Ash to Ash

by Mary Abma

This was not a slow death; it was not an inconsequential event in the scheme of things. This was a catastrophic diminishment and potential extinction of an entire species within a very short time—a terror brought on by our unmindful carelessness, our unseeing, and our disconnectedness (disentanglement, separation, withdrawal, disunion) from the rest of the natural world. Within ten years of its first known sighting, the emerald ash borer had decimated eastern North America's ash trees. Entire stands of trees near my home stood where they had died, brittle sentinels standing guard over once-sacred spaces, mute and still.

Many of the ash stands were located along highway arteries, passed unobserved by thousands upon thousands travelling at the speed of human enterprise.

I left you my card
But you did not cherish it.

You stuffed it in a drawer
Under all of the receipts
From your daily shopping

And failed to fill your lungs
With the breath of gratitude.

If you cared to look
You would have felt
The loss.

When I first heard of the emerald ash borer, I am deeply saddened to admit that I did not know what an ash tree looked like. That realization hit me hard. I was losing something that I did not recognize and the weight of the losses (for there were many) burned within me. I felt that I needed to mourn these trees—that we all ought to mourn them. But how do we mourn the loss of something we did not know well enough to cherish while it lived? Would it make a difference if we could learn to feel every loss to our ecosystems as deeply as we feel the loss of a person?

One of the consequences of the death of our ash trees was that municipalities needed to carry out culls of the dead trees within their city parks. Sarnia, my home town, has a large park with an area dedicated to native plant species. Canatara Park had a large number of ash trees and as they became brittle and unstable, their deaths posed a hazard. I watched the cull of these trees, an act as violent as the invasion of the borer itself. Trees were decapitated and chipped, their reddish remains strewn as blood across the landscape. Once the cull was finished, on a brisk, snowy day, I walked through the park, feeling the spirit of life and loss as I made my way through the snow-shrouded corpses. My sorrow was palpable and I began to consider these lives so violently cut short. Each tree had a story, had value. Why, then, did we not ritually mourn these losses? It occurred to me that we did not know how as many of us had not seen nor recognized the signs of their passing. In our society, mourning is a private affair reserved for those closest to the deceased. By leaving our grief rituals closed off and undiscussed we fail to embrace death's journey in our own lives. How, then, can we even begin to connect with the cycles of death and life of non-human species?

Grief and mourning rituals are so far removed from the day-to-day lives of contemporary humans, I researched historical responses to grief as a gateway into this project. The Victorians knew how to mourn.

Expressions of mourning were so popular at that time that they were literally worn on people's sleeves. I chose to use Victorian mourning objects and expressions of sentimentality as a framework for creating a body of notices, writings, and objects to express the grief that I felt over the loss of the ash trees.

I was guided by the question: if we felt every loss to our ecosystems the way we feel the loss of a person, would it make a difference to our behaviour as a species? Would we feel the interconnectedness we share with others in our ecosystems? Recognizing that storytelling and ritual could provide a means of entry for human mourners to cross over into the sacred spaces inhabited by trees, I decided that I would create stories for dozens of the lost ash of Canatara. I would memorialize them in numerous ways through the creation of memorial objects and writings, and in so doing, I would lament their loss and invite others in the community to mourn with me. Acknowledging and ritualizing the death of these trees might help us to value their lives and all of life itself. To do this, I needed to imagine that we lived in a world in which trees are cherished, noticed, and mourned as individuals.

For the next few years, I set about memorializing the ash trees by systematically creating identities for them—ones that mirrored human characteristics. I did this by identifying 14 clusters of trees—14 points of suffering, after walking through the woods several times, paying attention to what my senses perceived while I stood among the remains. I appointed an "Elder" tree and found communities within the woodlot. One community became "The Choir". When I listened as I stood near them, I could feel their songs. Another group formed an "Ash Nursery" where dozens of young ash held their ground, hoping to be spared the fate of the teenaged trees that had fallen among them.

Once I felt I "knew" my trees, I asked an arborist to help me determine how old the trees were when they died. We counted rings and measured trunk diameters. Once I had this information, I could begin the process of making mourning art. I began by transforming existing memorials from the human sphere, consecrating them in the forest cathedral to honour its dead. I wrote newspaper articles about the deaths of individual trees, altered antique newspaper ads to advertise items for a tree-centric world, and digitally modified memorial cards and poetry. In addition to this, I made mourning jewellery from old pieces that I had purchased at auction. To these discarded necklaces, bracelets, and baubles, many of which were lockets, I added ash ashes, wood curls, photographs and resin. I collected tiny antique bottles into which I poured similar materials. These represented mythological lachrymatories that were said to have collected the tears of mourners in ancient times. In each case, the objects of mourning were recycled from items that had been part of people's lives in the past. Through this work, these objects took on a new purpose—to become portals between our human stories and the stories of the trees.

In addition to making mourning art, I fashioned shrouds for each group of trees. This was an act of love and attention. I collected invasive phragmites (reeds) that were choking the wetlands on a friend's property in Aamjiwnaang (our neighbouring Indigenous community). From this invasive species I lashed together shrouds that would mark the resting places of Canatara's trees, killed by another invasive species, thus closing a circle. The materials I used were all biodegradable and are currently returning to the soil as nutrients.

I felt that this project would not be complete without a public gathering—a funeral rite, to offer up communally our songs, our poems, our dances, and our prayers in honour of the lost trees of Canatara. It was important for me to invite the community to grieve with me—for all of us to enter this sacred space with our eyes open. This event was held on a frigid day in April in conjunction with Arbour Day. People from Sarnia and Aamjiwnaang attended and contributed to the memorial. It seemed fitting, somehow, that we were not comfortable. The unseasonably cold conditions tore at our bones and joints. And yet we all stayed, shivering in the outdoor chapel. After the funeral, we walked through the woodland, a domain of life, death, and renewal, stopped at each of the stations, paid attention, and noticed our loss. As we reached our hands into bowls of seeds to make a symbolic offering at each holy place, we pledged our kinship with the forest.