

A plank's life  
Max Adams

It seems I must account for the life of this plank

(the one on the right)

I must count time

Starting now and working back.

Now. I am looking at it.

Minus:

One sixteenth of a second to take the picture

A minute to place the plank

Just right

An hour to contemplate the space

The angle, the light



As its biographer I will allow this plank a couple of weeks in a skip, give or take, before it is talent-spotted for an artistic career, its brief spotlight days of fame. The artist, I suppose, cycles past it one day on the way home and sees it there. Is it lying demurely, showing just a hint of mortised ankle beneath the plasterboard scraps which lie on top of it? Or is it poking brazenly out, shouting for attention, so to speak; having an X-factor moment.

I cannot say; there is no diary entry or tear-stained letter, the stuff I usually work with. I don't like to ask the artist in case he woke up on top of it after a heavy night and doesn't like to admit it.

The plank is trying to escape the incinerator. It succeeds. For a while, anyway.

It has been in a building, this plank. I can't quite see from here but I have a suspicion it might have been a weatherboard, the threshold of a door. It looks kind of trodden on. Let's see: say a hundred years in a house: thirty-six thousand pairs of feet going out in the morning and coming back at night and times that by the number of people in the house and factor in the children running in and out all the time (make your mind up and shut that bloody door). If planks could talk... But they can't.

Trees can. Some can. They send messages to each other when we are not looking: little puffs of acid gas to raise the alarm when something nasty is on its way. Mostly bugs. They are rather clever beasts, trees. They ought to be: they have been at it a long time. Three hundred million years. Something like that. Let's not split hairs. So long, anyway, that in the beginning they learned to have sex with each other with only the gentlest breezes of spring to help them. There were no insects to help them along; to give them a hand. As it were. No need to learn to walk or run if the sex comes to you. Just face the south-west and hang your bits out in that wafting air laden with pollen. So trees do not learn to walk. Or run. It saves energy. Phew.

This plank (the one on the right) might come from a conifer. Conifers are tall with pointy silhouettes because they live up north where the sun shines sideways most of the time. My guess is that this plank is from a deciduous tree: hard wood wears better, lasts longer. It's okay, they can take it; they are strong. Deciduous trees don't grow so tall and they have haircuts like seventies black soul singers; coming from the south they find that the sun shines overhead so that's where they wave their leaves to gorge on light. They wear shades. It's cool, man.

The tree that gave this emasculated plank its cropped grain, its truncated rings, its torn heart, its lock-jaw muscularity, it might have been two hundred years old when it died. A good innings, no regrets. It passed its genes on, saw its share of wars and tears, watched the fellers take its siblings and neighbours one by one by one. Trees are not sentimental. We may count their years off, summer after spring, spring after winter, winter after autumn, each confined within the next in filo sheaths of light and dark.

But trees can't count. They don't look back, trees don't, they look out. They watch us. That plank (the one on the right). I think it may be watching me.

(Photograph ©David Mills)