

Oberon

Sophie Overett

The *Eucalyptus regnans* is a tree of many names.

It is Swamp Gum.

It is Stringy Bark.

It is Mountain Ash.

In Tasmania, it stands as the tallest flowering tree in the world at 330 feet, but I am not standing before her. I am standing with her sisters in Wilsons Promontory, four hours south of Melbourne, staring up through the fanning leaves of forest floor ferns, the rough shelled bodies of palms, the twisted, naked arms of gum trees. I stand and I stare up, up, up, to where the Mountain Ash trees unfold like an endless book, sap running like red ink down their chests, foliage so high above us that the leaves look like distant birds, stuck in place against the grey winter sky.

These are my mother's favourite trees and as we hike, she tells me and my brother that they lock carbon up in their leaves, their branches, at three, four times the rate of other trees. They live for at least 300 years. They could save us from climate change.

In the moment, I believe it, inhaling deep as we scale the mountain, climbing closer, closer, to the top of these trees. Frogs start to purr around us as the air grows thinner, damper with the promise of rain. The path becomes bumpy not with rocks, but with the grip of roots as thick as your thigh. I spring over most, but trip over one, the ground cutting my knees, hands, and we stop for a moment. Mum's brought tea in a flask, and we drink it and listen to the brook babbling not far from us. She tells me more about the Mountain Ash.

We don't know how big they can grow; the biggest, the oldest, were cut down during colonisation before they were measured. They were so big their stumps could not be moved, so they sit still, rotting on forest floors. The carcass of a giant. The last ankle bone of a god.

A Bassian Thrush finds us when we walk again, flitting from higher branches down to lower ones, following us curiously for a while. Mum keeps missing it – it's the same colour as the tree bark – but the flicker of motion, the cut of its wings, keeps catching my eye. Later though, she's the first to see the Honeyeater, then the Crimson Rosella, their bright sparking chests like flowers amidst the green-brown-green of the forest floor.

They're like will o' the wisps, I tell her. Leading us up the mountain, steering us clear of the swamps. She laughs, but she is still looking at the trees. She's stopping more now, and I think she's tired, tell her we can go back, but she is not tired. She's awe struck. Breathless with wonder. Her hand finds the bark of one, narrowly avoiding the sap, and she cranes her head back, back, back, until the sharp point of her nose is almost tipping behind us, and I follow her gaze and find myself breathless too.

There is nothing special about this tree, but there is. Something to the moment that makes the length of it staggering – the way it surges through the foliage of every other tree that tries to lean against it, a long-distance runner in peeling bark. It's not flowering yet, although I know when it does, it will be in tiny balls of red, the same colour as the Rosella we saw on our way. Instead, right now, it is brown, green, brown. Moss clings to its base and its branches stretch out like arms opening in triumph, over and over again. Or not triumph, like Atlas's arms, left to hold the sky up, to keep it from falling in on the plants beneath.

On us beneath.

To keep us safe.

My mother is talking again.

I take another breath.

Sophie Overett is an award-winning author based in Melbourne, Australia. Her short stories have been published all over the world, and her debut novel, *The Rabbits*, was released by Penguin Random House in July 2021.