



The Forest After the Fire

On Responsibility in a World That Keeps Becoming

Wanhong Huang

*No god descended from beyond the forest to save it.
Yet a holiness appeared within the forest's own relations,
and through those relations the forest was born again.*



The Morning After the Fire

The forest is silent after the fire.

Trunks stand black and limbless. The soil is grey with ash and warm in places. Sound carries strangely, because the things that used to absorb it are gone. Anyone who has walked into such a place knows that the first feeling is not sorrow. It is a kind of arithmetic. The mind begins, almost immediately, to look for someone.

Who lit it. Whose line sparked in the wind. Which agency spent a century putting out every small fire until the hillside held a hundred years of fuel. Which permit was signed, which warning was filed and shelved, which budget was cut. These questions are not petty. They are the machinery of a civilisation that has learned, painfully and over a long time, to refuse the excuse that disasters simply happen. Somebody acted. Something followed. Somebody answers. That sequence is one of the great human achievements, and everything decent about law rests on it.

Then come the years.

Fireweed first, in sheets of magenta where nothing should grow. Aspen suckers from roots that never burned. A jay carries an acorn across a ridge and forgets it. Fungal threads reach out from the edges of unburned ground into the dead soil and begin, again, the slow commerce of minerals for sugar. Rain arrives without instruction. Beetles arrive. Woodpeckers arrive after the beetles. Somewhere under the ash a seed that required the heat of a fire to open its cone has already opened.

And a second question appears, which has a strange property.

Who restored the forest?

There is no defendant. There is no hero, no engineer, no committee, no authority that issued the order to return. The question has the grammatical shape of the first one and none of its content. We ask it and the sentence simply falls open at the end.

We have inherited a precise grammar for asking who broke the world. We have almost no grammar for asking who keeps it able to return.

That asymmetry is the subject of this essay.

The Place Prepared for a God

Before the forest can say anything to us, it is worth asking why the first question comes so easily and the second one comes so hard. The answer, I think, lies deeper than law. It lies in a very old need.

Human beings have always searched for something beyond themselves.

Not only for protection, and not only for explanation. For something more specific and stranger: for a place to stand outside oneself from which one's own existence can be witnessed. A person does not only ask what to do. A person asks before whom they are answerable, and what guarantees that their own judgment is more than their own wanting.

Left entirely alone with itself, the subject discovers that it cannot certify itself. Meaning that I alone confer on my life has exactly the authority I happen to give it this morning. So we look for

an other that exceeds us, and upon which our subjecthood can be witnessed. When one such other withdraws, the need does not withdraw with it. The place stays open, and something comes to occupy it.

The First Tenant: Heaven

In the older worlds, this other appeared as God, as Heaven, as Way, as cosmic order.

Human beings were not the ultimate authors of value. They lived before something greater than themselves, and responsibility took a vertical form: one answered upward. Good and evil were received, not invented. This was constraining, and it was also a relief. A person who has been given the measure does not have to be the measure.

The Second Tenant: Reason

Modernity did not abolish transcendence. It relocated it.

As theological authority receded, another occupant arrived to take the vacant place: reason itself, and its children, science and universal law. Human beings stopped looking upward and began looking inward, toward a rational capacity held to be common to all.

The relocation can be dated, and it is worth being specific, because the abstraction hides how literal the substitution was.

In a footnote to the first preface of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant calls his the age of criticism, to which everything must submit, and adds that religion through its holiness and legislation through its majesty commonly seek exemption and thereby arouse a just suspicion. The word he uses for the place where they must appear is tribunal. Reason does not merely think. It sits, and the world files past it to be judged. The bench is exactly where it always was. The occupant is new.

Two generations after Kant, Auguste Comte designed a Religion of Humanity, with a calendar, sacraments and a priesthood of scientists. Thomas Henry Huxley called it Catholicism minus Christianity. The design is usually filed as an eccentricity. It reads better as evidence: the man who coined the word sociology, having removed theology from the account of history, immediately built the furniture back.

The Quieter Tenants

Reason narrowed as it aged. The question drifted from what is true toward what is efficient. Understanding became prediction, prediction became control, and control became optimisation. Newer occupants took the place in turn, quieter than gods and harder to address: the market, the index, the ranking, the credit score, the model whose weights no one can read. They issue judgments and they do not explain. They cannot be argued with. That is not a departure from the old position. That is the signature of it.

Two of them are worth naming precisely, and both come from the world I work in. The journal impact factor was built in the early nineteen sixties as an in-house device for deciding which journals a citation index ought to cover. Its inventor warned in print, decades ago, that using a journal's average citation rate as a stand-in for the impact of a particular paper is expedient and dangerous. The warning was published, and it is well known, and careers are counted in the number anyway. An instrument made for a shelving decision became, within a generation, a measure of a life's work.

The second is a family of cases rather than a single one. An institution is ranked by a weighting it did not choose, cannot inspect in full and may not appeal, and it begins to rearrange itself around that weighting. Departments close. Hiring shifts. When the ranker revises the formula, the institution revises itself again. No order was ever issued and no reason was ever given. Something judges, and cannot be argued with, and that is the old position occupied once more, by a tenant with no face and no obligation to explain itself.

None of this is a story of decline, and it would be cheap to tell it as one. The place exists because we are finite. No one can verify everything alone; no community can act only on what it has fully established; and a shared authority is how limited beings coordinate at all. Peer review, courts, air traffic control, clinical guidelines: none of them claims to possess the truth. Each claims something more modest and more useful, that on present information this is the best common ground for acting together. That is practical wisdom, and it is how history continues.

So the question worth asking is not whether the place can be emptied. It is what kind of thing occupies it, and whether the constraint it carries stays open to revision by those who live under it.

With that question in hand, we can go back among the trees.

The Forest Has No King

The forest has no king.

No central intelligence assigns roles. No chief engineer holds the design. A tree does not know the forest. A fungus does not know the network it maintains. A bird does not know the future of the seed caught in its feathers. There is no office in which the whole is represented.

And yet the whole exists, and it does something that none of its members can do.

Walk in and try to point at what makes it a forest. You can point at a trunk, at a root, at a fungal thread the width of a hair, at rain. You cannot point at the relation. It has no location and no surface. And nothing you can point at would exist as what it is without it. The tree is not first a tree and later a participant. Soil, water, fungi, weather, neighbours: these are the conditions through which it becomes a tree at all.

This is the intuition I have been circling for years under the name *generative relational being*. Being is not first given and then placed in relation. Very often, being emerges through relation.

There is a human case just as ordinary and just as strange. Nobody teaches a child a language. Parents teach words, a few hundred of them, and correct almost nothing else. Grandparents repeat things. Other children supply the rest in the course of playing. Out of thousands of small responses, no one of which contains the grammar, a speaker appears who can say sentences that have never been said. Nobody holds the design here either. What the child receives is something other than instruction. It is a world that answers.

One caution belongs here, before the image gets away from us. A forest is not a harmony. Trees shade each other out and mean it. Roots poison competitors. Fungi trade on terms that favour themselves. Parasites do well. What holds among all this is weaker and stranger than cooperation, and more interesting: relations that continue to make further relations possible. Not peace. Not balance. Continued possibility.

That is a thin thing to build an ethics on. I would rather have a thin true thing than a thick false one.

A Single Spark, a Thousand Trees

Return to the beginning of the fire.

A spark is almost nothing. It has no power and no intention, and it does not know what it is about to change. Yet under certain conditions this nearly nothing becomes a force that rewrites a landscape.

The power was never in the spark. Dry leaves offer fuel. Wind offers movement. A slope offers direction. A century of suppressed small fires offers a continuous ladder from the ground to the crown.

That century has a policy behind it, and the policy has a number. After the Big Burn of 1910 took some three million acres in two days, the young United States Forest Service settled into a doctrine of total suppression, and by 1935 it carried a clock: every reported fire to be controlled by ten o'clock the following morning. It worked, which was the difficulty. Each small fire prevented is fuel kept, and the kept fuel accumulated across decades into exactly that ladder. The fire that finally came was not the fire the policy had spent a century fighting. The fire emerges from the encounter between a small disturbance and a field prepared to carry it. Drop the same spark on wet ground in a forest that burns lightly every fifteen years and nothing at all happens.

The Small Does Not Stay Small

The mind holds a quiet assumption about causes: that large effects require large causes, that a small act has small consequences, and therefore that responsibility should scale with size.

Living systems often decline to behave this way. Near a threshold, feedback takes over from proportion. A small difference is amplified, crosses a critical point, and the whole settles into another state. One match matters immensely on one hillside and not at all on another, and the difference lies in the hillside.

A single sentence becomes a conflict. A single exclusion becomes a culture. One unrepaired institutional gap becomes a systemic collapse. A small withdrawal of trust ends a marriage that survived worse.

The Debt of the Spark, the Debt of the Forest

This opens a difficulty rather than resolving one.

The first question stays necessary. Who acted. Whoever drops the spark cannot be excused by the dryness of the leaves; a world where amplification cancels authorship is a world where nobody ever did anything. The condition of the field is not a defence.

But a second question becomes unavoidable, and it has no defendant either:

What conditions allowed the spark to become a fire?

There is responsibility for the event, which asks who acted. And there is responsibility for the field, which asks who shaped the conditions under which acts acquire their force. An or-



ganisation, a legal order, a professional culture, a family: each is a field of amplification. Each decides, long before any particular act, which differences vanish and which differences become world-changing.

Seeds Are Small Too

Then the symmetry, which is the part I find most difficult to write honestly.

The same relational world that amplifies destruction amplifies renewal. A spark becomes a fire. A seed becomes a forest. One root bridges two severed communities of fungi. One act of attention restores a person's sense of being addressable at all.

The sentimental version of this is false, and worth naming so that it can be refused. Amplification is indifferent to what it amplifies. It carries cruelty with exactly the fidelity it carries care, and a field can be arranged so that kindness disappears without trace while a rumour crosses the whole organisation by lunchtime. The indifference is the honest part. It is also why the condition of the field is a moral question and not only a technical one.

And one more complication, which the forest supplies and which spoils any clean opposition. In some forests, fire belongs to the grammar. Lodgepole pine seals a portion of its cones with resin that yields at around fifty degrees, so a stand is reseeded by the same event that removes it. Certain seeds wait for smoke. Destruction and generation are not always opposites in the forest's own terms.

This must not be turned into a licence. A low fire every fifteen years and a crown fire after a century of suppression are different events, and the difference is not moral subtlety. It is scale, frequency, and the state of the field. Anyone who moves from the first observation to the conclusion that destruction is secretly creative has stopped looking at forests and started using them.

The God Who Did Not Descend

After the fire we expect a familiar story.

A disaster occurs. The world falls silent. Something greater than the world must arrive to restore what was lost. This may be humanity's oldest hope: that beyond our limited existence there is a power able to give back what we cannot recover ourselves.

The forest tells a different story.

No god descended from the sky.

No external hand reached into the ashes.

No supreme subject commanded the return of life.

And yet the forest was not abandoned.

Something continued. Beneath the burned surface, invisible relations remained. Seeds waited in the soil. Fungi went on with their silent exchanges at the unburned edges. Roots held fragments of connection. Rain carried possibilities that had not yet appeared. A bird crossed a ridge with something stuck to it.

The forest did not return because something outside the forest repaired it. The forest returned because the relations within it still held the capacity to generate.

Perhaps this is another way of meeting the sacred.

The sacred may not always take the form of a being above the world, governing it from outside. Perhaps it can also appear within the relations through which a world continues to create itself. It appeared between root and soil, between seed and rain, between decay and renewal, among countless beings responding to one another with no comprehension of the whole.

The forest was not rescued by a savior.

It was regenerated by relations.

From Above to Between

Humanity's long search for something beyond itself expressed a genuine recognition, and I do not want to talk anyone out of it. Individual beings are never sufficient sources of meaning. That is simply true.

What the forest disturbs is a narrower assumption: that whatever exceeds an individual must be a larger individual.

A tree exceeds itself through the forest. A person exceeds themselves through the relations that made them a person. A generation exceeds itself through futures it will not see. The more-than is not always above us.

Sometimes it is between us.

Three questions can be laid beside one another here, and each has carried its own form of the more-than-us. Who created the world. How does the world work. How does the world continue becoming. The first was answered by a creator standing outside. The second by law standing above. The third has no occupant yet, and this essay is a suggestion about where to look: at the conditions, held among beings, under which becoming continues at all.

A Name to Be Given Up

I have been using the phrase *relational divinity*, and I want to be careful about it, because it is the most dangerous phrase in this essay.

It is a word for pointing, and it must be surrendered once it has pointed. Go looking for the relation and you find soil, thread, seed, rain, a bird, and no relation. You cannot be shown one. A relation is not a thing, not a node, not a link, not a network. It is the constraint within which becoming unfolds, and it has no address.

So relational divinity is not a new tenant for the empty throne. If the phrase hardens into a name for something, then the essay has committed precisely the error it came to describe: it will have found the vacant place unbearable and moved a successor in. The word is a ladder. Once you are up, push it away.

One further refusal belongs here, and it is not decorative. I am not claiming that transcendence-between is superior to transcendence-above because it generates more. That sentence would make generativity into a currency, and once generativity is a currency there is an exchange rate, and once there is an exchange rate someone will be spent. There is no such rate in this essay. What is being offered is a description of where the more-than-us may be found, and descriptions do not come with entitlements attached.

The Forest Promises Nothing

Here the essay has to turn on itself, because the image has begun to serve me too well.

The forest says nothing. It offers no lesson, holds no position, and has no view about responsibility. Every meaning in the preceding pages was placed there by a reader who arrived with questions already formed. The reading is mine, and so is the responsibility for it. Nature is the oldest surface onto which human beings have projected the order they wished to find, and it has authorised almost everything at one time or another.

So three refusals, before the essay can be trusted with anything.

The first: sometimes the forest does not come back. In the sagebrush country of the American west, cheatgrass arrives after a burn, an annual that cures to tinder by early summer and shortens the interval between fires from something like a human lifetime to three or five years. Sagebrush cannot mature that fast. What follows is an annual grassland that burns and returns as annual grassland, and stays. In the mountains the mechanism is different and the outcome rhymes: burn twice within a few years, put the nearest surviving seed source two valleys away, add the hotter and drier summers that now follow a fire, and the conifers simply fail to establish. Regeneration is a possibility and not a promise. Any essay that ends in guaranteed return has stopped describing forests and started consoling.

The second: an account of how life returns says nothing about whether its return matters. This is the point at which I have to be most careful, because the vocabulary of generation is seductive enough to hide the gap. A description of a mechanism carries no value with it. Structure does not arrive with worth attached. Knowing in detail how a system maintains its capacity to keep changing tells you exactly nothing about whether that capacity deserves protection, or whose.

The third follows from the second, and it is the reason the first two had to be said. The most dangerous sentence available to any philosophy of generativity is that whatever keeps a system generating is thereby good. It is dangerous because it is often factually true. Destroy a part of a coupled system and the remaining parts frequently do unfold more freely. Expel the member and the group's coordination cost really does fall. The history of that sentence is written in clearances, purges, and the removal of whatever was said to obstruct the whole. It is the self-justifying form of nearly every atrocity, and a philosophy that treats flourishing as an aim cannot refute it, because in that philosophy's own language the sentence is correct.

So a line has to be held, and it is a narrow one.

What may be called an obstacle is a condition. A blocked channel. A rule. A cost. A scarcity of attention. An absent path.

Never a being.

The moment a person is placed in the category of obstruction, the category begins to manufacture its own evidence, because it can only be true if he does not flourish. That is the mechanism, and it is available to majorities acting in perfect sincerity after long collective reflection. Sincerity is no protection. What offers some protection is narrower and more procedural: the one who bears the cost of a designation holds the standing to contest it, and that standing does not depend on the goodwill of anyone else.

Nothing in the forest supplies this. It has to be held by us, against the image, in the full knowledge that the image will not object.

The Fire Has a Date, the Forest Has None

The opening of this essay asked a question it did not answer. Why does one of those two questions come so easily, and the other so hard.

I think the answer is a matter of tempo.

A fire is an event. It has a date, an hour, a point of origin, a photograph. It can be drawn on a map with an arrow. It fits inside a sentence that has a subject and a verb, and that sentence can be read aloud in a courtroom.

A returning forest is a rate. Nothing happens on any particular afternoon. There is no moment at which the forest has returned, no threshold anybody crosses, no ceremony and no announcement. What exists is a slope: a little more moss this decade than last, seedlings that were saplings by the time anyone looked again.

Moral attention is built for events, and it is built that way for a good reason, because events are where the exits are. The cost is that we hold instruments of very unequal quality on the two sides. On the side of destruction, precision. On the side of return, almost nothing.

Underneath the tempo lies something harder. Nobody watches a forest come back. The person standing in the ash and the person standing under the second canopy are not the same person, and often not the same generation. Whoever keeps the conditions of return intact does so for a state they will never see confirmed, on behalf of beneficiaries who will not know their name, with no visible evidence along the way that the keeping is working at all. This is why care for conditions is such a weak motive and blame is such a strong one. Blame arrives complete, today, with a face attached. Maintenance offers no such satisfaction, and it never will.

And people do it anyway, constantly, which is the part worth noticing. Someone plants a walnut at sixty, having done the arithmetic. Someone keeps a variety of bean alive by growing it out every third year and handing seed to whoever asks, so that a plant no company sells is still in the world. Someone feeds a starter every morning that was alive before they were born. Someone puts a bench where the path turns, for people they will not meet. None of this is heroic, and none of it can be seen from outside, and it is the ordinary human form of caring for a rate instead of an event.

Then the refusal that has to accompany all of this, or the section turns into a consolation.

The second forest grows out of the death of the first. Standing dead trunks shelter the seedlings. Fallen ones become nurseries. Ash fertilises a season or two. Every part of this is true, and none of it settles anything. The tree that died is not compensated by what grew on it. A harm is not redeemed by the fact that something eventually came of it, and *look what grew out of it* is among the oldest cruelties available to anyone who was not the one who burned.

Regeneration is a fact about a system. It is no verdict on the loss.

A Harm Without an Author

With those refusals in place, the second question of the opening can be taken up seriously.

Attribution is not the enemy here. It is a defence, and mostly a defence of the weak. Whoever acted answers. This is what closes the exits that power habitually uses: it was the market, it was the culture, it was the system, it was everyone and therefore no one. Keep it.

But some harms are not events. They are processes that reproduce themselves.

Exclusion in an organisation rarely begins in a decision anyone would sign. It lives in a hiring habit, an evaluation form, a set of informal invitations, and a silence in a meeting that nobody afterwards remembers. Each element is defensible on its own, and the harm is in the arrangement. Ask which act caused it and every candidate is too small. The pattern is not hiding behind an actor. It is distributed across a field, and it renews itself each quarter without anyone intending it to.

The same distribution runs the other way, and it deserves the same attention, because it is easier to see once you know to look. A place where a newcomer is taken care of rarely has a rule that says so. It lives in whoever notices that someone is eating alone, in the habit of explaining the thing nobody wrote down, in a senior person asking a question they already know the answer to so that a junior one can answer it. No single act contains the welcome. It sits in the arrangement, it renews itself quarter by quarter, and it can be taken apart by nothing more dramatic than a few people deciding they are too busy.

There is a darker version. Look closely at the person standing at the sharp end of such a pattern, the one everyone can name, and something uncomfortable appears: the role would be filled by someone else within a month if he stopped. He is also performing for an absent audience, closer to the front of the stage than the rest. Attribution reaches him and finds a man obeying a script.

That observation must never become an excuse, and this is the sentence that has to be said clearly: responsibility does not vanish when psychology stops explaining it. It relocates. It moves from the interior of a person toward positions, capacities, and the maintenance of the script. Punish the actor and leave the role written, and the next person will step into it. Everyone who keeps the script legible carries something.

This is where the relational view becomes usable, and also where it can collapse into vapour. If everything is connected, is everyone responsible for everything?

No. Connection confers nothing by itself.

Responsibility gathers where four things gather. Whether you occupy a position that shapes the field. Whether you could have acted otherwise with the means actually available to you. Whether the degradation was foreseeable from where you stood. Whether your conduct helped reproduce the pattern. A child walking through the woods and a company holding the logging concession are both in relation to the forest, and they do not stand in the same place.

What emerges is not one responsibility but two, held together and doing different work. Answerability looks backward and names. Participation looks forward and maintains. Answerability alone leaves the field untouched, so the pattern regenerates around the punished actor. Participation alone is worse in its own way: a diffuse ethic of care with nobody accountable for anything, and power finds that arrangement extremely comfortable.

Keep both. The tension between them is not a flaw in the account. It is the shape of the problem.

Law in the Shadow of the Forest

Law is a map, and I want to say clearly that the map is indispensable. The argument here is not that law is mistaken about anything. It is that a map is not a forest, and that some of what a forest does cannot be drawn.

Law is superb with boundaries and events. A line was crossed. A duty was owed. A harm was caused, and here is who pays. This machinery is precise because it is narrow, and its narrowness is a virtue: it is what makes the outcome contestable and the reasoning reviewable.

Conditions are harder to draw. How trust forms. How a meaning comes to be shared. How a place remains able to recover from damage. These are not mysteries in principle, and they resist the form of a rule, because a rule needs an addressee and a moment.

And here is the dependence that deserves more attention than it gets: law lives on conditions it cannot itself produce. A judgment binds because a community treats it as binding. A rule works because officials apply it on days they dislike it, and because witnesses come forward when it would be easier not to, and because the losing party goes home. Strip those away and the text is unchanged and the law is gone. The map is drawn on ground it did not make.

Some of this is already being worked out where the pressure is greatest. Environmental law knows about duties of restoration, which are obligations of maintenance and something more than prohibitions. American contaminated-site law goes further and fixes liability on the position of owner or operator without asking who was at fault, reaching back to conduct that was lawful when it happened. The doctrine is widely disliked, and it is instructive. It is what a legal system does when it meets a harm whose author has dissolved and decides to attach the duty to the position that remains. Governance of automated systems keeps arriving at the same place from another direction, since nobody caused this output and the question that remains is who arranged the conditions under which such outputs appear, and who may contest the arrangement.

What I would suggest is modest and procedural. Attach duties to position. Keep the paths of revision open to whoever bears the cost. Let the maintenance of conditions be capable of grounding an obligation, alongside the prohibition of acts.

One danger belongs here, and this essay is the thing that supplies it. If responsibility reaches the conditions under which harm becomes possible, then somebody will propose to secure those conditions in advance, and preventive power has never once declined such an invitation. An authority entitled to act before anything has happened, on the ground that it is maintaining the conditions of a common life, is the most expansive authority anyone has yet thought of. A promise of restraint is worth nothing against it. The only safeguard available is the procedural one already named: those whose conditions are being maintained hold the standing to contest the maintenance, and whoever maintains owes them an account of it. Care for conditions without that standing is ordinary control with a better vocabulary.

And then a limit, which loops back to where the essay began. Law must not be asked to hold all of this. A legal order that undertook to guarantee trust, meaning, care, and recognition would simply be the newest occupant of the empty place: the last supreme subject, standing above the relations it claims to protect, unarguable and unreviewable. Better a map that knows its edges, and a society that knows the ground is not drawn.

The Second Forest

Go back one more time, twenty years on, when nobody who watched it burn is thinking about it any more.

What stands there is not the forest that burned. The pioneers came first and some of them will hold the site for a century. The old composition may never reassemble; certain trees will not



return in any human lifetime; the dead trunks that made the recovery possible are still lying across the ground and will be there long after they have stopped being remembered as damage. This is a continuation. It is not a restoration.

Communities are like this after harm. There is no route back to the morning before. What is available is a different arrangement that can keep going, built partly out of what the damage left behind. Repair and regeneration are different words, and the second is the honest one.

So perhaps the question shifts.

Not only who owns the past.

Also who takes part in making the future.

The forest asks nothing. It has no question and no answer, and on the morning after the fire it is simply silent. We are the ones who ask, and that is not a weakness in the position. It is the position. What we can still answer, in an organisation, in a household, in a legal order, in a burned valley, is which relations we are keeping alive, and for whom, and whether those who bear the cost of our answer are still able to argue with it.

No god came to save the forest.

And something like the divine appeared among the roots.

Companions in Thought

This essay does not argue with anyone, and it is not alone. Hans Jonas asked what responsibility becomes when its object is a future that cannot answer back. Hannah Arendt distinguished guilt, which is personal, from a responsibility that attaches to belonging. Iris Marion Young proposed that structural injustice implicates participants without making each of them culpable, which is the sober version of much of what is said here. Aldo Leopold wrote about obligation to a land community and about how quickly such writing turns into sentiment. C.S. Holling gave resilience its meaning as the capacity to absorb disturbance and reorganise, which is the ecology behind the whole essay. Per Bak's work on systems held near a critical point is the source of the spark. Suzanne Simard's work on mycorrhizal networks supplies the image of the underground exchange, and the strongest versions of those claims remain contested, which is worth saying because the image is so appealing. Emmanuel Levinas is the reason the word *witnessed* appears where it does. None of them is responsible for what has been done with them here.



火后的森林

论一个持续生成的世界中的责任

没有一个神从森林之外降临，拯救森林；
但某种神圣性，却在森林内部的关系之中显现，
并通过这些关系使森林得以重生。

火后的清晨

火之后，森林是寂静的。

树干焦黑，没有枝叶。土地覆着灰，有些地方还留着温度。声音在里面传得古怪，因为从前吸收声音的东西都不在了。任何走进过这样一个地方的人都知道，最先浮上来的并不是悲伤。那是一种计算。心几乎立刻开始寻找一个人。

是谁点的火。谁家的电线在风里打出了火花。是哪一个部门，用一百年的时间扑灭了每一场小火，直到山坡上积起一百年的燃料。哪一份许可被签了字，哪一封预警被归了档，哪一笔预算被砍掉。这些问题并不琐碎。它们是一个文明的机器：这个文明经过漫长而痛苦的学习，才终于拒绝接受「灾难只是发生了」这样的说法。有人做了事。有事随之发生。有人要回答。这个次序是人类了不起的成就之一，法律里一切体面的东西都建立在它上面。

然后是许多年。

先是柳兰，在本不该有东西生长的地方铺开一片洋红。山杨从未被烧到的根上抽出新条。一只松鸦衔着一颗橡实越过山脊，然后忘了它。菌丝从未燃的土地边缘伸进死去的土壤，重新开始那桩缓慢的生意：以矿物换糖。雨落下来，没有人给它指令。甲虫来了。啄木鸟跟着甲虫来了。而在灰烬底下的某处，一颗必须经过火的高温才能开启的球果，早已经开了。

于是第二个问题出现了，它有一个奇怪的性质。

是谁让森林恢复的？

没有被告。没有英雄，没有工程师，没有委员会，没有一个下令「回来」的权威。这个问题在语法上与第一个问题一模一样，内容却是空的。我们问出它，句子就在末尾松开了。

关于「谁毁坏了世界」，我们继承了一套精确的语法。关于「谁使它仍然能够回来」，我们几乎没有语法。

这篇文章要谈的，就是这个不对称。

为神预备的位置

在森林能对我们说出任何话之前，值得先问：为什么第一个问题来得那样容易，而第二个那样艰难。我想，答案比法律更深。它藏在一种很古老的需要里。

人类一直在自身之外寻找某种东西。

不只是为了庇护，也不只是为了解释。是为了某种更具体也更奇怪的东西：一个可以站到自身之外的位置，从那里，自己的存在得以被见证。人不只问该做什么。人还问，自己在谁面前负责，以及什么担保自己的判断不只是自己的想要。

被完全留在自身之内，主体会发现它无法为自己作证。我独自赋予生命的意义，其权威恰好等于我今天早晨愿意给它的那一点。于是我们寻找一个超出自身的它者，好让自身的主体性在

其上被见证。当其中一个它者退去，这需要并不随之退去。位置仍然空着，总会有什么来占据它。

第一位居住者：天

在更古老的世界里，这个它者显现为神、为天、为道、为宇宙的秩序。

人不是价值的最终作者。人生活在某种大于自己的东西面前，责任因此取一种垂直的形式：人向上回答。善与恶是被给予的，而非被发明的。这是一种约束，也是一种松脱。一个已经被给予了尺度的人，不必自己去做那个尺度。

第二位居住者：理性

现代性没有取消超越。它给超越换了地方。

随着神学权威退场，另一位居住者搬进了空出的位置：理性本身，以及它的儿女，科学与普遍法则。人不再向上看，而开始向内看，看向一种被认为人人共有的理性能力。

这一次迁移是可以标出日期的，而且值得说得具体，因为抽象会掩盖这场替换有多么字面。

康德在《纯粹理性批判》第一版序言的一处脚注里称自己的时代为批判的时代，一切都必须接受批判；他还补充说，宗教凭其神圣、立法凭其威严，惯于为自己申请豁免，也因此招来正当的怀疑。他用来称呼那个它们必须出庭的地方的词，是「法庭」。理性不只是思考。它坐着，而世界列队从它面前经过，接受裁判。审判席仍在它一向所在的地方。换的是坐在上面的那一位。

康德之后两代人，孔德设计了一套人类教，配有历法、圣事，以及一个由科学家组成的祭司团。赫胥黎称它是「去掉了基督教的天主教」。这套设计通常被归档为怪癖。把它读作证据要好得多：这位造出「社会学」一词的人，在把神学从历史的叙述里移走之后，立刻把家具又搬了回来。

更安静的那些居住者

理性在变老的过程中变窄了。问题从「什么是真的」漂移到「什么是有效率的」。理解变成预测，预测变成控制，控制变成最优化。更新的居住者依次搬入，比诸神安静，也更难以对话：市场、指数、排名、金融信用评分、权重无人能读的模型。它们下判断，并且不作解释。它们无法被争辩。这不是对旧位置的偏离。这正是那个位置的签名。

其中两位值得点名，而且都来自我自己所在的这个世界。期刊影响因子是在一九六〇年代初被造出来的，本是一件内部工具，用来决定一个引文索引应当收录哪些期刊。它的发明者数十年前就在文章里提醒过：拿一份期刊的平均被引率去替代某一篇论文的实际影响，方便，而且危险。这个提醒早已刊出，众所周知，而人们仍旧用那个数字来计算一个人的学术生涯。一件为上架决定而造的器具，不到一代人的时间，成了衡量一生工作的尺度。

第二位不是单独一例，而是一族。一所机构被一套它未曾选择、无法完整查看、也无从申诉的权重排了名次，于是它开始围绕那套权重重新安排自己。院系关停。招聘转向。当排名者修改公式，机构再改一次自己。没有谁下过命令，也没有谁给过理由。有什么东西在下判断，而它无法被争辩；那个古老的位置就这样被再次占据，而这一位住客没有面孔，也没有解释自己的义务。

这一切都不是一个衰落的故事，把它讲成衰落是廉价的。那个位置之所以存在，是因为我们有限。没有人能独自验证一切；没有一个共同体能只依据已被完全确立的东西行动；而共有的权威，正是有限者之间得以共同行动的方式。同行评议、法院、航空管制、临床指南：没有一个宣称自己拥有真理。每一个都宣称某种更谦逊也更有用的东西——在目前的信息条件下，这是我们能够共同行动的最好依据。这就是实践智慧，历史因此得以继续。

所以值得问的问题，不是那个位置能否被清空。而是：什么样的东西占据它，以及它所承载的约束，是否对生活在其下的人保持着可修正的余地。

带着这个问题，我们可以回到树木之间。

森林没有国王

森林没有国王。

没有中央的智能分派角色。没有总工程师握着设计图。一棵树不知道森林。一株真菌不知道它所维持的网络。一只鸟不知道羽毛间那颗种子的未来。没有一间办公室，在其中整体被代表。

然而整体存在着，并且做着任何成员都做不到的事。

走进去，试着指出是什么使它成为森林。你可以指出一段树干，一条根，一缕头发粗细的菌丝，一场雨。你无法指出关系。它没有位置，也没有表面。而你所能指出的一切，若无它，就不会是它所是的样子。树并不是先成为树，而后才参与进来。土壤、水、真菌、天气、邻居：正是通过这些条件，它才成其为树。

这就是我多年来在「生成性关系存在」这个名字下反复围绕的直觉。存在并非先被给定，然后被放进关系。很多时候，存在正是通过关系而生成。

有一个属于人的例子，同样平常，也同样奇怪。没有人教会一个孩子一门语言。父母教的是词，几百个，其余几乎不加纠正。祖辈重复一些话。别的孩子在玩耍之间补上剩下的部分。从成千上万次微小的回应里，没有哪一次含有那套文法，却出现了一个会说话的人，他能说出从来不曾有人说过的句子。这里同样没有谁握着设计图。孩子所得到的，是别的什么，不是教导。是一个会回应他的世界。

有一句提醒应当放在这里，趁这个意象还没有跑掉。森林不是和谐。树互相遮蔽，而且是认真的。根系毒害竞争者。真菌以对自己有利的条件交易。寄生者活得很好。在这一切之中维系着的东西，比合作更弱，也更奇怪，也更有意思：那是仍然能够继续生成关系的关系。不是和平。不是平衡。是持续的可能。

用来建立一种伦理，这是很薄的东西。我宁可要一件薄的真东西，也不要一件厚的假东西。

一星之火，万木之林

回到火的开端。

一颗火星几乎什么也不是。它没有力量，没有意图，也不知道自己即将改变什么。然而在某些条件下，这个近乎乌有的东西成为改写一片山川的力量。

力量从来不在火星里。干叶提供燃料。风提供移动。坡度提供方向。一百年里被扑灭的小火，提供了一架从地面直通树冠的连续的梯子。

那一百年背后有一项政策，而政策带着一个数字。一九一〇年的「大燃烧」在两天之内烧掉约三百万英亩之后，年轻的美国林务局定下了全面扑灭的方针；到一九三五年，这方针带上了钟点：任何被报告的火，须在次日上午十点之前被控制。它奏效了，困难正在这里。每一场被阻止的小火都是被留下来的燃料，而这些燃料在数十年间累积成的，正是上面说的那架梯子。最后到来的那一场火，并不是这项政策用一百年对付的那一场火。火，生成于一个微小扰动与一片准备好承载它的场之间的相遇。把同一颗火星丢在潮湿的地上，丢进一座每十五年被轻轻烧过一次的森林，什么也不会发生。

微小者不会一直微小

心里藏着一个安静的假设：大的结果需要大的原因，小的行为带来小的后果，因此责任的大小应当与影响的大小相称。

活的系统常常不肯这样行事。在临界点附近，反馈接管了比例。一个微小的差异被放大，越过一个临界点，整体落入另一种状态。同一根火柴在一面山坡上重若千钧，在另一面山坡上毫无分量，而差别在山坡。

一句话成为一场冲突。一次排斥成为一种文化。一个未被修补的制度缝隙成为系统性的崩溃。一次微小的信任撤回，结束了一段挺过更糟境况的婚姻。

火星的债与森林的债

这打开的是一个困难，而不是一个解决。

第一个问题依然必要。是谁动的手。丢下火星的人不能以树叶的干燥为自己开脱；一个「放大取消了作者」的世界，是一个没有人做过任何事的世界。场的状态不是辩护。

但第二个问题变得无可回避，而它同样没有被告：

是什么条件让这颗火星成为一场火？

有对事件的责任，它问：谁行动了。也有对场的责任，它问：谁塑造了让行动获得力量的条件。一个组织，一种法秩序，一个行业的风气，一个家庭：每一个都是放大之场。在任何一个具体行为发生之前很久，它们就已经决定了哪些差异消失，哪些差异改变世界。

种子同样微小

接着是那个对称，也是这篇文章里我最难诚实写出的部分。

同一个放大毁灭的关系世界，也放大更新。火星成为大火。种子成为森林。一条根接通两片被切断的菌丝群落。一次注意的给予，恢复了一个人「自己仍然可被呼唤」的感觉。

这件事的感伤版本是假的，值得指名，好把它拒绝掉。放大对它所放大的东西毫不在意。它传递残忍时的忠实程度，与传递关怀时完全相同；一个场可以被布置成这样：善意消失得无影无踪，而一句流言在午饭前穿过整个组织。这种不在意才是诚实的部分。它也正是为什么场的状态是一个道德问题，而不只是一个技术问题。

还有一重复杂，是森林提供的，它破坏了任何干净的对立。在某些森林里，火属于文法。扭叶松以树脂封住一部分球果，那树脂在约五十度时松开，于是一片林分被同一个把它抹去的事件重新播种。某些种子等待烟。在森林自己的语汇里，毁坏与生成并不总是对立面。

这不可以被换成许可。每十五年一次的低强度地表火，与一百年扑灭之后的树冠大火，是不同的事件，而它们的差别不是道德上的微妙。是尺度、频率，以及场的状态。谁若从前一个观察走到「毁坏其实是隐秘的创造」这个结论，他就已经不再看森林，而开始使用森林了。

未曾降临的神

火之后，我们期待一个熟悉的故事。

灾难发生。世界沉默。某种大于世界的东西必须到来，把失去的还回来。这也许是人类最古老的希望：在我们有限的存在之外，有一种力量，能够归还我们自己无法找回的东西。

森林讲的是另一个故事。

没有神从天而降。

没有外来的手伸进灰烬。

没有至高的主体命令生命归来。

然而森林并没有被抛弃。

有什么在继续。在烧焦的地表之下，看不见的关系还在。种子在土里等着。真菌在未燃的边缘继续它们无声的交换。根保存着连接的断片。雨带来尚未显形的可能。一只鸟越过山脊，身上粘着什么。

森林的归来，并不是因为森林之外有什么修复了它。森林归来，是因为它内部的关系仍然持有生成的能力。

也许这是遇见神圣的另一种方式。

神圣未必总要取一个高居世界之上、自外部治理世界的存在的形式。也许它也能显现在世界借以持续创造自身的那些关系之中。它显现在根与土之间，在种子与雨之间，在腐朽与更新之间，在无数彼此回应、却谁也不理解整体的存在之间。

森林不是被一位拯救者救回来的。

它是被关系重新生成的。

从「之上」到「之间」

人类长久地在自身之外寻找什么，这表达了一个真实的认识，我并不想劝谁放弃它。个体存在从来不是意义的充分来源。这就是真的。

森林所扰动的，是一个更窄的假设：凡超出个体者，必定是一个更大的个体。

树通过森林超出自身。人通过那些使他成为人的关系超出自身。一代人通过他们看不到的未来超出自身。那个「更多」，并不总是在我们之上。

有时候，它在我们之间。

三个问题可以并排放在这里，每一个都携带着自己形态的「超出我们者」。谁创造了世界。世界如何运作。世界如何持续成为。第一个由一位立于世界之外的创造者回答。第二个由高悬于世界之上的规律回答。第三个还没有居住者，而这篇文章是一个关于往哪里看的建议：看向那些持存于众多存在之间、使「成为」得以继续的条件。

一个终将交还的名字

我一直在使用「关系性神性」这个词，而我想在这里格外小心，因为它是整篇文章里最危险的一个词。

它是一个用来指的词，指过之后就必须交还。去寻找那个关系，你会找到土壤、菌丝、种子、雨、一只鸟，以及没有关系。你无法被指给一个关系看。关系不是一个东西，不是节点，不是连线，不是网络。它是生成得以展开的约束，而它没有地址。

所以关系性神性不是空王座的新住客。如果这个词硬化成某物之名，那么这篇文章就恰好犯下了它前来描述的那个错误：它会因为无法忍受那个空出的位置，而搬进一位继任者。这个词是一架梯子。上去之后，把它推开。

还有一个拒绝属于这里，而且并非装饰。我并不主张「之间的超越」优于「之上的超越」，理由是它生成得更多。那个句子会把生成性变成一种货币；而一旦生成性是货币，就有汇率；一旦有汇率，就会有人被花掉。这篇文章里没有这样的汇率。这里提供的是一个关于「超出我们者可能在何处」的描述，而描述不附带任何授权。

森林不许诺任何事

到这里，文章必须转过身来对付自己，因为这个意象已经开始对我太顺从了。

森林什么也没说。它不提供教训，不持立场，对责任没有看法。前面那些页里的每一重意义，都是一个带着已经成形的问题走进来的读者放进去的。那个读法是我的，读法的责任也是我

的。自然是人类最古老的投影面，人们把自己希望找到的秩序投上去；在不同的时代，它几乎为一切事情背过书。

所以，在这篇文章可以被托付任何东西之前，有三重拒绝。

第一：森林有时候不会回来。在美国西部的山艾草原，火后到来的是旱雀麦，一种在初夏就枯成引火物的一年生草，它把两次火之间的间隔从接近一个人的一生缩短到三五年。山艾赶不上这个速度。随之而来的是一片一年生草地，烧过之后仍旧回来作一年生草地，并且就停在那里。在山地，机制不同而结局押韵：几年之内烧两次，最近的存活种源在两道山谷之外，再加上如今尾随火灾而来的更热更干的夏天，针叶树就是立不住。再生是一种可能，不是一个许诺。任何以「保证归来」收尾的文章，都已经不再描述森林，而开始安慰人了。

第二：一份关于生命如何回来的叙述，对「它的归来是否重要」什么也没有说。这是我必须最小心的地方，因为生成的词汇足够诱人，足以把那道缝隙盖住。对机制的描述不携带价值。结构不会自带价值。详尽地知道一个系统如何维持自己继续变化的能力，对于这种能力是否值得保护、以及对谁值得保护，恰恰什么也没有告诉你。

第三重从第二重来，而它正是前两重必须被说出的理由。对任何一种生成性哲学而言，最危险的句子是：凡维持系统继续生成者，即为善。它之所以危险，是因为它常常在事实上为真。摧毁一个耦合系统的一部分，其余部分确实往往展开得更自由。驱逐那名成员，群体的协调成本确实下降。那个句子的历史，写在清除、驱逐，以及一切被称作「妨碍整体之物」的移除之中。它是几乎所有暴行的自我辩护形式，而一种把繁荣当作目的的哲学无法驳倒它，因为在那种哲学自己的语言里，这个句子是正确的。

所以必须守住一条线，而它很窄。

可以被称为障碍的，是条件。一条被堵住的通道。一条规则。一项成本。一种稀缺的注意。一条不存在的路径。

永远不是一个存在者。

一个人被放进「妨碍」这个类别的那一刻，这个类别就开始制造自己的证据，因为只有当他不再生成，这个名字才为真。这就是那个机制，而它对经过长久集体反思、真诚行动的多数同样可用。真诚不构成保护。能够提供一点保护的东西更窄、也更程序性：承担某个指认之代价的人，拥有反驳它的资格，而这个资格不依赖任何其他人的善意。

森林不提供这一条。它必须由我们守住，逆着那个意象，并且清楚地知道：那个意象不会反对。

火有日期，森林没有

这篇文章的开头提出过一个问题，却没有回答。为什么那两个问题里，一个来得那样容易，另一个那样艰难。

我想，答案是速度。

火是事件。它有日期，有钟点，有起火点，有照片。它可以被画在地图上，带一支箭头。它装得进一个有主语有谓语的句子，而那个句子可以在法庭上被朗读出来。

归来的森林是一个速率。没有哪一个下午发生了什么。没有一个「森林已经回来了」的时刻，没有谁跨过的门槛，没有仪式，也没有宣告。存在的只是一道斜坡：这十年的苔藓比上一个十年多一点；等到有人再看的时候，当年的幼苗已经是小树。

道德的注意力是为事件造的，而且是有理由这样造的，因为出口都在事件那里。代价是：我们在两侧握着的工具，精度极不相等。毁坏那一侧，精确。归来那一侧，几乎空手。

在速度之下，还有更难的一层。没有人看着一座森林回来。站在灰烬里的人，与站在第二层树冠下的人，不是同一个人，往往也不是同一代人。维持归来之条件的人，是为一个自己永远无法看到被确认的状态而维持，为不会知道他名字的受益者而维持，而且一路上没有任何可见的证据表明这维持正在起作用。这就是为什么对条件的照料是如此软弱的动机，而归咎是如此强大的动机。归咎当天就完整地抵达，还带着一张脸。维持不提供这样的满足，而且永远不会。

然而人们照样在做，而且一直在做，这才是值得注意的地方。有人六十岁上种下一棵核桃，账是算过的。有人每隔三年把一种豆子种一遍，把种子交给任何来要的人，好让一种没有公司出售的植物仍然留在世上。有人每天早晨喂养一份在自己出生以前就活着的面种。有人在小路转弯的地方放一条长凳，为他不会遇见的人。这些都不英勇，从外面也看不见；而它们正是照料一个速率、而不是照料一个事件的、最寻常的人的形态。

然后是必须与这一切同行的拒绝，否则这一节会变成安慰。

第二座森林长在第一座的死亡之上。站立的枯干为幼苗遮荫。倒下的成为苗床。灰烬肥沃一两个季节。其中每一句都是真的，而它们什么也没有结算。死去的那棵树，并不因为有东西长在它身上而获得补偿。一桩伤害不会因为后来终于长出了什么而被赎回；而「你看，后来长出了什么」，是所有不曾被烧到的人手里最古老的残酷之一。

再生是关于一个系统的事实。它不是对那场损失的裁决。

无人署名的伤害

有了这些拒绝，开头的第二个问题才可以被认真接住。

归责不是这里的敌人。它是一道防线，而且多半是弱者的防线。谁行动，谁回答。正是它关上了权力惯用的那些出口：是市场，是文化，是体制，是所有人因而没有人。请把它保住。

但有些伤害不是事件。它们是自我复制的过程。

一个组织里的排斥，很少始于一个有人愿意签名的决定。它活在一种招聘习惯里，一张考评表里，一组非正式的邀约里，以及一次事后谁也想不起来的会议沉默里。每一项单独看都站得住，而伤害在那个布置之中。问哪一个行为造成了它，每一个候选者都太小。那个模式并没有躲在某个行动者背后。它散布在一个场里，并且每一个季度都在无人有意的情况下自我更新。

同样的分布也向另一个方向运行，而它值得同等的注意，因为一旦知道要看，它其实更容易被

看见。一个新来的人被照顾到的地方，很少有哪一条规定这样写。它活在谁注意到有人独自吃饭里，活在把那件没人写下来的事解释一遍的习惯里，活在一位资深者明知答案却仍然发问、好让一位年轻者来回答的那一刻。没有哪一个行为装得下这份接纳。它在那个布置之中，一个季度一个季度地自我更新；而拆掉它，也不需要什么戏剧性的东西，只需要几个人决定自己太忙。

还有更暗的一种。仔细看那个站在模式最前端、人人都叫得出名字的人，会出现某种令人不安的东西：如果他停下来，一个月之内会有别人补上那个角色。他也在为一位不在场的观众演出，只是站得比其他人更靠前。归责伸到他那里，找到的是一个正在服从剧本的人。

这个观察绝不可以变成借口，而下面这句话必须说清楚：当心理学不再解释责任时，责任并没有消失。它换了位置。它从一个人的内部，移向位置、能力，以及对剧本的维护。惩罚那个演员，而让角色继续写在本子里，下一个人就会踏进来。每一个使剧本保持可读的人，都承担着某种东西。

关系性的视角在这里变得可用，也正是在这里，它可能坍塌成一团雾。如果一切都相互连接，那是不是所有人都对一切负责？

不是。连接本身什么也不赋予。

责任聚集在四样东西聚集的地方。你是否占据一个塑造场的位置。以你实际拥有的手段，你能否有所不同地行动。从你所站的位置看，那种退化是否可以预见。你的行为是否帮助了那个模式的再生产。一个走过林间的孩子，和一家握有采伐权的公司，都与森林有关系，而他们并不站在同一个位置。

于是浮现出来的不是一种责任，而是两种，彼此扶着，各做各的工作。回答性向后看，并且指名。参与性向前看，并且维护。只有回答性，场毫发无损，模式会绕着那个被惩罚的人重新长起来。只有参与性则更糟：一种弥散的关怀伦理，而没有人对任何事负责，权力会觉得这样的安排极其舒适。

两个都保住。它们之间的张力不是这套说法的缺陷。那是问题本身的形状。

森林阴影下的法

法是一张地图，而我想明确地说：地图不可或缺。这里的论点不是法在哪里弄错了。而是：地图不是森林，森林所做的有些事无法被画出来。

法在边界与事件上极其出色。一条线被越过。一项义务被亏欠。一桩损害被造成，而这是付钱的人。这套机器之所以精确，是因为它狭窄，而它的狭窄是一种美德：正因如此，结论可被争辩，理由可被复核。

条件更难画。信任如何形成。一个意义如何成为共有。一个地方如何保持从损伤中恢复的能力。这些在原则上并不神秘，而它们抗拒规则的形式，因为规则需要一个受话人和一个时刻。

而这里有一重依赖，值得比现在更多的注意：法生活在它自己无法生产的条件之上。一个判决具有拘束力，是因为一个共同体把它当作有拘束力。一条规则之所以运作，是因为官员在自己

不喜欢的日子里仍然适用它，是因为证人在沉默更省事的时候仍然站出来，是因为败诉的一方回家去了。把这些抽走，条文一字未改，而法已经不在。地图画在它并未造出的地面上。

在压力最大的地方，其中一些已经在被处理。环境法知道恢复义务这回事，那是维持的义务，而不止于禁止。美国的污染场地法走得更远：它把责任系在所有人或经营人这个位置上，不问谁有过错，并且回溯到那些在发生时仍属合法的行为。这套原则广受厌恶，而它有教益。当一个法秩序遇到一桩作者已经消散的伤害，转而把义务系在留下来的那个位置上时，它做的就是这件事。自动系统的治理不断从另一个方向抵达同一个地方，因为没有人造成了这个输出，剩下的问题是：谁安排了产生这类输出的条件，以及谁可以对这个安排提出异议。

我想提出的方向是谦逊的、程序性的。把义务系在位置上。让修正的路径对承担代价者保持开放。让条件的维持能够成为义务的根据，与行为的禁止并列。

有一重危险属于这里，而供出这重危险的正是本文自己。如果责任伸向使伤害成为可能的那些条件，那么就会有人提议提前把那些条件管起来，而预防性的权力从未推辞过这样的邀请。一个可以在任何事情发生之前就行动、并以「我在维持共同生活的条件」为理由的权威，是人们所设想过的最能扩张的权威。对它而言，一句克制的许诺一文不值。唯一可用的保障仍是前面已经说过的那一条程序：条件正被维持的那些人，拥有对这份维持提出异议的资格；而维持者欠他们一个交代。缺了这份资格，对条件的照料只是换了一套更好词汇的管束。

然后是一条界限，它绕回文章的开端。法不可以被要求承担这一切。一个法秩序若担保信任、意义、关怀与承认，它不过是那个空位的最新住客：最后一个至高主体，高踞于它声称要保护的关系之上，不可争辩，不可复核。宁可要一张知道自己边缘在哪里的地图，和一个知道地面并未被画出的社会。

第二座森林

再回去一次，二十年之后，那时已经没有人还在想着那场火。

站在那里的，不是烧掉的那座森林。先锋物种先来，其中一些会占据这块地方一个世纪。原来的组成也许再也不会重新聚合；某些树在任何人的一生里都不会回来；使这场恢复成为可能的那些枯干仍然横在地上，并且会在人们不再把它们记作损伤之后，继续躺在那里很久。这是一次延续。它不是一次复原。

共同体在受伤之后也是这样。没有回到那个早晨之前的路。可以得到的，是另一种能够继续下去的安排，其中一部分材料，正是损伤留下来的东西。修复与再生是两个不同的词，而后者是诚实的那个。

于是问题也许移动了。

不只是谁拥有过去。

也是谁参与创造未来。

森林什么也不问。它没有问题也没有答案，在火后的清晨，它只是沉默。发问的是我们，而这不是这个位置的软弱。这就是这个位置。我们仍然能够回答的是：在一个组织里，在一个家



里，在一个法秩序里，在一片烧过的山谷里，我们正让哪些关系活着，为谁而活，以及承担我们答案之代价的人，是否仍然能够与它争辩。

没有神来拯救森林。

而某种近乎神圣的东西，出现在根须之间。

同行的思想者

这篇文章不与任何人争论，而它并不孤单。约纳斯（Hans Jonas）追问：当责任的对象是一个无法回答的未来，责任会变成什么。阿伦特（Hannah Arendt）区分了属于个人的罪责，与因归属而生的责任。杨（Iris Marion Young）主张结构性不义把参与者牵连其中，却并不因此使每个人都有过错，那是这里许多说法的清醒版本。利奥波德（Aldo Leopold）写下对一个土地共同体的义务，也写下这样的文字有多容易滑成感伤。霍林（C. S. Holling）赋予「韧性」以吸收扰动并重新组织的含义，那是整篇文章背后的生态学。巴克（Per Bak）关于系统维持在临界点附近的工作，是那颗火星的来源。西马德（Suzanne Simard）关于菌根网络的研究提供了地下交换的意象；那些主张的最强版本仍有争议，这一点值得说出来，因为那个意象实在太动人。列维纳斯（Emmanuel Levinas）是「被见证」一词出现在它所在之处的原因。以上诸位，对本文如何使用他们，概不负责。