

The Death of our Trees

The elms died when I was a teenager. I helped to fell their dried remains as part of my conservation charity work, and listened to my older colleagues' reminiscences of the tall elms of their own youth. I was sad, but cheered by the trees we were planting – ash, oak, rowan and hornbeam – a hundred saplings a day to fill the silent spaces.

Four decades later, the elms are still dying. Every time I see them sprout in our hedge, I hope that this time they will grow to their full height and outlive me. But they raise their fluffy heads into the flight path of the beetle and within a year have browned and died and crashed to the ground.

I remember hoping for their survival. I remember hearing of Sudden Oak Death removing the oaks from the western woods, of Chestnut Blight, of ash dieback leaping the channel and flaying the bark from our ash trees. The trees in our garden are dying of honey rot fungus before any virus can kill them, and the silver birch at the far end of the garden fell victim to a neighbour's broken water pipe, its roots sliding clear of the soaked ground like a pip popped from a grape.

Last winter, I went around the garden to stroke each tree in turn and silently wish it luck and long life. The cedar stretched its hefty branches across its yards of space, indifferent to any dangers. The pine at the far end had been struck by lightning a decade ago and was growing one desperate, lopsided sprout of branch below the dead spire of trunk. The Victoria Plum drooped, clattering in the wind.

I stopped at the pear tree at the centre of the garden. If it lives long enough, it will be taller than our house. I have learned now that I may outlive the trees I have planted, that they might warm us briefly in the house stove in winter and be scattered as snowy grey ash around the roots of their successors.

I put my hands on the bark of the pear tree and thought hard of the care we took in choosing it, the deep and wide hole we dug, the compost we gave for its roots to settle into. Of the hope, the same hope of my teenage years, that this tree would live long and grow tall.

“Don’t give up,” I told the tree, stroking its furrowed bark. I looked around at the dead ash, the faltering oaks, the withering chestnut.

“Don’t let this tree die,” I said to somebody. To a botany student puzzling over a cure for the death of trees. To a nurseryman, planning to import a tree with a new killer in its bark. To the Earth.

“Don’t leave the pear tree alone,” I begged the beech, sunning its leaves nearby. The beech made no reply, no promise, and I left them together in the garden of dying trees.