Veins of the Forest

It reminded me of the birthday ballot listed in the *NZ Herald* in 1968. My birthday wasn't listed but my best friend Laurie's was. When I phoned him, he greeted me with a cynically jubilant "I won! I won!". That meant he, alongside many others, was expected to report to the military authorities for conscription. Then, more than likely, off to Vietnam. I had resigned myself to being called up, but glad I wasn't. Frightened and pissed off as hell for Laurie. He was rather a smallish chap that would have been hospitalised after his first scrum if forced to play our national game of rugby, but on the reverse side, he had, and still has, a brain the size of a planet, and by no way should his intellect have been put in front of a people-shredding device. Fortunately, though maybe not, he failed his medical owing to incipient varicose veins. And what I see almost every morning made me think of that.

I take my dog Coco for a run/walk twice a day to make sure she poops in the forest walk and not in my backyard, and for a mutual effort at exercise. I need a lot more than just gardening at home. Because of the yearly cycle of torrential rain and flooding we experience in the far north of Queensland every year, affectionately called the "Big Wet", it causes considerable erosion of the stream and riverbanks, exposing tree roots and frequently sufficient to take away those same appendages that keep them upright. In between seasons many are laid bare, giving strong hints as to which trees are next to topple over. With increasing change to our climate through increasing heat and turbulent weather, the forest and stream sides appear to be becoming more varicose than the worst I have ever seen on humans.

The birthday ballot of 1968 wasn't just a bureaucratic list; it was a roll of the dice with human futures. In New Zealand, the system of compulsory military training was inherited from earlier conflicts, justified by Cold War fears and the domino theory of communism. Australia had a similar system, feeding young men into the grinding gears of Vietnam. For those born on the "wrong" date, there was no appeal to fate, only the expectation that you would report, comply, and serve. Laurie's veins spared him. Not his wit, not his protest, but a quirk of his body. That's what struck me most at the time: the absurdity of it. Here was a mind sharp enough to solve problems

beyond most of our reach, and yet the state measured him by the flow of blood in his calves. It was bureaucracy reduced to biology, as though the vascular system determined one's civic worth. When I think of Laurie in this context, I think of the randomness of conscription, the way human lives were treated as expendable units in a geopolitical chess match. Vietnam was a war where jungle roots and human veins both bled out under pressure. The varicose vein is, in medical terms, a sign of failure in the valves of the venous system. Blood, which should return upward toward the heart, instead pools downward, distending the vessel, twisting it into those bulging, unsightly cords. They are not always fatal, but they are always symptomatic. Something is not working as it should. There's a cruel poetry in the idea that Laurie's disqualification from war came because his body already carried a warning sign of systemic stress. He was spared death because his veins were already marked by weakness. That paradox lingers with me, decades later, when I see the roots of trees exposed in my forest walks.

Roots are the veins of the forest. They channel water, minerals, and stability. They are buried and hidden, like our circulatory systems, taken for granted until they fail. When floods strip the soil, when rains gouge the banks, those roots bulge and twist in the air. Like human varicosities, they are grotesque signs of stress, veins where they should not be seen. Walking Coco through the dripping tracks, I see the forest as a body. The canopy is the head, the trunks the torso, and the roots the veins and arteries. Streams are its bloodstream, carrying nutrients and silt, redistributing energy across the ecosystem. When erosion lays bare the roots, it is as though the forest has rolled up its sleeve, revealing damage normally concealed. Sometimes the roots hang like tendons from the banks, frayed and skeletal. Other times they twist across the soil like veins across an elderly hand. I cannot help but read them diagnostically. Just as a doctor runs a finger along a patient's varicosities, predicting circulation trouble, I walk past the roots predicting which tree will topple in the next storm. The prognosis is rarely good. A tree with half its veins exposed has no long future. Like a patient with severe varicosities, the options are limited: endure, collapse, or adapt in ways we cannot fully see.

The "Big Wet" has always reshaped our forests, but climate change has turned the seasonal rhythm into a circulatory disorder. Heavier rainfall intensifies floods; longer

droughts parch roots before the deluge comes. The vascular system of the forest no longer cycles smoothly; it spasms. Scientists describe this in terms of resilience and tipping points. To me, it feels closer to human frailty. Just as the circulatory system can handle strain for decades before suddenly failing, aneurysm, heart attack, stroke, the forest's resilience has limits. And we are already testing them. When the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns of "cascading risks" in ecosystems, I think of cascading collapse in human physiology. Veins give way, blood clots, circulation halts. So too with roots, rivers, and forests: erosion here, treefall there, landslide further down. A breakdown of circulation at one point leads to system-wide collapse.

Yet I must admit, as much as I diagnose, I also admire. The exposed veins of the forest are strangely beautiful. They create sculpture along the banks, twisting arabesques of strength and fragility. Sunlight catches the wet roots, and for a moment they resemble polished driftwood, artworks of their own. There is beauty in varicosity too, though we seldom admit it. The human body marked by veins and wrinkles tells a story of age, of endurance, of history written in flesh. Likewise, the forest marked by exposed roots is a record of time, of floods survived, of seasons endured. The veins are not only warnings; they are testimonies. This reflection brings me back to Laurie. His veins spared him from Vietnam, but they also marked him for life as a person whose body tells a story. Perhaps the forest, too, tells us its story through its veins, warning us not to conscript it into wars it cannot survive.

Why tie together a friend's varicose veins, a conscription lottery, and the roots of a Queensland forest? Because they all speak to vulnerability under pressure. Laurie was vulnerable to a system that valued compliance over intellect. His veins betrayed him to the medical examiner but saved him from war. The forest is vulnerable to climate systems that erode its banks and expose its roots. Its veins betray its fragility but testify to its endurance. We are all living on varicose time, our bodies, our forests, our climate. The veins are there, bulging, twisted, impossible to ignore. The choice is whether to treat them as mere unsightliness, to be hidden until collapse, or as urgent warnings calling for care. Laurie was spared because someone paid attention to the warning. Perhaps the forest can be spared, too, if we pay attention in time.