

nurse log

[written for a solstice celebration on Bowen Island December 2014]

I was just getting to sleep when they came and sat on me. Sleep is important to us logs. Most trees hibernate, and so do logs. Especially pregnant logs like me, nurse logs, drawing on our habits from when we were trees to have a long deep sleep through the cold, dreaming out information we can give to the baby trees that will sprout from us in the spring. Mostly trees of different species – see how generous we are – wet-nurse logs, other folks' babies in the rain. So I was pretty annoyed when I was just getting into a really rich dream as these two hefty humans came and dumped their hefty posteriors on my bark.

They had come to get a christmas tree and a yule log (whatever that is, they thought). And holly, and they were under the impression that mistletoe is the leaf of a kind of tree that grows in crippen park. They thought it was like a holly bush but with white christmas lights, and they gathered some poison ivy because the berries looked right. So they had been tramping around looking for a mistletree and wondering why all the logs they saw were too decaying to burn or too big to haul out of the forest. They were exhausted, so they sat down on the first soft-but-solid log they found – me – pulled out a hip flask and began chatting about warm winter evenings around a fire. A fire made from the likes of me,

roasting some of my friends and occupants.

Occupants. You see, when I sleep I help others through the winter. or through to somewhere else. We often have mice, squirrels, rats, racoons, and sometimes larger beasts resting inside us, and we do our best to get them through. Through to spring, or to ... I've had lost old dogs wander into my hollow core, looking for where they have to go, and I've done what they needed to keep them warm and dark while they found the way. I have to reassure my residents that I'll see them through to spring, and if not there to somewhere else they've tried to get to.

The guys had got to me starting from Magee road, and one said that this had made him think of *the cremation of sam mcgee*, so they started trying to remember parts of it. . *on the marge of lake labargesince I left plumtree back in tennessee it's the first time i've been warm*. And that made them shiver and imagine fires. So they sat together on me, with snow falling gently down, describing to one another a winter evening before an enormous fire, all the while rubbing their hands together and stamping their boots.

We don't *like* warm evenings in front of the fire. We trees and ex-trees don't like fires in general – we capture all the loose carbon we can lay our leaves on – but winter fires have a particular problem. That's when we do our dreaming, and help the dreams of those we are sheltering. If it's too warm they

don't have the deep long-term dreams that they need, and we don't get to hear the mystic counterpoint of many creatures dreaming at once, bouncing and framing images and feelings off one another. (Each one thinks it's just her dream, of course, but we know better.) Mid-winter carols, if you want, but more voices and better harmony, no lazy sopranos thinking the tune is for them alone.

The very worst is when someone's inside it when it goes on the fire. I don't care for big spiders either, but they know what to do when this happens. If there were no cold and no one sleeping in us logs then there would be no passing of dream tunes from one creature to another, and no one would know what to do when the days got longer. Biodiversity run wild, eco-capitalism.

Back to these two guys rubbing their hands and stamping their feet. They kept taking swigs from the flask, and laughing, and wondering how they'd get out of the woods in the dark, as if that were a joke. They would lean against one another and then recoil and sit straight, and a couple of times one fell off and the other had to haul him up onto my back. They got quieter and quieter and then one began to snore; soon they both were wheezing and snorkeling till they went horizontal and lay along me, asleep. It's an effect I have, though most of my customers are not so noisy.

So here we all are in the long dark tunnel waiting till it gets

lighter and warmer. I'm thinking of the little trees I'm going to sprout when the time is ripe, and picking up lore from the mice and squirrels while sending little bits of wisdom to them so they can pass it on to other logs who will tell it to other mice and squirrels. I begin to hear something, a sort of a clumsy dream tune. It's the two guys – pretty crude and not much of a melody, but I hadn't realised that humans can do it at all. Perhaps the cold helps, perhaps the hip flask helps. They're dreaming of warmth, of course, and shivering all the while. But people aren't much good at hibernation, or dreaming for that matter, and it soon becomes clear to me that if I leave them alone they won't get up again, ever. I do what I do in the spring to my normal occupants. I push dreams of waking and moving at them. In one of them the tune went: cold, snug, waiting for ferry, here it is, gotta move. And in the other it went: dark, light, at end of tunnel, get there, must go. Pretty basic, but ok for a human. Why do they always dream of warmth when it will only wake them up? They stirred, groaning, and staggered themselves vertical, hanging on to saplings and bending them so far that the saplings sprang back flipping them into the snow. Off they lurched, along a long moonlit tunnel between the trees, singing *the cremation of sam mcgee* to the tune of *o little town of bethlehem*, headed for somewhere, though they couldn't remember what it was.