

## The Forest of Echoes

Gabriela Steren

Sometimes I travel alone, and even when I don't, I often find myself walking alone at some point, especially in the mornings. I enjoy the company when I can get it, but these moments of solitude are also welcome, as they allow me to walk at my own pace, take in the views and reflect on things I'm normally too busy to think about.

It was during one of these morning walks that I encountered what I have come to call the Forest of Echoes. The small forest called to me as soon as I spotted the first line of trees in the distance. I can't explain how, but it felt magical to me. As soon as I stepped in, I was regaled with a beautiful birdsong and the dancing rays of the sun that filtered among the canopy of leaves. The earth was soft and pleasant to walk on, so I kept going, wondering what I would find.

I walked among the trees for about an hour and then realized the forest was much bigger than it had seemed at first sight. I sat down to rest, leaning my back on the welcoming trunk of a lenga beech which seemed to have reclined just for me. As I laid my hand on the tree's roots, the image of a line of ants walking up the tree appeared before my eyes. I instinctively raised my hand to look, but no ants were there. Puzzled, I put my hand down again and saw a small mouse walk around the tree, a woodpecker hammer repeatedly on the trunk, a flock of siskins dive down to feed among the roots, and a hare run by to suddenly stop, sniff the air, and dart away in a different direction.

I thought I was dreaming, since every image faded away as quickly as it had come. Afraid to break the spell but knowing I had to keep going, I stood up and resumed my walk. Soon, I reached the first sign of human presence other than my own: the remains of a campfire. I picked up a burnt stick and saw a family laugh as they shared a meal around the fire, followed by two foxes who competed over the leftovers, playing tug of war with a cow's rib. I hurried away before I would see the cow's ghost and eventually reached the end of the forest. The road greeted me among a green pasture, but before I left entirely, I had a thought. I looked back and saw my own tracks on the earth. I touched them and saw myself as I had walked through the woods earlier. I realized then that it is true that one cannot observe nature without affecting it, but also—and more importantly—that I was now, myself, a part of the forest.