Fiction section

Edited by Joe Gray

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A year has passed without a suitable submission for this section, which says a lot more about my ineffectiveness in promoting its existence than for the potential of the literary sub-genre that is eco-fiction. In order to give the section some renewed visibility, I present here something of my own, written under the pen name that I use for my attempts at this discipline. I am not suggesting that the story has any particular merit, but I hope its inclusion shows, if nothing else, that the drama around which a tale turns need not be Earth-shaking.

At the risk of making self-indulgence a theme, I would also like to share an amusing sentence that I encountered recently and which I feel has some pertinence here. The writer of the sentence was Jack London, whose short story *Bâtard*, one first published in the early years of the twentieth century, was something I used back in the first instance of this section to exemplify how non-human concerns can be central to a piece of fiction. More recently, I have been reading his *Cruise of the Snark*, a real-life account of a voyage across the Pacific undertaken around the same time. In a chapter titled "The Nature Man", he describes the time that he spent on Tahiti with an American proto-hippy named Ernest Darling. With reference to the subject's literary tastes, London notes the following: "The Nature Man never wastes time on fiction" (London, 2003: 119). In using the present tense, London was perhaps hinting at an applicability of his observation beyond this one individual. But I hope that there are many nature lovers who do find value in fiction, and that this section can continue to develop.

For further information on submitting eco-fiction of your own, please visit:
https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/submitting-fiction.html

London J (2003) *The Cruise of the Snark*. National Geographic Society, Washington, DC, USA.

Surgery

Dewey Dabbar

Falls from trees can cause serious bodily harm (e.g. death). I had read this warning back in my youth, posted in a park, and I had found it sufficiently amusing at the time to commit it to memory. The advice returns to me now, on a Sunday

afternoon in late autumn, as I shin up the off-straight trunk of the mature ash at my garden's edge. Up in the canopy, three feral parakeets alight in unison—their apple-green plumage contrasting with the charcoal sky as sharply as their tropical squawks defy the suburban calm. I hook my right arm around a branch in search of respite. The ticker, which is not nearly as supportive of my physical ambitions as it once was, marks time rapidly.

After catching my breath, I continue upwards, reassured by the fact that I had managed the same climb twelve months earlier. On that occasion, my purpose had been to tie the end of a thin piece of rope around the ash's bole. This time, I am ascending with extendable loppers hanging from a strap over my shoulder.

I soon reach the place on the trunk's surface where a roughly circular aperture opens into a cavity. The hole is just wide enough for the insertion of a forearm, should this be my inclination. And the cavity, I know, must be broader. My understanding of the tree's internal topography comes not from a previous tactile examination, however, but through having witnessed the local parakeets rear brood after brood within the chamber's confines. Before them, grey squirrels had done the same. And going back further in time, the hollow had been the home of great spotted woodpeckers—the original architects.

From this point on the trunk, I can look across more or less horizontally at my target, which is a series of spindly branches pointing out towards the ash's nearest fellow tree, a horse chestnut in the corner of the playing field that borders my small parcel of land. Like this conker-yielding giant, the ash is now bare. The palmate foliage of the former and the compound leaves of the latter have fallen and been raked into mixed piles in the garden's various nooks, where they offer shelter for insects and other creatures.

Between the tips of my target branches and the nearest shoots in the chestnut's own woody radiation, there is three feet of air. The gap is small enough to invite a leap.

"You want to be careful," says a voice from the ground. "George Bernard Shaw died by falling from a tree." This biographical detail has been offered up by my neighbour Bill. It is in keeping with his peculiar grasp of humour.

A witty reply eludes me. Instead, I utter a single syllable—"Thanks"—in a tone too close to a grunt to be considered civil. (Later, I contemplate how I might have responded with something like: "Didn't Shaw say that the optimist invents an aeroplane, and the pessimist a parachute?" But life never really gives second chances.)

"What are you doing up there anyway?" Bill continues. "Lost a kite?"

At this point, only the truth seems appropriate—or at least a slice of it—and so I reply: "A spot of pruning."

"Is it even your tree?" Bill presses. Here he has asked a question that I have pondered countless times before. The trunk's base is bisected by the imaginary line that runs between my garden and the council-owned pavement beyond it. The dividing hedge stops at the ash and continues on the other side; in other words, the tree forms part of the physical boundary. During previous deliberations on this matter, I have found some comfort in the ash's form, since the trunk deviates distinctly away from the perpendicular and into the

airspace above my lawn. I once read that fallen fruit is the property of the person in whose garden it lands (as much as it belongs to any human), even if the source tree is rooted in neighbouring soil. And this seems relevant in some way. As a minimum, it brings the dimension of altitude into jurisprudence's sphere.

I do not wish to encourage a lengthy debate on the matter, however, and so my response to the question on proprietorship is a two-syllable snort: "Not sure."

"Why the pruning?" Bill asks next, reprising his earlier line of investigation. I realize in this moment that there is a distinct downside to being up in the sky. Namely, it is not a position from which it is easy to dismiss a man who has his footing on terra firma. I have little choice, therefore, but to continue my participation in the interview.

So I give him another part of the truth: "I want to stop the squirrels using the spindly branches to jump across to the ash. My plan is to trim them off."

This information seems to have finally sated his inquisitiveness, and he begins to stroll away. "Buys some loppers and thinks he's a tree surgeon," I hear him mutter.

Now that I am free to resume the work, I inch myself along a sturdy branch that takes me away from the bole. For stability, I grasp the cordage that runs taut between the ash and the chestnut. *Might as well find a use for it*, I muse.

My progress is slow, but at last, with the loppers' telescopic handles now fully extended, I attain a position from which I can reach the base of the shoots that I intend to cut. I am close enough to study the sooty buds that emerge in opposite pairs along the length of each of the thin branches. I also notice the manifold brown growths that are dangling from these woody shoots. I have seen them from the ground *en masse*, but not until the present moment have I wondered what they might be. Each one looks like the head of a broccoli stem, except smaller and desiccated.

The presence of the growths sets off a train of ideas. I decide to contract the handles of my implement—its cutting blades unused—and then slide back along the branch to make my descent.

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It is nearing noon the next day, and I am setting off to visit a friend, who lives a couple of miles away, when I encounter Bill again. It is clear that he has been giving further thought to my arboreal activity. "You should have rented a cherry-picker," he offers. The suggestion does not surprise me: he is the kind of man who likes to turn a simple task into a pageant.

"I still don't get why you need to be up there pruning," he continues. The man's tenacious curiosity—in a world that indifference has permeated like a plague—is not something that I can fault. And I reward him with the rest of the truth, delivered in as friendly a manner as I can manage.

I begin by describing how I look out of my bedroom window each morning and see squirrels jumping between the canopies of the ash and the chestnut, always leaping from a comparatively sturdy branch but landing with paws

clinging to a seemingly fragile shoot. As a feat of acrobatic dexterity it is extraordinary. But the fear that the shoot will be ripped from the tree is not something that I can shake. This is because I have seen it happen. I had to dig a grave for that poor mammal. And while the autumn gales take care of some of the weaker branches, their filtering effect is imperfect.

Next, I explain that during the previous year I had fastened a rope to serve as a bridge between the two trees, but that the squirrels had still favoured their air-borne mode of passage (saying little for the universe's faith in my tautline hitch). I resolved, therefore, to remove any flimsy-looking appendages. Then, as a brief concluding point, I note how I have read enough on the subject to be reassured that a pruned tree should, with clean cuts, not suffer any ill health in the long term.

I am expecting Bill to dismiss my concerns with some belittling statement about these non-native mammals. He might, for instance, use an epithet that I have heard being spat from the lips of several other neighbours. The term to which I refer is *tree rat*. (This is akin to calling humans *land gibbons*: it is not so much the words, then, but the way in which they are said.)

Bill surprises me, though, with a more subtle form of ridicule. "When you're done with your garden," he boldly announces, "there are a few hundred more trees to keep you busy in the wood up the hill." The tone is too snarky for me to consider his statement as philosophy; yet I have to concede, internally at least, that his analysis has precipitated a rather knotty ethical conundrum.

My own intonation loses its warmth, and I bid Bill a curt farewell as I set off on foot for my friend's house. I am soon strolling along the edge of the playing field and struggling to formulate a clear differentiation between urban trees and woodland ones, as regards the applicability of my intervention. I did not plant the ash or the conker tree. In fact, these representatives of their species have been living in the place a lot longer than I have. But the gap between them lies in the airspace above my garden. And this seems to be important for some reason, even if I cannot articulate exactly what it might be.

I then begin to speculate how I might feel the same urge even if the jump was between trees wholly on neighbouring land. Is the vital element not, then, I wonder, that the leaping mammals are visible from my bedroom window? Terms like *guardian* and *caretaker* tumble in and out my stream of consciousness. Nothing seems to adequately describe who I am, either to the squirrels or within the world at large.

By the time I reach my friend's house, I have made a dangerous leap of my own —one that has taken me to another moral quandary. In denying squirrels their preferred aerial passage, would I not, I ask myself, be encouraging those who have set their heart on exploring the ash to descend to the ground in order to get there? And by doing so, might I be responsible for exposing them to the hazards of my lawn, chief among them being its popularity with domestic cats?

Knowing my intellectual acumen to be inadequate for the navigation of such rocky terrain, I am eager for a mental diversion as I rap the wood of my friend's front door using the dragonfly-shaped knocker. The man has natural historian written through him, as with a stick of rock.

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Galls. This, I have just learned from my friend, is what the little dried-up broccoli heads are. It seems that I had been slightly off with my choice of vegetable in the visual analogy, however.

"Most people," he says, "among that rather small subset of the population that calls them anything at all, know them as cauliflower galls. The galls form through a localized cellular reprogramming, one caused by mites in this case. This particular kind is unique to ashes, as far as I'm aware."

"And if I cut off the shoots they're on?"

"If the mites are still developing, then I suppose it would be curtains for them."

For the second time inside twenty-four hours, I recall a phrase that I encountered in my childhood. A favourite of my mother's mother, it was this: *Life is complex*. Too true, Granny, too true. Nevertheless, at least I am now sure that I cannot go lopping off branches from the ash. There are other lives at stake.

Before long, we are eating sandwiches and sipping beers, and my friend offers some additional thoughts on the matter. "If it was koalas and not grey squirrels who'd become the established non-natives here," he says with a smile, "you would be better off. They have that good sense so characteristic of Antipodeans to know better than to attempt a jump, no matter how appealing the foliage on the next tree."

The refreshments have helped my own thinking too. If you cannot solve a problem from one end, I reason, then you can always try from the other; and I settle on a plan.

Tomorrow, I will get the loppers back out and climb the chestnut.