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ILLUSTRATION BY MAURA DOYLE

## Connecting the dots

**From smoke-filled skies to the sweet smell of a dying spruce, we are losing touch with the life around us.**

SPENT THE MORNINGS of August 2017 in the same way Emily Byrd Starr did, roughly 100 years earlier, waiting for the sound of trees being taken down before their time. One episode in L. M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* recounts a feud that ends with the neighbour's fateful decision to cut down the grove of spruce and hardwood trees that abuts Emily's family farm. Emily, who loves trees in general and the small grove in

particular, finds the waiting period interminable.

"When would the blow fall? Every morning Emily listened miserably as she stood on the sandstone doorstep of the kitchen, for the sound of axe blows on the clear September air. Every evening when she returned from school she dreaded to see that the work of destruction had begun. She pined and fretted.... Almost she wished Lofty John would begin and be done with it."

My reason for fretting and pining? The large lot next to my southwest Calgary rental, with numerous trees and the 1950s bungalow in the centre. Built during a time when land—for gardening, for children's play, for beauty—was important, and a small dwelling more than adequate. The assumption was that this 750-square-foot house, with two bedrooms, provided plenty of space for a family of five or six or seven. Recently, the lot and house



have been sold. Not to a family of six but to a developer. Who would do what Calgary developers regularly do.

In the same way that Emily's concern focused on a small grove, my concerns in the summer of 2017 focused on a small corner of the world. And yet strands from that small corner had global inferences.

In a world short on trees, losing even a small number of them matters. Using non-renewable fossil fuels to manufacture and transport housing materials, in order to replace perfectly appropriate existing housing, matters. Adding hardwood floors and granite fireplaces to our overflowing landfills matters. Following the values of consumer culture, which insist on quadrupling the size of 1950s family housing, matters. Choosing to design and build houses with heating and electrical sources coming from non-renewable fossil fuels, rather than solar and wind sources, matters. Using the profit motive as the sole guiding principle, in spite of staggering advances in designing sustainable dwellings, matters.

Doing all of these in the midst of clear evidence of global warming and the ensuing climate chaos matters. All of these events were unfolding right beside me, in a house and a lot that I knew well. I had been inside the house and taken note of viable pine doors and cupboards, hardwood floors, granite fireplace, built-in bookcases. The lot contained a multitude of healthy trees: a 60-year-old birch, two 60-year-old Engelmann spruce trees, three mountain ashes (beautiful indigenous trees whose berries are a favourite of local birds), two spruces 15 to 20 years old, a gnarled crabapple tree that still produced fruit, a twisted old lilac with tree-like stature.

A small corner of the earth, yes. But acting as a microcosm providing important information about the depths of our ecological crisis, saying much about values, beliefs, spirituality, worldview. As Indigenous folks, ecofeminists and holistic thinkers have long understood.

A small corner of the earth, a small set of actions occurring in the midst of clear evidence of global warming and the ensuing climate chaos. As I waited and watched, I did so with my windows closed, even though it was August. Otherwise I'd have choked on the smoke from forest fires in British Columbia (there have been 1,200 since April 2017) and the nearby wildfire in Banff National Park.

The smoke arrived in Calgary in early July and stayed like an unwelcome house guest who speaks vaguely of departure at an unnamed future date. The Vernon Creek fire in Banff National Park was contained in August, but fire officials said it wouldn't go out until a foot of snow fell in the mountains. (Yes, Virginia, environmentalists are correct when they talk about how interconnected we truly are. We share everything: the beauty and the terror.)

## Environmentalists are correct when they talk about how interconnected we truly are. We share everything: the beauty and the terror.

Wildfires are part of the natural weather patterns in Western Canada, and at the same time they constitute an example of extreme weather events. Consider the significance of what the climate scientists have been saying for, oh, the last 30 years or so. But who's counting? Thanks to global warming and climate chaos, extreme weather events happen with more regularity and more intensity; that is, their quantity and quality increase. The pattern in British Columbia and Alberta is unmistakable, if we pay attention.

And therein lies the rub. The frightening lack of attention. I had an impossible number of casual conversations that summer with people who exclaimed about Calgary's great weather, hot and dry. Let me spell this out: we were in the midst of a serious drought, with temperatures in the atypical high 20s and low 30s, and the municipal government issuing warnings about the damage the drought is doing to our urban forest, and parts of the province burning up, and smoke entering our homes, and health officials suggesting we stay indoors.

I would have given my eyeteeth to any weather reporter who connected the dots:

"Keep in mind that 2017 is the fourth hottest year on record, following 2016, 2015, 2014. Here in Calgary the temperature today reached 32 degrees Celsius, well above our seasonal high temperature. And we are still in a drought, another weather abnormality for our summer months. These are the patterns climate scientists have been warning us about for the past decades."

I have yet to hear that weather report.

On the first night of the 2017 Canmore Folk Festival, over the long weekend in August, we had all the signs of a big rainstorm moving in. Thunder and lightning, wind picking up, temperature dropping,



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clouds rolling in. I was prayerfully and desperately hopeful. But the storm passed over, and within 30 minutes three people told me how happy they were.

“Isn’t it great?” one said breathlessly. “I was so worried it was actually going to rain!”

I wanted to weep, for our stupidity and ignorance. It reminded me of the moment in Barbara Kingsolver’s book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, where she and her family stop at a convenience store and notice the sky darkening suddenly. The furious cashier insists it better not rain, as that would alter her plan to wash her car.

“I am not one to argue with cashiers, but the desert was dying,” Kingsolver writes. “We had all shared this wish, in some way or another; that it wouldn’t rain on our day off. Thunderheads dissolved ahead of us, as if honoring our compatriot’s desire to wash her car as the final benediction pronounced on a dying land.”

Kingsolver’s reference to final benediction, to prayer, is not lost on me. I remember my grandmother praying over her large, exorbitantly healthy backyard garden that boasted a fruit-bearing apricot tree—a rare sight in that pocket of southern Ontario. She had grown up in rural Lebanon, where the hill farmers deliberately understood the connection between adequate water and sunlight and healthy crops,

and routinely prayed to whatever creator they honoured to keep that connection healthy.

Reverence, sacrament and prayer are, I believe, one possible antidote during these troubled times. Along with engaging in practical actions, I pray about the environmental crisis. Prayer can provide me with solace; it can assuage anguish. Certainly it helped me in the days preceding the attack on the trees next door, their murder a foregone conclusion. And so I bore witness, blessed the trees, and thanked them. I felt they may have known what was coming.

I spent the days following the attack offering more blessings. I also honed in on small moments of grace. One of these took place with my neighbour Dawn, the elderly working-class woman who has lived for 45 years on the other side of the street. She talked to me about how upset she was, all the while hanging her wet cotton sheets on the clothesline.

A similar moment happened when I ran into Bill, another neighbour, as he loaded paint cans into his truck for a long day’s work. “I watched it right up to the point where they were about to take out the birch,” he said, “then I had to go inside.” His eyes grew moist as he looked at the ground, blinking.

These moments reminded me that suffering shared is suffering lessened. Not removed, but lessened.

In Montgomery’s 1923 novel, there’s a happy outcome. The blow does not fall. Emily resolves the feud and saves the trees.

I admit it: I envy writers like Montgomery. Like me, she worshipped the natural world, and found beauty, solace and rejuvenation there. She could revel in this love, and share it with readers. She could create a happy ending in which the trees live. I could do no such thing. After three hours of throbbing machines and shaking earth, by noon on September 1 it was all over.

I had expected a local sawmill to “harvest” the trees and then use the wood in some way. I hadn’t considered the possibility that the house and trees would be mercilessly bulldozed together. Living trees and hardwood floors and an intact granite fireplace tossed indiscriminately into a bin that would take them to the landfill. The overflowing landfill, that is. Yet that is what happened.

When I stepped outside my home the next morning, I inadvertently took in the beautiful smell of sap. It produced in me that happy feeling of being in an evergreen forest. After a few seconds, the reality of the experience set in. My sensory enjoyment was a result of the senseless murder of a 60-year-old community of spruce trees.

The blow had fallen. It has been a painful one. **M**