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The Order of Things

Julia Bell

I have often identified with Jamaica Kinkaid's question: 'Why' she asks, 'must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility that comes with being a human being?' Why indeed? In her writing Kinkaid reads the garden as a metaphor for colonisation, the way in which nature is owned, histories erased, plants moved and exploited around the globe, and she shows the way in which the formal culture of gardening is so bound with ideas of Empire. She saw, as Foucault did, that 'the garden is the smallest parcel of the world, and then it is the totality of the world.'

In this way, I experience my garden as existing in a persistent state of conflict between the fantasy of some prelapsarian Eden, and the actual process of gardening which is anxious and compromised, physical and sexual and violent and political. Rather than creating a retreat from myself, gardening throws me into the ferment of life. Here, I have to make decisions, take responsibility, my actions have consequences. No wonder so many people hate gardening.

To be even halfway good at it, you have to practise a kind of attention which is alert to everything. Not the kind of attention of meditation, which demands the deliberate passivity of the body in order to listen to the mind, but a kind of active looking, which notices the minute changes that can occur in only a few hours. When bulbs are emerging, what pests are beginning to overpopulate, where a disease has taken hold, where there is too little water or too much, how the leaves on the seedlings are unfurling, how the buds are opening. Plants communicate, in their shapes and tendencies. A good gardener can tell when a plant is unhappy, a really good one can tell you why. You have to learn to read what Derek Jarman calls, 'the codes and counter codes, the secret language of flowers.' Losing myself in gardening involves a physical alertness to space, decoding what I think the plants and the soil are trying to tell me. Consequently, anything I put in the ground I want to protect with my life.

I wish I had a time-lapse video that covered the past fifteen years of my efforts in my north facing back garden in London. In my imagination this video would have the movement

of the sea. Great tidal retreats in the winter when everything dies back, to the high summer surge spilling out of every corner, turning the back of the flat into a kind of holloway.

I never meant to live here so long, it kind of happened, as life does, but I know that the reason I moved to this apartment in the first place – initially as a renter, and then as owner – was that it had a small oblong of land attached to it – around 30ft long – that I could garden. The space is not overlooked by houses as it boundaries a school playing field and then a park. It's almost pastoral for London and feels sometimes as if it is on the edge of the countryside rather than the inner city which is outside the front door. The flat is like a portal from one world to the next. Out the back I can hear woodpeckers, see foxes and squirrels, finches and wrens and robins. Out the front, sirens, traffic, people.

This part of Tottenham is not particularly beautiful, the environment is degraded, the park beyond the school is in a state of managed scruffiness, victim to fly tippers and vandals. The wildlife is uncanny, urbanised: huge flocks of seagulls, displaced, now scavenge the school playing field at lunchtime for scraps of Chicken Cottage; there are so many foxes that the school has to periodically trap and remove them; green parrots flock and squawk in the trees, expanding their territory from Highgate; magpies proliferate.

An unusually warm week at the end of winter, precipitated the beginning of a major clear out, a ground zero approach to dig over and refresh the beds, attend to the dying and pot bound, dig out a blighted box tree, and put in a new piece of decking instead of the impossible lawn. While doing this, in the sudden high temperatures of late February 2019, I became more acutely aware than ever before of the history of this little patch of land in Tottenham, of my fleeting place in its ecology, and the not always comfortable relationship between myself and this space.

Initially, the garden was dominated by a huge pear tree which was at least 60ft high. It was a useful post for a hammock, but it shaded and droughted everything beneath it. There was a spindly sweet cherry tree nearby trying to grow beneath its canopy, but it had a small crop which was most often eaten by foraging starlings who would flock over it for a few days until it was picked bare. At the back, an equally lanky yew right on the boundary with next door and the school, which looked like a new-ish addition, a present from the birds probably. But three trees for such a small plot was too much.

This land was once, somewhere in the medieval dreamtime, part of Tota's Hamlet, which became over time, Tottenham. In my imagination, Tota's Hamlet was full of medieval

peasants, bent beneath the weight of their bushels, like figures from woodcuts. Somehow the children of history, life was simpler and tougher and significantly shorter. And there certainly would have been no grey squirrels.

Until the end of the 19th Century this area was mostly farms and market gardens. Right up until the 1970s when the last market garden closed, the area had been supplying fruit and vegetables to London. The pear tree was most likely planted at the same time as the house was built – somewhere in the 1880s. Over a hundred years old, a grand Victorian, a kind of living monument. For a few years I tried to garden around it. Everything mostly in pots. The ground beneath the tree was hard and dry and unyielding and frustrating. The only plants which thrived were woodland weeds. Splashes of yellow Celandine, Wood Avens, Enchanters' Nightshade, and my favourite, Herb Robert, with its red stems and distinctive sharp scent.

When I finally bought the flat, after a few years of renting, according to the survey the pear tree was too close to the house and the hard pears, falling from such a height, really could kill you, or at least knock you out. I vacillated about it for months then in the autumn, a particularly overburdened cluster of branches fell from the crown of the tree and smashed the fence.

The men who came to cut it down were from the local co-op. They scaled the tree using climbing ropes, heaving up their huge chainsaw. All day I was out of sorts, trying to work while interrupted by the intermittent scream of the chainsaw. There is a viscera attached to this memory. I felt strangely, uncomfortably, powerful. Even more so, when the trunk came down, the inside of the timber a bright buttery yellow. Dismembered. Fresh meat. I remember it smelled lovely, sharply sexual.

In the crown of the tree were two drays. One musty, abandoned, the other one very new. The squirrels were frightened off but would soon come back to find their home gone. One of the consequences of taking the tree I hadn't anticipated was quite how pissed off those squirrels were going to be.

They chopped a portion of the trunk in half and left me with two roughly made benches. I tried to count the grain but got lost somewhere after 60. Pear wood is sought after as a woodworking material, had I known then I probably could have sold it, for a lot more than I had paid to remove it, though it would have needed a specialist kind of

seasoning. Pear wood is given to warping as it dries, but as a hardwood for working, it's prized for its sensuality, for the gradations of colour that can be revealed in its grain.

After they had finished, we sat on the new benches, looking at the new patch of sky. The garden was suddenly naked, exposed. This new aspect cast a strange absence across the garden and also a huge relief; like the death of an aged relative after a long illness. We sipped tea, and I remember talking neurotically about the tree as if seeking some kind of pardon. It was rotten, it had to come down, it was dangerous. I had changed the ecology of the garden forever. The responsibility for this felt heavy, but the space was palpably lighter, safer, freer.

One of the men had recently become a father for the first time. He had an idea for a business: Nature Baby. In which he would take high resolution photos of nature and put them on a DVD for babies to watch. He felt that children in the cities weren't being exposed to enough nature, so this was his solution. It was in the days before the internet really took off, and DVDs were, briefly, one of the main means of digital dissemination. I tried not to laugh. I wanted to make a video of him felling the tree and show the baby that, or of a particularly destructive slug, ploughing across a pot of basil till there was nothing but stumps, or two foxes fucking on the lawn, or a cat taking a dump on the primroses. All with a loud punk soundtrack. That was nature, baby.

They left, finally, with the rest of the tree stuffed into the back of an old VW camper. The garden was mine again. It took some time to get used to it, but there was a lightness in the flat. The old patriarch was gone with his impossible demands, drinking all the water, stealing all the light, lobbing fruit like a thug. Opening up room for a diversity that wasn't possible before, but why did I feel so guilty about it? Why did I feel as if I needed to defend what was ancient, and cantankerous, to tolerate it, to garden 'with nature', rather than to change it? Almost as if my thoughts had become animate, the squirrels returned, looking for their home, upon finding the tree gone, they went, what I can only describe as berserk. They sat on the fence and barked at me, dug up bulbs, ran around the cherry tree and began to chew at its trunk, they attempted to get into the flat roof of my kitchen, gnawing on the edges of the asphalt. In the end I had to trap them and remove them because they were being so destructive.

The whole lesson of the tree was one of the impossibility of defending the past, and, of how gardening is inherently queer. Especially if we take making things queer to mean, as

Sara Ahmed suggests, 'to disturb the order of things'. There is no preordained plan in any garden except what we choose to impose on it, or how we read it. The idea of anything being 'natural' in an urban garden is a mistake. There is no order, just accidents of survival. The tree could have been taken by the previous owners, except it wasn't. They needed a post for a washing line, more than light for a garden. Or perhaps they liked the hard, inedible pears, or perhaps like me, they were for a while, too timid to change the order of things, and not knowing what to do they opted to suffer under the status quo.

Cutting down that tree improved everything about my garden, in spite of my tortuous feelings about it: the light, the quality of the soil, the plants that grew. Another ecosystem emerged, more responsive, more diverse, more experimental. One which sometimes escapes me entirely to be what it will, and at other times rewards my attention with a riot of flourishing. All I can say for sure is that every day in my garden, as with life, there is an ongoing conversation with the order of things.