

## The Old Heads of Elder Grove Learn About Air Pollution

Zakiya Mckenzie

A cobalt sky blanketed the morning and pockets of hazy sunshine beamed through morphing openings in the canopy high. Common blue butterflies flitted through moist air, floating for a split second, wings stretched, then in and out of a buddleia bush. Beneath, on the woodland floor, studious bugs and sapphire bachelor's buttons lived together in a teeming buzz of little breaths inhaled by each organism and exhaled again, back to the earth. It was a ritual of survival that had taken place for so long that the Old Heads in Elder Grove took it for granted.

These old trees had bantered for centuries, each one rooted in a place of wisdom, trying to outdo the claims to true splendour and insight of the others. They had been there so long, these old trees, that they may have even known your ancestors. Nestled in a pristine wooded hideaway, the Old Heads had only ever known perfect air. Or maybe it was that they had just ignored the growing concerns of the less imposing, younger trees who were coughing and spurting strange apparitions lately. Being that mighty and majestic meant no other species ever challenged their views, thus, the Old Heads were left to converse among themselves as the creatures with legs and wings scampered about and roots and bark.

The only ones the Old Heads didn't understand, and sometimes feared, were the humans. They came to see them less and less nowadays.

"The bats came home this morning, with an odd warning," Welly, the giant sequoia who only spoke in rhyme and melody crooned, "they said the humans are complaining, and our air? They are cursing. I don't understand, how can this can be, we make the best air here, we are such beautiful, dutiful trees."

She sighed and the wheezy hum whooshed wind through her branches.

"Preposterous! It is necessity, how can they complain about something they need and are given for free?" said Tembi, a grand old juniper who showed light and shadow patterns on the ground with her needle-leaves.

"They could never be so dense and ungrateful," added bold-faced Woodson, "all the years I, on my own, have stretched to the sun and brought better (and beauty) to this world and yet they still complain. Oh, to be a flailing tree uprooted in a storm, to crash down on the fleshy brutes."

"Maybe it's their ears", said Tembi contemplating, "those bats are pretty deaf, right? Yes, absolutely."

"No, they are blind and hear acutely, but maybe *you* heard hair", Welly said astutely, "and with fronds on your head that don't help feed you like our leaves, I understand and I too would be aggrieved."

"I bet you they said heir," Woodson wind-chimed in, "for offspring and small shoots come with growing pains..."

The elders of the grove spoke about it all day awaiting the awakening of the bats, for they were self-centered and thought the humans were cursing them. Their egos were bruised because who could abuse, who can curse evergreen magnificence, who among you can curse the ever-wise? Blasphemy, they thought, they were sure that the sing-song sequoia had sung in the space to be silent.

The elders never once thought that the humans had done it to themselves. The Old Heads could never imagine that the humans were polluting their own air.

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