



Walking in Canada's Urban Forests

Treed

Ariel Gordon



Treed

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Hump

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Treed

Walking in Canada's Urban Forests

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For Yvonne Blomer & Jenna Butler.

For Mike & Anna Deal.

For the trees.



Brush Fire

I WANT TO GO walking in Winnipeg's Assiniboine Forest.

I want to go walking in the forest whenever and however I can. It's hard to explain without sounding like a dirty hippie, a back-to-the-lander, but over the years I've come to the conclusion that the best version of myself lives in its 287 hectares of aspen/oak parkland in southwestern Winnipeg.

This best-version thing is hard to explain, but let me try. When I sit down to write my goal is to write something. Something worth all the sacrifices of the writing life, which means I am inevitably and irrevocably disappointed, even if I wind up with a couple of poems or even this essay. But when I go for a walk in the forest, my goal is to go for a walk in the forest. And so, having met my goal the moment I get under its trees, I'm content to spend two or

three hours wandering around, getting sort of lost in the woods. Sipping my tea and holding my partner Michael's hand and trying to find mushrooms to take pictures of on a parcel of land that has somehow escaped development.

And if I fall in a puddle or can't find any mushrooms or get swarmed with bugs, I've still been for a walk. To lean on a Japanese concept, I've forest bathed, which is to say that I've absorbed the angle of the sun and the sound of the leaves rustling as well as every beneficial molecule exuded by the plants and trees. I've *also* gotten some exercise.

But here's the trick. The kicker.

On walks, I spend a few hours looking at things. Feeling things. But since Mike is seeing/feeling the same things, there's no need to instantly acknowledge these sensations, to respond, except maybe with an extra squeeze of his fingers. This means that walking in the forest is a largely non-verbal experience for me, which is important given that I've built a life around responding to things, out loud or in my journal or even online.

The quiet of these walks has an additional benefit: we see more wildlife because we're not jibber-jabbering all the time.

And because walking in the forest feels like walking in a provincial park in the middle of nowhere, Mike and I do all we can to preserve this illusion. We actively avoid other people, their children and their dogs so that we can be alone together. That can take some work, as people insist on acknowledging other people in the forest the way they wouldn't on the sidewalks in front of their houses. They insist on meeting your eyes and saying hello. They warn you about mucky sections or about the cop issuing fines to people with off-leash dogs. I find this urban/rural dissonance, this we're-all-in-this-together feeling, interesting,

but it somehow doesn't affect me. Which means that I'm not the friendliest person in the world should you encounter me in the woods. But I'm *awake*, both full and empty, quiet and quieted. And that's the best way of being-in-the-world I can imagine.

I've pledged to periodically visit this best version, on good days but also on rainy days. In seasons when most of the forest's paths are under water. On hot weekday mornings.

Dead deer near the train tracks along the forest's southern border, come spring. Imagine the deer charging across, afraid of the train's noise. Wanting in/out of the trees. Imagine the body frozen all winter, overlaid with snow. Another year, in that same spot, a monarch emerges from its jade pot, wet wings unfurling.

IT WAS FALL 2011. I wanted to go for a walk, but Mike had the car, so I called my mother, Karin, who knew *of*, but had not spent much time *in*, the forest. The forest is a good half-hour drive across the city from my house. Also, I don't see my mum as much as I should. Two birds . . .

As we approached the intersection of two mulch paths not far into the forest, we startled someone. Someone who was wearing hiking boots, socks and nothing else. He had his hand on his penis, of course.

I suppose the Forest Perv liked to be the one startling people instead of being startled, because he quickly ran away. Semi-erect.

My first reaction was shock. My second? The desire to unearth his cache of clothes and take them with me so

that he'd have to walk/drive home naked, too. I also sort of wanted to apologize to my mum for introducing her to the Forest Perv. But instead of articulating any of this, I kept on walking and we had a conversation that went something like this:

"Was *that* . . ."

"Yes."

"Why *ever* would someone . . ."

And then we laughed at having seen a naked man *together*. At how foolish he'd looked as he trotted off. Forty minutes later, as we were leaving the forest, a pair of uniformed police walked up the forest's main path. They stopped us and asked if we'd seen the naked man, as they'd had several reports.

We acknowledged that we'd seen him. The police then asked if we were okay. We glanced at each other, both startled for a second by the idea that we could *not* be okay, and said we were fine. I didn't know at the time that this wasn't the Forest Perv's first jaunt. Apparently, he sometimes chases the young women who come to the forest from their adjoining residence at Canadian Mennonite University. This has happened often enough that women taking up residence there are warned about him.

As we walked away, I told my mum that they'd never find the Forest Perv given the forest's size and all the ways you can enter/exit its patchwork.

When we got to her car, my mum looked at me, a wry smile on her face:

"Nice walk."

Lobster mushrooms growing alongside the mulch path. Bright orange and red blobs of flesh that seem to rest on the ground instead of grow out of it. I only saw one or two here and there for years until this year I found a spot where there were dozens of them, most too mushy and bug-infested for picking. I tucked a handful into my bag, knowing that in a day they'd be gone. Knowing that they were the product of one fungus parasitizing another . . . but still feeling like a thief. Washed, trimmed and sliced, the lobster mushrooms browned in butter. Five heart attacks, strangely diminished in the saucepan.

I WANTED TO go walking in Assiniboine Forest. But I'm not sure I wanted to see that deer leg in a tree at the intersection of two paths.

The humerus, or upper portion of the leg, had been cleaned to the bone while the lower portion, containing the radius and ulna, was intact, still covered with fur. The limb had been hung in the trees at eye level, where people would see it.

After years of coming upon similar deer legs, I still haven't decoded the intentions of the person who did it. Am I supposed to think that they are culling deer from the forest's resident herd, which would make these displays their trophies? Or are the legs taken from train- or winter-killed deer, or even deer taken in legal hunts somewhere else? And if so, why? Are they part of an art project, a forest-y memento mori?

To me, the half-cleaned, half-intact legs, crooked around tree branches, feel slightly sinister. They are an incoherence

in a place that I go to for pattern and order. I call whoever hangs them the Poacher.

The stretch of woods where I thought that a small plane en route from Flin Flon had gone down ten years ago, all eight passengers surviving, somehow staggering out of the trees. I thought that was what had created this burnt-out clearing, with blackened trunks that fell in a criss-cross pattern. Except I was wrong, the crash was elsewhere. Ten years on, the mystery clearing is filled in with blond grasses, but the hardened trunks lurk below, like a pond filled with deadwood. Ten years on, we spotted a duo of lost moose there, their dark flanks disappearing into the trees.

IT WAS SPRING 2012. I wanted to walk in the forest but I had to go to work. I got an email from Mike mid-morning saying that there was a fire nearby. And then another, saying, “nevermind, false alarm . . .” A few hours later, he emailed again, this time about a fire in the forest. This was no false alarm. Like other recent fires, it was a grass fire at the far end of the forest, near the CMU residences. Last time, we’d driven to the forest right away, worried that a large swath was gone, but this time it was mid-week and we were over-booked as it was.

If I had to guess, I would say that the fires near the residences are caused by people having bonfires in the field near that entrance to the forest, as I’ve come across a makeshift firepit there before. I got that people living in tiny cinder-block rooms, people living far from home,

would find a bonfire comforting, and that cinders blown from their bonfire were probably what started this fire. But I also knew I should be preparing myself for the idea that people are burning the forest on purpose, that these are just arsonists with varying degrees of success/experience.

Neither of these ideas assuaged my the-forest-is-burning anxiety so I scoured local media websites. The articles were short and illustrated by strange pictures of firefighters with brooms and heavy backpacks full of water. No obvious flames, just smoke and people in bulky suits cleaning up the forest. This fire, as it happened, was relatively close to the forest's one fire hydrant, but others have been too far for the hydrant and its attendant hoses to be of much use.

It was Sunday before we finally managed a visit. In our headlong rush out of the house, I'd forgotten my camera, so I borrowed Mike's and its big macro lens. I'm used to my own camera. I can make it see what I see. Using Mike's camera was like trying to look at the forest using only my peripheral vision.

Mike waited at the edge of the fire, standing amidst the yellowed grasses and downed trees while I walked between the trembling aspen trunks, raising small puffs of ash and soot.

I spent a lot of time photographing mossy tree trunks, specifically on the boundary between burnt and green. It reminded me of depth marks you see on bridges after a flood recedes, except here it marked the height of the fire and the heavy steps of firefighters between trees.

I had a bath when I got home five or six hours later. I had been pleased in a middle-aged sort of way that I

hadn't gotten too dirty while tromping around, but when I climbed into the tub, I saw that my leg muscles were outlined in soot.

It was like a charcoal illustration of a leg *on* my leg. So I had carried the fire home in Mike's camera and on my skin. And somehow that seemed right.

The harbingers. Yellow lady's slipper orchids, or those white mushrooms that look exactly like teeth. The variety of native violets, strawberries and other low shrubbery in bloom; and then there's that corridor where you're surrounded by wild roses. The feeling of being surrounded by wild roses. Both of us were wet and mucky, practically to the knees, when we got back to the car, but still we kept a keen eye out for the woman and her leashless dogs-as-big-as-ponies we'd seen entering the forest just before us. Mike muttering, "I'm sure they chased down a deer . . ."

IT SHOULD GO without saying that I'm angry that someone might have set a fire in the woods accidentally-on-purpose. And I *hate* that the Forest Perv and the Poacher haunt the forest. That their responses to urban nature are, respectively, wagging their penises and disrespecting the bodies of the deer they take.

But this is a multi-use space. It is a public space. Which means people bring to the forest what they have: Dogs. Children. Inappropriate nudity.

And I have this idea that having access to the forest probably keeps the Forest Perv from doing *worse* things in

school playgrounds and mall concourses. It probably keeps him healthy. Or at least healthy-ish.

So I resist the impulse to boomerang the Poacher's deer legs into the woods.

I try to forgive whoever burnt the forest.

And I walk.



This is Winnipeg's Urban Forest

IT'S 3:30 P.M., mid-June 2014. Time to pick up my daughter from her school, a half a block from our house. Nearly there, I notice a flock of brown-black grackles in the trees, moving like fat raindrops, like jazz hands, from the elm trees to the apartment block lawn and back.

Each panel of the sidewalk between them is full of idiosyncratic illustrations. Mostly these are the remains of Day-Glo green cankerworms, but they are supplemented with pink earthworm segments and shiny black beetles making a run for it on top of white spots of grackle shit.

It should go without saying that the annual cankerworm infestation is at its peak.

Cankerworm caterpillars eat the leaves of American elm, Manitoba maple and green ash in May and June. If

they're present in large enough numbers, they'll strip a tree bare in a day or two, then spin silken lines and drop to the sidewalk, looking for their next meal. It should also go without saying that the bellies of the birds that eat cankerworms – grackles and robins and sparrows – are filled to the brim with bright green goo.

So the space between the mowed lawn and the seventy-five-foot-tall elm canopy is full of wings and late afternoon raindrops, shadows and bright green worms on silk lines trying to escape the flock. There's cottonwood fluff stuffed in the cracks in the sidewalk, too, and in the lawn's five-day stubble. The gilled mushrooms that emerged today on the boulevard – half of which got stomped on this morning by school-bound children – are grey-black and the size of my thumb.

The crossing guards are singing tunelessly across the street, flapping their faded neon-orange flags, stopping traffic in both directions. They're like monks, chanting prayers they've said a hundred times. Parents in work clothes obey their instructions, picking up their children from school and hauling them home.

Nearly there, and rappelling worms have landed on my shoulders and the nape of my neck. There are wings in my peripheral vision. The air is humid, thick with spores and pollen and seeds.

People stop at the edge of the grackle squat, unsure how to navigate it. Go around? Go through? Or fail to notice altogether, causing extra ripples of movement, the swaying lines of silk slowly rotating; birds moving from the ground to the lowest branches of the trees, their tails flicking. Children drop their hats and bags, as they do, even kicking off shoes as they run through.

On the edges of all of this are just-emerged hosta fronds and grass seed and elm seedlings, grown from the pounds and pounds of seed dropped annually.

Just beyond that, there's the man with the parrots, who has a series of cages and perches on his balcony. The bright birds punctuate their ring tones and hello-ing with loud parrotty squawks as he gazes down at the street, a bemused look on his face.

And then there's the rusty-door shrieks of the merlins, nesting two doors down and rocketing through the trees.

And then there's the beautiful big elm in front of my house with its spreading branches that covers my house like a giant umbrella.

This is my experience of Winnipeg's urban forest.

WHEN I USE the words "urban forest," I mean all the trees and shrubs on public or private land within city limits.

Winnipeg also has Assiniboine Forest, which was created out of an undeveloped section of the former Town of Tuxedo in 1973, one of the twelve municipalities that were added to the City of Winnipeg in 1972 to become what was called "unicity." Many of those former cities became suburbs that then required roads and sewage systems, boulevard trees and light poles. Some people say that the unicity accelerated Winnipeg's urban sprawl, while others say that it made the delivery of municipal services more efficient.¹

When it was founded, Assiniboine Forest was at the edge of a suburb on one side with the remainder surrounded by farmland, but forty-five years later, its 287 hectares of aspen parkland now have housing developments right up to

its borders. That urban forest – technically a park – is part of Winnipeg's larger urban forest.

The City of Winnipeg estimates that there are approximately eight million trees in its urban forest, three million in what they call natural areas and five million on private property. In 2015, it was estimated that 299,000 of the eight million are boulevard and park trees.² It's hard to know if that number includes shrubs, either the introduced species like lilac and caragana or natives like chokecherry and dogwood.

But it definitely includes all the riverbank trees, the trees on the boulevard, whatever you've got growing in your yard and everything on boulevards and on the 4,047 hectares of parkland the city maintains.

I SAID “cankerworm infestation” and I meant it. In the spring, Winnipeggers pick caterpillars from other people's shoulders instead of shaking hands when they meet in the street.

It's a part of our culture, like the urban forest, like tree banding. Half of the visitors to the city in the spring ask, “What are those strange belts on the trees?” What they are is strips of insulation four inches wide, attached to the tree midway up the trunk and spread with a thick layer of Tanglefoot, an intensely sticky substance made of resin, oil and wax. They're applied in early fall and removed in late spring. The bands are meant to catch the wingless adult female cankerworms that climb up trees so they can lay next year's eggs in the uppermost branches in the fall and the spring. If the trees are banded, the females get stuck in the Tanglefoot goo and die.

On my block, one family organizes tree banding. I know this because every year a note stapled to a bank machine envelope appears in my mailbox asking for a donation to cover the cost of banding my elm. I know this because the bands go up every year and it wasn't me that put them up.

Winnipeggers band our trees because cankerworms can eat all of an infested tree's leaves in only a few days, which causes the tree to expend energy to grow a new set of leaves. This extra energy expenditure weakens the tree, making it more susceptible to Dutch elm disease and other stressors.

In spring 2014, we had a cankerworm infestation, but, admittedly, it was pretty minor, with the City of Winnipeg reporting that their numbers were low throughout most of the city.³

Trees Winnipeg, an advocacy group formed in 1992 as the Coalition to Save the Elms, has allocated considerable resources to tree banding. In addition to their education programs, they have also provided people with supplies. In 2015, however, they announced that they would no longer be focusing on tree banding:

“Since the mid 1990's, Block Captain volunteers and neighbours have worked hard at organizing tree banding in their communities to protect our urban forest from cankerworm infestations. As a result of this city-wide effort, The City of Winnipeg reports that cankerworm populations have been consistently low over the last several years and Trees Winnipeg feels that the urgency for city-wide tree banding is reduced for the immediate future.”⁴

According to Trees Winnipeg, though cankerworms are under control, the numbers of leaf-loving caterpillars are on the rise, including forest tent caterpillars and elm

spanworms. Unfortunately, tree banding doesn't protect the trees against either of them because the female moths of both of those species have wings.⁵

Given the low numbers of cankerworms, Trees Winnipeg felt like it was time to redirect their resources toward new projects such as their ReLeaf program, which provides homeowners with saplings to plant on their property and workshops to make sure that they plant them properly, and preparations for the emerald ash borer, which was confirmed in Winnipeg suburb St. Boniface in 2017.

IT'S A WEEKDAY in September 2013. I've just finished work and my stomach is growling, but instead of heading home, I drive toward Linden Woods, a newish development in the south end of the city. There's a chill in the air, but it's still summer.

I've a date with someone I've never met to pick her chokecherries.

Tonight, I'm one of three volunteers picking Schubert chokecherries, a cultivar of the wild chokecherry that has pretty purple leaves to match its purple berries. Chokecherries are weird. Eaten straight from the tree, they have a mouth-puckering taste and texture. The only way I can describe it is to say that they're furry. But cooked down with sugar to a deep purple syrup or jam, they have a beautifully complex flavour.

After parking my dirty little Prius, I walk up to the front door and check in with the homeowner, an older woman living alone. Surveying the tidy yard, I note that there are four healthy chokecherry trees. Returning to my car, I pull out my stepladder and bins and wait for my fellow volunteers.

Ten minutes later, I'm still the only picker present. I check my email and discover that the other two pickers sent messages to say that they won't be able to make it.

In the meantime, it's starting to get dark. And here I am with four trees full of fruit.

After spending a few more minutes standing under the tree with my glowing smart phone, frantically typing as I try to recruit friends, I pick until I can't see and leave with about five litres of fruit, my stomach rumbling and moaning. Before I finish, the homeowner comes and stands at the bottom of my ladder. She confesses that she's never picked the berries in all her time living there; it hadn't occurred to her. She shyly asks how I am going to use them. I describe the Mennonite-Grandma recipe a friend had shared – berries and sugar, boiled down and then strained through cheesecloth – and she looks intrigued.

Before she goes back inside, the homeowner points down the street and says that her neighbour has a pear tree in her backyard. The neighbour is apparently too old to climb up and down a ladder, so she slowly and painfully collects the pears when they fall and puts them out with her trash.

I sigh. Perfectly good pears thrown in the trash because she doesn't have anyone who'll come pick them for her. I tell the homeowner to tell her friend to call Fruit Share and drive home, having applied one of the emergency granola bars I keep in my car to my hunger headache.

As I drive away, my purple-stained fingers gripping the steering wheel, I'm already looking forward to slathering chokecherry jam on seedy toast.

This is also my experience of Winnipeg's urban forest.

EIGHT MILLION trees, eh?

Our urban forest is a mix of native and non-native trees, including elms, ashes, maples, oaks, poplars, basswoods, willows, birches, spruces, pines and cedars. To break it down a little further, the 299,000 boulevard and park trees are 33.84 percent ash, 26.87 elm, 8.33 linden, 6.29 maple, 5.66 spruce, 5.43 oak and 4.17 poplar. The remaining 9.14 percent are chokecherry, ornamental crabapple, willow and "other."⁶

Winnipeg's canopy is heavily weighted toward ash for good reason, according to the catalogue copy for Jensen's Nursery and Garden Centre: "Green Ash will grow to be about 60 feet tall at maturity, with a spread of 40 feet. It has a high canopy with a typical clearance of 7 feet from the ground. Probably the most rugged, versatile and planted shade or street tree in colder climates, and with good reason; low maintenance, clean, shapely habit of growth, supremely hardy and often good fall color."⁷

Elm has similar characteristics, but instead of ash's "shapely oval form" it has "a picturesque vase-shaped form," and it has other characteristics that make it a good street tree: "It is an amazingly adaptable plant, tolerating both dry conditions and even some standing water. It is not particular as to soil type or pH, and is able to handle environmental salt. It is highly tolerant of urban pollution and will even thrive in inner city environments."⁸

Linden is the next tree in the top three. Known as the American linden or basswood, Jensen's describes it as a "stately native tree prized for its strongly pyramid-shaped form throughout life, clean habits and fragrant yellow flowers in early summer, will eventually grow quite large; very adaptable and low maintenance, a choice shade tree for large landscapes."⁹

I try to gather all those trees mentally, like a woody bouquet, but fail.

How do you get a sense of eight million of anything? I can sort of visualize eight million people, though that's more than the population of the Canadian Prairies. Let's try it another way. If there are eight million trees in Winnipeg, how many is that per Winnipegger? According to the 2016 census, there were 705,244 people living in Winnipeg. Divide eight million trees by 705,244 people and you get 11.34 trees per person. That's a generous allotment, even if you round down from 11.34 to eleven trees per person.

Eleven trees per person is more than most places.

Toronto, for example, has approximately 10.2 million trees and 2,731,571 people according to the 2016 census, which makes for 3.73 trees per person. Closer to home, Calgary has seven million trees and 1,498,778 people, which equals 4.6 trees.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2013, city officials started to get complaints about strange black lumps on the branches of their chokecherries. It turns out the trees were infected with black knot, a fungal infection that affects all *Prunus* species, including plum and cherry trees, the native chokecherry and the Schubert cultivar.

During the '80s and '90s the Schubert chokecherry was apparently very popular and was planted both by developers in new residential areas and in the city, on boulevards and in parks.¹⁰ The city hasn't planted them since 2004 and has discouraged developers from planting them since 2009. But as of 2015, Schubert chokecherries represented 3.75

percent of Winnipeg's boulevard forest, which works out to 7,843 trees on boulevards and in parks.¹¹

And now many of them are showing signs that they're infected with black knot.

Former City Forester Michael Allen – known to many by his nickname Dr. Tree – believes that climate change, and the warmer winters that it has brought to the Prairies in particular, is one reason for the increase in certain pest species like forest tent caterpillars and elm spanworms. But it's not the only reason.

"The other very significant change in urban trees during the same period has been the continued increase in the number and variety of cultivated tree varieties," Allen notes in the introduction to his book *Dr. Tree's Guide to the Common Diseases of Urban Prairie Trees*.¹² "Many of these cultivated tree varieties constitutes a monoculture."

Monocultures are dangerous, because the lack of genetic diversity means that every tree responds to pests and disease in the same way. That's good if the tree happens to be resistant to a particular threat, but really *really* bad if it's susceptible.

Allen says the Schubert chokecherry is a perfect example of what happens when you plant a monoculture. "Twenty years ago, it would have been very rare for Schubert Chokecherry to have Black Knot Disease," he wrote. "Now this disease is virtually affecting every tree."

Having walked under the heavily infested Schubert chokecherries in my own neighbourhood, having seen infected native chokecherries in the middle of Assiniboine Forest, I often wonder about those four trees in Linden Woods.

Did the homeowner discover the pleasures of choke-cherry syrup just in time to see her trees come down?

SO I HAVE eleven theoretical trees. But how many do I actually have, as someone who lives in a downtown-adjacent suburb on a small lot?

In the front yard there's that one beautiful elm squarely on *my* section of the boulevard, one of an estimated 131,000 elms in the urban forest.¹³ It's unique in that, unlike most of the trees on my block, it hasn't had any major branches pruned off, so its branches look balanced and it has that classic umbrella shape. And while it has a fair number of bare lower branches, it doesn't seem to have Dutch elm or any major injury yet. The problem is it hasn't been pruned at all for years and deadwood attracts elm bark beetles. I could hire an arborist to prune them away, but it would be expensive and I don't have that kind of disposable income.

Another elm is half on my property and half on my neighbour's.

In the front I also have a lilac that produces anemic clusters of mauve flowers, a cedar that's currently bent over by snow, a spindly cotoneaster and three shrubs of unknown origins that previous owners topped but which still produce an enormous biomass of shoots and leaves running parallel to the sidewalk. In the back Virginia creeper twines on the eaves of my garage, a line of ferns have seeded themselves between the garage and the car, and a volunteer peony sprouts in the gravel. These are the remnants of the cultivated space former occupants created. Between the garage and the house, there are no redeeming features, just the cheerful purple flowers of the astonishingly invasive

creeping bellflower, the stout spikes of thistles and monstrous dandelions.

There's also a neglected planter that's currently being occupied by elm seedlings, but I'm not counting those, though I am intrigued, especially after hearing City Forester Martha Barwinsky admit at a panel discussion that she plants elm and oak seed in pots on purpose! And gives them to people as gifts!

Finally, at the bottom of my property, nearly in the back lane, there is a Manitoba maple that is technically in the neighbour's yard, though it arches over our car. The neighbour is quite possessive of the tree; when they landscaped his backyard this past summer, he insisted that the tree had to stay, though it meant they lost three feet of play space.

There was another tree, a sapling that leaned over from my other neighbour's property. It was a scrubby volunteer, a Charlie Brown tree.

After the roof of his garage stove in two winters ago, the neighbour razed the entire structure and put in a new concrete pad. This past spring, planning to build on the new pad, the neighbour asked Mike if we minded if he cut down the tree, which at that point was about three feet tall. My partner didn't know that one of the small pleasures of my writing days, over the past year, had been sitting with my laptop at the dining room table, facing the window and watching the tree. Songbirds of all descriptions would inhabit its branches, hiding from the songbird-eating merlins or resting in the leafy shade, and I would look up every few minutes to watch them come and go.

I hadn't told him because it felt like something that he'd shrug away: *Yes, but . . .*

And I'd feel like I'd netted one of the songbirds to show him, just to discover that it was shamefully drab, even as I marvelled at its tiny terrified heart beating between my palms.

So, beloved or not, volunteer or otherwise, that's a total of 1.5 trees, six shrubs and an unquantifiable mess of weeds. Which leaves 9.5 trees owing. If I could claim 9.5 trees from somewhere else in the city, what would I pick?

IT'S EARLY November 2016. It's been unseasonably warm, but there are skins of ice on the puddles this morning, the kind that are wonderful to stomp. I've just dropped our daughter, Anna, at a friend's house; Mike and I have a few hours to ourselves, so we're going for a walk. We're doing the Wolseley/Wellington loop, which means walking under a domed canopy of trees, from one neighbourhood to the next and back.

As we set out, we notice arborists on the next block pruning the elms, one with a hand tool – a long stick with a blade at the top – and another farther on with a bucket, trimming the uppermost branches. I approach the one with the tool, who has just trimmed a lower branch about the diameter of the thin end of a baseball bat. He looks like he doesn't really want to talk to me – the city apparently gets somewhere in the neighbourhood of 6,000–10,000 customer service requests per year¹⁴ and I'm sure this arborist has had his share of conversations with frustrated homeowners, wondering when their tree is going to be taken care of – but soon warms up.

I point back the way I've come. "I've got the best-looking elm on the street," I say. "Are you heading to my block next?"

He shakes his head, saying that Wolseley Avenue is the boundary for his crew, and that once they finish on Lenore they're heading to the same block of Evanson. He pauses, adjusts his hard hat and says, "The biggest, most beautiful elm in all of Canada is at the entrance to Palmerston."

"Whereabouts on Palmerston?" I say, looking down the street toward Mike.

"You can't miss it," the arborist says, smiling as he returns to his work.

He's right. The tree is easily twice as big as my elm, with four main branches and a thick trunk. I've seen it before but now, looking at it, it's glorious, even if it's stuck on the corner between two streets. I try to imagine its root system, which would easily cross both streets given the size of its crown. There's a mansion-y house adjacent. I want to go knock on the door and ask earnest questions about the tree, but I don't. I want to measure it with my arms, the way children do, but I don't.

A few blocks later, we find fresh orange mushrooms growing out of a boulevard tree stump. It's not a fresh stump either, which means that the city hasn't been able to replace as many trees as it's removed, at least this year. I'm glad to see the mushrooms because they're intricately colourful, especially now that all the leaves have fallen, but I'm still ambivalent about the stump. About the hole in the canopy it represents.

This is how I mourn Winnipeg's urban forest.

IF I COULD choose my trees, I think I'd claim a couple of apple trees, one that produced juicy yellow-pink apples in

the summer and one that fruited in early fall. The apples crisp and deep red.

I'd pick a pear tree that produced incandescent yellow pears and also the microclimate that kept it happy.

I'd maybe even claim a sour cherry; I wouldn't even mind the wasps it attracted. I'd definitely want a wild plum and a hazelnut. That's six of nine and a half. Trees for food and beauty. Trees that aren't especially long-lived but that would keep me in jam and pie over the winter, fill my fruit bowl in the fall and scent my yard in the spring.

I'd probably want the rest in hardwoods.

Two bur oaks, which the city says is "the only oak species native to the Canadian prairies." I think I'd want one that was only a couple of years old, so I could watch it grow over my lifetime, and one at least in middle age, with minimal pruning, whose canopy I could stare up into and dream. I might even try to make acorn flour in mast years, if I could save any acorns from the animals that carry them away in their cheeks and bellies, and the acorn weevils that bore into the ones that are left.

And I'd like another elm, to replace the one I'm inevitably going to lose when it succumbs to some combination of disease, injury and old age.

So I can wrap myself in its dappled shade like a shawl.

FEBRUARY 2017. Someone sent me a link to a photo of my block on Lenore in 1913, a year or so after the houses were built but before the boulevard trees were planted or the street paved. There's junk in the yard of the house that I will eventually inhabit, which seems about right. I share the

photo and my friend Kerry Ryan, a poet who lives in the next block, immediately asks if there's one of her block, too.

A few minutes later, she comments again: "God, I'm just realizing that is what it will look like again when all the elms come down."

She's right and she's wrong.

We won't have the arcing canopy of elms again once they're gone, we won't have the purple leaves of chokecherries or probably even the compound leaves of green ash trees after the emerald ash borer finally arrives in town, but I have hope. I have hope that the urban forest my daughter lives under will be more diverse, that her generation of Winnipeggers will have even more trees per capita than we do, that they'll love those trees as fiercely as mine does.

This is all of us, living in Winnipeg's urban forest.