and east and west, a graveyard in her lungs. She'd spat it out and watched it sink into the cracked earth. Before she was born, fires used to turn the sky orange, the smoke particles rescattering the sunlight into red wavelengths. Now, they had filled the air with sulphur, great pumps spewed it into the atmosphere to try and reflect some of the ever-growing heat. It had caused a great desaturation, an unblueing of the sky, and now it was all white. She could hardly see the smoke most days. Had almost stopped smelling it. She was as much smoke as she was blood and sinew and water glittering with microplastics.

She'd been exhausted by the time she had returned home, Adi trailing behind her. Everyone was exhausted, all the time. Wasting muscles and silt-clogged pleura were a natural product of living in a near-dead world. They had all begun to decay along with it. She wouldn't miss her body, she'd thought. When Jax told her it was time, she was ready, ready to be poured into The Clearing, awash on a new shore.

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They came in crops of two and three, quivering knots like seed pods near bursting. Moments after Margie bought the girl into the kitchen more had appeared. They filled the street outside, burst from bedroom wardrobes, had arisen from the lake in the park, water draining silently from their twitching mouths. The Clearing had turned to chaos, residents running from their homes, clipping involuntarily away from the apparitions and screaming in redoubled terror. Nic and Jax had to hang everyone up, freeze their avatars and force them all into a state of temporary unconsciousness to stem the tide of panic.

'Someone's fucked us Nic, someone's made some deal with the City, we've got rot, we've got a mole, got fuckin' termites. Invasive species termites... Had 'em in my house when I was a kid, Nic. Mum had to call up a guy to come with a flamethrower. Burn the whole thing down, Nic. Detritovores they're called. They're why we had all the fires back home Nic, I reckon, Earth trying to burn out all the termites.'

Jax was flitting between the groups of strange figures, dismissing them to Margie's backyard where Adi was analysing them. Nic was staring down at the ground, a track of red dirt weaving through a block of scrub that some of the deleted figures had wandered into. There were no footprints in the dirt. There never were. Why didn't they make it so that they had footprints?

'I know this one. Nic! I know this one!'

Jax was leaning over the spectre of a woman, she was coiling and unfurling in the dirt like a dying worm. Nic tried to step toward her but was hit with a pulse of vertigo. The dirt wasn't underneath her, not really. She might be sideways or upside down or nowhere at all.

'...Used to work design with me. These are real people Nic, real people. City must be clearing 'em out.'

The woman had started to scoop the dirt into her hands. They were too big and so thin, and the red earth trickled past her distorted fingers like water. Jax dismissed her but the dirt remained, hovering in space like a bloodied gash in the sky.

It was raining. That wasn't possible. They didn't have rain scheduled for weeks. Nic looked up at the sky and saw a swimming pool hovering above her, fat chlorine-scented drops occasionally breaking free of whatever internal logic kept them constrained to the propane flame blue of the surface to fall downwards, upwards at her. She caught her reflection in it and stared, until something in the pool's surface shifted and her outline in the water was dispersed into a shimmering array of rippling light.

Then she was gone, out of the world a moment and then standing again in Margie's kitchen. She must have clipped without realising. She didn't know what time had passed. It had curdled and separated and had never really been there to begin with.

Adi's face floated in front of her. Just his face. The same way he used to be.

'Something is wrong, Nic.' His eyes were flitting back and forth. Still reading, still solving and looking for space and solutions as he spoke. 'The City is throwing everything to the edges. They have to be past capacity. They must be looking for a way to delete things for good.'

'They will,' said Margie. She was sitting cross-legged on the ground. There were flowers in her hair. Thousands of them. They were coiling down her arms and spreading out in a thick carpet across the floor. 'As soon as we're out of space here. Everything is compressing so that we can keep going. No more space between things, Nic.' Her voice was fading away, turning into the velveteen exhalation of flowers being pressed.

'Bullshit about Keith Richards. Didn't know the first thing about playing guitar.'

You know he only had four fingers? Fuckin' God's word, only reason people don't know about it is they edited all the videos of him playing. Had a stand in play for him and then they would sew the shots together. Fuckin' joker, fuckin con artist, took everyone for a ride.'

Jax was sitting on a chair, his feet pulled up as though the floor had flooded, and he was trying to stay dry. His fingers were pressing against the table again, pressed and pushing urgently against the polished wood. Every now and then he shook his head, as if trying to clear something from between his ears.

'I don't know what they did to my body Nic. I dunno if they found us and threw me in a pit or if I'm lying in cold storage somewhere. I dunno.' He glanced down at his fingers. They were sliding through the wood, or the wood was sliding into them. Nic didn't know if there was a difference. 'I don't feel cold. I don't'

Nic looked out the window. There was a copse of trees and an arts centre and a set of seats from one of the buses outside, she couldn't tell what was where, couldn't tell the edge of one thing from another. She stepped through the door, didn't bother to open it. Didn't really need to.

She sat with the trees as they knitted closer together, practically one now. Back home they were one anyway. Tangled together in the understory, woody synapses singing and whispering to each other. She should have given them that here.

Jax was wrong. Their bodies hadn't been buried or frozen. Nic knew that almost everyone who left with nobody to take care of their body was cremated. They had been burned like everyone else. Like everything. The charred carbon she left behind would have been too alkaline, too salty. Would have killed any plants in the soil around her. Poisoned them from the root up. She hoped nobody had found them, hoped she was a carcass. At least then she would be eaten by the wild dogs and the maggots and the necrophages that had waited patiently beneath her skin to devour her from the inside.

Her legs had become caught in the twisting roots of the trees. Something was coming. She could feel it behind her. The pause before a strong breeze, the paper-thin moment of resistance when she stepped into a pond, where the fine skin of water bowed and undulated beneath her but did not break. She tried to look over her shoulder, but her shoulder was gone, had been contoured into the trunk. Still, she felt it. She told herself she did. She tried to find her mouth, tried to find something to say before it came. She didn't. She knew she had been burned. Had been incinerated and spewed into the atmosphere.

The sky was white, and nobody would see the smoke.