

A Gathering Place

By ERICA FLOCK



ature tulip poplars are leggy, like models. There's a lot of trunk going up before you reach branches. Their other defining feature, of course, is their creamy white and orange flowers which bloom in late spring here in Northern Virginia, high up where no one can reach them. Across the street from my third floor apartment, a little forest of them – 4 ½ acres – had somehow held their ground for decades among the office parks and apartment buildings. For two seasons of warm weather nights, I sat on my balcony with a beer or an ice cream cone ruminating and watching the trunks rock in the breeze, the multitude of fluttering leaves producing shifting gradients of color. They towered thick above the pedestrians walking the dirt path below with grocery bags from the strip mall. I waited eagerly each winter for their leaves to return and woke to the sound of birds calling from their branches.

One morning in May I shuffled from my bedroom and looked out the window to discover a busy Caterpillar bulldozer knocking the trees down. I had no emotional preparation for it: the eastern edge of the forest had already been transformed into exposed dirt by the time I awoke. The morning joggers and workday commuters sped serenely past the carnage as the bulldozer toppled tree after tree, each landing with a subterranean boom.

At work I couldn't concentrate. I emailed the county zoning office to ask what the land would be used for. My query was passed around various departments, finally landing on the desk of an urban forester who gave me the unsurprising news: the trees were being cleared to build condos. "I'm really sad to see these trees go," I wrote. His response was professional, resigned. I looked up the plan number and discovered that the forest had been on death row for years before I arrived. I learned that the developer was simply another ubiquitous local real estate company, one I had considered renting with myself when I first moved here.

The public record on the land contained the long list of government agencies that had to sign off on the development: fire marshals and storm water specialists, the department of transportation, wastewater planners. There was no boogey man I could blame – no rouge developer that had snuck into the forest in the middle of the night to pull a sneak attack on nature. A host of people had made the decision collectively over many years, including the urban forester who emailed me. The result, seemingly so sudden, was the result of careful, albeit dispassionate, planning.



By the time the top photo was taken, a large portion of the forest had already been felled to make way for residential development in Herndon. After three days (bottom), nearly all the trees were gone. "Tulip trees" were beloved by both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson who planted them on the grounds of their respective estates. According to Jefferson's Garden, Washington often tied his horse to an old tulip poplar in Falls Church where he was a church warden before the Revolutionary War.

My girlfriend and I walked over to the clearing that evening. In Japan, a country where forests are simultaneously revered and decimated, she told me the oldsters stand around when trees are being cleared for development, just to witness. Another friend who had lived in northern Ghana told me that trees served not only as a place where villagers could find shelter from the oppressive heat, but as a gathering place for the ancestors. We stepped gingerly through the soft soil crisscrossed with machine tracks, the power lines crackling above us. We noted the soft, creamy, trunks stacked in piles and the green flower buds on the branches aborted mid-bloom. The flying bugs bit at our legs and arms, loosened from their homes, perhaps, in the branches.

Just before 7 a.m. the next day, I spotted two deer on the edge of the remaining forest. They looked around uncertainly and considered trying the cross the busy road before making their way across the clearing and out of view, mere minutes before the bulldozer arrived for its second day of work. I watched rapt as it busily tackled the next section of trees. Its steadfast activity was captivating, in a way: “the little engine that could”. It slowly circled the tree, loosening the roots with its metal claws. After about five minutes it’d raise its arms and heft its weight against the trunk. The leaves would shiver all the way down and the dozer would unceremoniously roll or drag the entire tree to the nearest pile where a man with a chainsaw would later cut it into more manageable pieces. After the third day, a handful of trees stood naked on the periphery. I thought those few might be spared, but they too were removed after the weekend.

The aura of the place had changed. The verdant green backdrop had lent a cool cast to the street. There was an empty space beside my building when I looked at it from behind. I suddenly found my room too bright, too stark, and pulled the blinds down to shield the glare. The trees had successfully hidden the ugliness of the neighborhood – a neighborhood that when viewed from a satellite resembles the script of some extraterrestrial language in cul-de-sacs. At night, in troubled dreams, I thought I heard loud motors and slapping

sounds coming from the lot. It became the location of something garish and unsettling. Daily life continued, but the trees lingered like phantom limbs at the periphery.

A man with the air of a construction supervisor had visited the site the second morning and after briefly watching the machines, forcefully kicked a piece of debris out of his path. The gesture seemed significant to me. In one of his many essays disparaging the trappings of “progress”, Wendell Berry repeatedly stresses the importance of affection. Affection and community, he says, ultimately provide humans with greater sustenance than the “cold abstractions” of economic activity ever could. What did the trees matter if there was no community there to witness it? I hardly knew my neighbors apart from the annoyance they caused me: the resident downstairs whose presence was detected by the cigarette smoke that drifted in my window; the woman in the next building over whose dog had bit me the year before. Now I longed to connect to others who were just as devastated by the development. I carefully watched the faces of passers-by from my perch to see if they noticed this drastic change in landscape. The majority didn’t seem to care. Those few that did – such as the two men who stopped to watch the activity on their morning walk, fanning their faces to keep the bugs away – filled me with a sense of bittersweet hope.

The piles of Tulip Poplar branches gradually turned from green to brown in the June sun and the soil bleached and dry. A temporary wooden fence was erected around the site, forcing pedestrians onto the busy street. New and different machines arrived to pulverize the branches into mulch, floating a fine dust into the air and across the street. We sneezed, even with the windows closed, breathing in the dust of the dead trees. Men with hard hats and maps began assessing the terrain and grading the land to prep it for road work.

I thought about it for weeks but couldn’t find a moral to this story. I lived in an apartment building that probably started its life the same way – with the crack of falling trees and the “beep beep beep” of reversing machinery. I was part of the population growth that made it feasible to build more. And 112 condos on 4 acres in an already dense region

is certainly a more efficient use of space than expansive developments of detached (and foreclosed) houses that litter my home state of Michigan. Still, these consolations seemed marginal to the explicit emotional response. In a cherished episode from Northern Exposure, the town collectively mourns the passing of “Old Vicky” a giant black cottonwood that’s contracted a fungal disease. “What is it about genus arboretum that socks us in the figurative solar plexus?” Chris, the town’s philosophical deejay, asks. “We see a logging truck go cruising down the road, stacked with a bunch of those fresh-cut giants, we feel like we lost a brother.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Erica Flock recently moved to a neighborhood in Northern Virginia with abundant trees and blogs on environmental issues at curiuserblog.blogspot.com.