

An elegy for ash trees

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Not until it began its extinction did I start to know Ash.

Newly befriending the living in their last stages of vigor can be bittersweet; rich and previously unimagined relationships bloom as decline sets in and I wonder, how did I not know them sooner? What did I miss?

I was a child during Elm's die-off. I remember their tall trunks and the cool shade of their graceful branches arching over city streets. I remember Elm trees being there and then they weren't. I wasn't aware of their decline, I wasn't keeping vigil by their grey trunks. Now in upstate New York I'm working in the woods almost every day and what I see dying isn't just a beloved shade tree in my neighborhood, it's a wholesale die-off of an entire species in a generation, another tribe of trees succumbing to its own version of smallpox.

Being in the woods generally settles and invigorates me, soaking in and observing nature's self-balancing rhythms resets my perspective, gives me hope. But lately when I'm out there I mourn and worry, even as I consider the renewing cycles of death and birth, as I work to restore what's gone away, abandoned farmland overrun with invasives. During Covid time especially, death seems to be increasing in so many dimensions. Ash is one of them, though just a tree, some might say. Yet its die-

off feels of a piece with human pandemic deaths, global trade and travel helped spread vectors that threaten both.

I've come to appreciate Ash's colonizing impulse especially at meadow edges with generous sunlight. Nearby along a road that runs between sprawling fields of corn and wheat, where hedgerows are continually bulldozed away, Ash trees will stoutly sentry up to patrol their last frontier—the scrub land too ditchy and close to the road for planting corn. Ash seedlings, hearty and decay resistant, sprout among sumac and honeysuckle, multi-flora rose and the occasional wild cherry, and when established will count for roughly three of every five trees, sheltering the furry and feathered creatures that used to hide in hedgerows.

I first heard about the Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) maybe fifteen years ago, learning that a jewel-green beetle, native to the Far East and reportedly brought here in lumber shipments, threatened to devastate the American Ash population, possibly bring it to the brink of extinction, like Elm and American Chestnut. It was one more grim news item, another fact to take into account about a world in which much of what we knew and took for granted was disappearing — algae-free water, vivid coral reefs, solid glaciers. The news came in a way that's become a too-frequent pattern, a warning that the familiar is threatened, we better learn about it, pay attention, change behavior, while at the same time we're told about the government's response. In this case US Department of Agriculture personnel were monitoring Ash trees across the Midwest and Northeast and studying possible remedies, issuing rules to quarantine lumber and firewood, even mulch chips, to keep insect-riddled wood from moving across state lines. The seesawing nature of such reports — the situation is grim but officials are responding — can unsettle and falsely assure, exasperate and numb us to inaction. We see it playing out with some responses to Covid news and guidance: anxiety, indifference, defiance.

On December 18th, 2020 the USDA declared it was abandoning its Ash quarantine rules for lumber and firewood, stating that the quarantine failed to prevent the Emerald Ash Borer's spread from the thirteen Michigan counties where it was first identified in 2002. Now the insect is known to be ravaging Ash trees in thirty-five states and the District of Columbia.

"We no longer consider regulatory and enforcement activities to be an effective use of program funds," the agency said in its ruling announcement. "Domestic quarantine regulations have been on the whole, unable to prevent the spread of EAB (Emerald Ash Borer)." The agency went even further, grimly declaring that "a nationwide initiative to protect and/or replace native ash populations is cost prohibitive."

Research projects to release wasps that feed on the Emerald Ash Borer will continue, the agency said, although the USDA offered little hope for that approach, noting that the wasps thrive only where the Emerald Ash Borer is established, where it's already wreaked havoc. The stark prognosis is that Ash is finished and a signature landscape tree of forests and parks and suburban subdivisions will disappear.

You can see it dying everywhere, leafless branches in summer, thin layers of bark ribboning off in narrow strips, yellow fungus attacking weakened trees. The forester who is advising us on rejuvenating our scrubby woods recommends cutting seemingly healthy Ash trees, some eighty and more years old. They're going to die anyway, his thinking goes, and if other desirable seedlings are planted and cared for around the Ash stump they won't be shaded and held back by a grand old Ash.

People's relationship with trees was closer when we depended on them directly, when planting a stand of Sugar Maple or Black Walnut was widely appreciated as a sure investment for future generations. Some tree species were planted for shade and beauty and that was enough. Grand old trees became landmarks for grave sites, treaties, speeches. And then there were the trees with special utilitarian characteristics: Elm, fibrous and strong, was used wherever shock resistance was essential, for wheel hubs and agricultural implements, heavy flooring and shipbuilding. Its strong and supple bark was used by Native Americans for canoes and rope. The American Chestnut once dominated North American forests, showering its rich nuts to people and animals below. Its decay-resistant and straight-grained wood was a favored lumber for everything from fences to furniture. Ash, tough and pliant and light, was the go-to for carriage frames and later for baseball bats, the wood's action giving propulsion and lift to a hard ball squarely struck. Ash was used for tennis racket frames, hockey sticks, church pews, bowling alley floors, the oars and keels of small boats.

We've grown distant from direct interactions with wood, we've become accustomed to swapping in synthetic substitutes improved in nearly every way, engineers tell us, carbon fiber as one example. But the distinctive beauties and versatility of woods like Elm and Chestnut and Ash are irreplaceable. And at this moment, Ash's untimely disappearance, there are millions and millions of them across the country, will further diminish earth's ability to remove carbon from the atmosphere.

Bad news can be shrugged off — the onset of a human pandemic threat, police killings of defenseless civilians, the extinction of a species — it's all regrettable and one can rationalize that it doesn't directly affect them. But if we deeply consider what's being lost, whether the fullness and relationships of individuals whose lives were taken, or the former ubiquity and disappearance of a species like Ash, the unease that follows can prompt us to shift our thinking, to change how we live. Look around while it's still here. In its healthy fullness Ash is so abundant in a mixed forest as to be easily missed, the trees don't immediately draw the eye. Young trees reach up like an artist's brush, mature trees have symmetrical broad crowns with even and open branching that allows for good sunlight penetration and abundant airflow, both qualities that had worked to inhibit disease. Silvery undersides of Ash foliage lighten summer shade, in autumn the leaves are tinted with bronze and mauve and help harmonize the more flashy Maples and deep green Spruce. So much of this is going away and I am heartbroken.

Unprecedented stresses we've created for the world multiply by the day, requiring a different attitude toward whatever life is left. Take notice, savor what is, heed the warnings of experts, maybe take an action to help heal or save some part of the planet. Our lives and the lives of species around us are changing, how quickly and whether for the better depends on us.

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