

Witness Tree

by *Sophie Wadsworth*

Phil and his wife Beth prune, feed and worry
but refuse to cut. Wide as a barn door,
the sycamore is older than anything
in sight, and we pray it will outlive us.
We stand in rain, talking about rain
and what men do to each other.
The branches turn slick and rain
flows in sepia streaks down the trunk.

Also called buttonwood, this one is known
as The Whipping Tree. Here in 1783, a Shaker
named Abijah Worster was bound and lashed
by a mob until a General rode by
and set the man free, telling the crowd
to whip him instead.

For a talisman, I pocket downy fruit,
packed with gold-brown seeds.
Our soldiers come home without their limbs—
and we send new ones overseas.
We could do worse than planting sycamores
whose shade we do not expect to see.
Where plates of bark have fallen away,
the pale green cambium shines—
by the inch, the heartwood keeps growing.
One limb now spans the road, its branches reaching.



Solace and the Art of Scything

by John Hanson Mitchell

It's seven o'clock in the morning on June ninth and birdsong and sun are all abroad in the land. I'm sitting on my porch, drinking coffee and eyeing the grasses in a sweep of greensward that runs from the front of my house down a slope to a little shady alcove of clipped hemlocks on the eastern side of the property. My intention today, if things go well, is to mow the grasses, wildflowers, and ground covers that make up the body of the plant material in this expanse of open space. In order to accomplish this task, I'll use a scythe, a tool that was perfected sometime in the twelfth century and whose basic structure has remained unchanged ever since.

Cutting this section of what my old mother used to call "my grounds" is not a major piece of work; I could probably cut the whole strip in fifteen minutes or so with a ride-on power mower. But I prefer to make a project of it and mow by hand, mainly so that I can enjoy the morning. And it's a beautiful day withal; the little pine warblers are stitching the trees together with their sewing machine song; the cardinals are whistling in the thickets on the south side of the property; the indigo buntings are singing; the dew is on the vine; and (as far as I know) all's right with the world.

In point of fact, all's wrong with the world. Earlier that year, a huge international coalition of Christian armies had once again invaded the Levant and local forces had, as expected, risen up to defend themselves. There was fighting in the mountains to the east; fighter planes and Howitzers shelled ancient villages where, over the centuries, the local people, of necessity, would cast their lots with whichever violent tribal warlord held sway. To the southwest, the deserts were burning; the rivers were fouled with the wastes of war, the great marshes at the confluence of the two great rivers east of the Fertile Crescent were drained, and the Ma'dan, a generally nonviolent unaligned tribe of swamp dwellers, were either killed or evicted.

But all that is out there. Not here in the garden. Not this morning, at least. And anyway, in the long run, what can those of us who attempt to live quiet lives without praise or blame possibly do about an international conflict undertaken by distant heads of states over questionable issues about which we have very little influence.

With this in mind, I shoulder my scythe and walk around to the top of the greensward and begin to cut.

It rained last night. The clovers and grasses are wet and heavy, and the sun is glinting in little sparkling lights on the leaves of the ajugas and violets—perfect conditions for scything. The scythe snatches low, and the grasses fall easily as I begin to mow along the first row. I can hear the swish of the blade, the chatter of the wrens, and the chuck of the local robins, and smell the rich odor of cut grass and pungent weeds.

Scything is notoriously hard work if you go at it with brute force, but easy, even pleasurable and contemplative work, if you take your time, and rest periodically to smell the earth and listen to the birds and the crickets.

This is the first cutting, which is always the smoothest and freshest. I take a few swipes and walk on, take another swing and another step, and move on, slowly sweeping and cutting, sweeping and cutting, and mowing eastward down



the line, leaving a two- or three-foot swathe of fallen grasses in my wake. The moist scent of fresh herbage rises around me, the birds sing in apparent unison, and from the farm on the other side of the hill I can hear a dog barking lazily.

It's easy to forget that elsewhere things are falling apart—wars raging in the Middle East, wars in Sub-Saharan Africa, civil unrest in Middle Europe, crime in the streets at home, corruption in governments, vast gulfs between the rich and the poor, armed madmen loosed on the towns. It's all storm and chaos and noise.

But not here.

In his novella, *Candide*, Voltaire may have summed up the state in which I currently find myself. Having traveled the world with his various companions, and having seen all manner of disasters, including the deadly Lisbon earthquake and the local Inquisition, and having retreated finally to a small farm in Turkey, Candide announces that in the face of it all there's nothing to be done but cultivate your garden.

In some ways that was the original purpose of a cultivated ornamental garden. It was a hedge against reality. The creators of the great Italian villa gardens of the Renaissance were well aware of this fact. Streets and alleyways were plague ridden and squalid in those chaotic decades; footpads and highwaymen, and warring city-state armies rattled through the countryside and the clamor of war was in the air. Better to stay in the walled villa gardens, lounging by the wellhead among the quinces and the ilex hedges.

I learned to cut with a scythe shortly after I moved to this land. I had recently been in the Azores, in the interior of the island of São Miguel, and saw an old man cutting a smooth green lawn with a scythe. I knew that the traditional American yeoman used a scythe to cut hay and wheat. But I had never seen anybody mow a lawn with one. In my broken, schoolboy Portuguese, I fell into conversation with the old man and he let me try to mow. The trick, I learned, was to keep the blade very sharp and cut low and slow. Actually, I never did learn the real art. But I still like to pretend.

No more than twenty yards into my work that morning, in midswing, I saw something leap in an angled arc out for the jeweled grass tangle—a wood frog. This is a good garden for frogs. In the forest just northwest of the property, there are two vernal pools where wood frogs breed, and, since this is hardly a manicured, pesticide-laden, neatly mown piece of land, they take refuge here. I can understand this. I'm doing the same thing. Theirs is a dangerous world, so dangerous that—unlike my own species—they are approaching the endangered species list. They eschew shorn lawns, paved driveways, and parking lots, none of which they will find here. But their presence in the long grasses is actually a problem for me.

Scything is quiet work, save for the whisper of the cutting blade. Frogs, snakes, grasshoppers, crickets, toads, and spiders (and also on a couple of occasions baby bunnies) do not hear the approaching scyther. This creates a dilemma. If ever I mow this swathe with a power mower, which I do every couple of years just to make a fresh start, long before the machine comes their way, the local denizens flee to safety. I hate to confess that more than once I have speared a toad by this scything work. Even the memory is unpleasant, and sometimes gets me wondering whether I should just let the whole garden go wild and stop cutting and trimming and planting.

In fact, perhaps cutting and pruning could be considered by some ethicists as a form of plant cruelty. A clipped grass blade or tree branch is in some ways a brutal injury to the organism. Plants have evolved the ability to grow back, but would it not be better to let them grow freely as they would in wild nature? I actually posed this question once to a biologist with a decidedly ethical bent and she assured me that it's okay to cut grass; it will grow back with vigor. "It's what plants do," she said.

In any case, the fact is if I quit managing this land the whole place would be taken over by invasive plants in a matter of years. As it is there is a lot of diversity on my grounds. I did a rough survey of the plants and animals in this acre-and-

a-half garden one year and counted well over 2,000 species, which, I was told by an ecologist, is probably a very conservative count.

No matter, whether wild or tamed, the modern world is dangerous for wildlife: speeding cars, unchecked development everywhere, pesticides, climate change. It's also dangerous for people. A few weeks ago, just about the time that the violets, ajugas, clovers, and Quaker ladies were abloom in the mead, a mad man with a shaved head and an AKA-40 wandered into a public event and started randomly shooting people. The police stopped him. But as if to finish the business, another disturbed individual began shooting up the streets in front of a mosque. More shootings, this time in Texas. Police killed an unarmed man in Florida. There were riots. Somebody tried to break into the White House. A friend of mine got mugged not far from the Boston Common, and everywhere there was bedlam.

When I first came to this property, I started using the scythe to mow the blackberry brambles and rampant orchard grasses that grew just outside the backdoor of the farmhouse where I lived. It was all part of a little fantasy I was playing out at the time. The place was a wreck in those early years—an early nineteenth-century farmhouse with canted walls, a caved-in barn, a few old apple trees, poison ivy everywhere, and on a rise behind the house, where a former apple orchard once grew, a block of ominous white pines that seemed to absorb all surrounding light.

My idea was to fix the place up and grow things there. Restore the land in other words. But I wanted to do it in the old way. Hand-tools only. It took me years, but slowly, working with the scythe, a mattock, shovels, and rakes, I managed to clear enough land to create a semblance of a pseudo-Italianate garden, a landscape design I had come to appreciate over the years. By the time I finally finished, I was living in a different house on the property, a house based on the designs of the mid-nineteenth-century landscape architect and house designer Andrew Jackson Downing.

Downing was a member of a loosely organized group of gardeners and landscapers known as the Genteel Romantics who favored integrated pleasure grounds complete with woodland groves mixed with ornamental gardens, fruiting orchards, and waterworks. Essentially they were escapists. They were contemporaries of Thoreau, Emerson, and the Abolitionists, but they chose to pretend that nothing was wrong with the world. They loved nature, but they believed in living modulated orderly lives. They weren't radical, nor were they Transcendentalists; they sought only the peace of nature.

I appreciate their philosophy, but I'm not that good at pretending. I try though. Anyway, I'm not the only one who has tried to escape into the myth of the garden in order to survive in the face of the absurdity of war, the destruction of the environment, the violence of the streets, and all the other ills wrought by the successful primate species known as Cro-Magnon. The garden is indeed a sanctuary if you can willingly suspend disbelief while working there. It can even be a sacred place for those who believe in that sort of thing. I used to know an older gardener years ago, an irreligious man, who somewhat ironically given his religious nonbeliefs used to talk about "cathedral time," by which he meant the hours he spent in his garden.

Halfway down the line I've planted a little circular garden bed in the center of the swath with an ornate urn, planted with long-lived annuals—yet another Italianate flourish in this American garden, and also a good refuge for snowy tree crickets. Later in the summer, I can always hear them repeating their interminable birdlike chirps in this spot, a sultry languorous sound that always seems to me to speak of fecundity and primordial life. I believe it was Nathaniel Hawthorne who wrote somewhere that, if you could hear moonlight, it would sound like a snowy tree cricket.

As early as late April you can hear meadow crickets calling from the grassy thickets here, also field crickets, and then in late June the fireflies collect in the air above this section of the garden. After that, in August, the snowy tree crickets, and then the katydids, begin calling from the surrounding treetops, and then the

dragonflies arrive. All this is made possible by the fact that the scythe, in spite of my best efforts, does not leave behind a shorn lawn. Even after I've cut and raked up the grasses, the vegetation is high enough to shelter all these native species of insects. This section of the garden, and in fact all the open areas, is more like medieval mead, a mix of grasses, herbs, and forbs. From April to mid-November there is always a variety of color here because of the mix of plant material.

I sweep on, one swing, step, another swing, step, little by little the land is transformed.

In some ways I hate cutting down this mixed tangle of grasses and wildflowers. But the fact is, I know that if I let it go the grasses and flowering plants will go to seed, turn brown, and lose their vitality. The crickets and the sparrows wouldn't care. In fact they would probably prosper on the seeds and the shelter. But I like the flowers and the new grown fresh greenery.

Out on the main road, about a quarter of a mile south of this property, I hear the wail of a siren, soon joined by the yelp of police cars. Something unfortunate has happened. Violence on the roads perhaps.

There's no visual disturbance here in the garden; I can't see anything but trees and greenery from this land. Noise is the only intruder. That and the daily news. I hate reading the news nowadays, but I do it anyway. Last week there was a major conflict in the ongoing desert war just east of the ancient city of Uruk. A big tank battle. Many casualties on both sides. This was not a good year for world peace.

Farther south, in Sub-Saharan Africa, powerful tribes had clashed, citing ancient grievances. A victorious army clipped through the jungle terrain with the same ferocity as the warring armies in the north and east. Villages were attacked and burned, and an immense number of refugees fled eastward and southward, moving unseen through the vast Ituri Forest in central Africa, living on bush meat and thereby threatening the existence of local, and in some cases endangered, species of forest animals. The pursuing army cut a swath of destruction through the forest, driving the peaceful Mbuti Pygmies deeper and deeper into their forest sanctuary.

There is nothing new as far as the disasters of war are concerned. Save for a period of universal peace in northern India under the reign of King Ashoka around 323 BC, and a curious 100-year period of religious tolerance and general peace during the Caliphate of Cordoba in tenth-century Spain, the world has been characterized by violence.

If I have my histories right, the scythe as we know it was invented around the time of the First Crusade when a vast international force of Christian armies, encouraged by the religious fanatic Peter the Hermit, fought their way down through the Italian peninsula and on to Antioch, Byzantium, and the Near East and finally, after two years of warring, to Jerusalem. There were many subsequent Crusades, ten in all, and there were many wars in the region before that and many afterward, one of which was currently in progress on that June morning. Earlier in that month there was a pitched tank battle not far from the Via Maris, a place that archeologists discovered a few years ago, evidence of what may have been the first organized war involving armies and sieges and the spread of empire—the city of Uruk, in this case.

We seem to have to live with this as a species. No one has yet beaten swords into ploughshares, even after generations of prophets and antiwar efforts and religions crying out for peace and love.

One day in the early years on this property, I was scything in the lower reaches of the mead nearer to the road when someone called up to me from the street.

“Cutting in the old way,” he shouted, in a lilting Swedish accent.

I knew the voice; it was Sven, an acquaintance of mine who I used to chat up whenever I saw him walking by. Sven was a man out of an older Europe. Sweden along with Switzerland is one of the few European countries that has managed to remain neutral in the course of disastrous modern wars. Sven had a way of dismissively turning his head sideways and clucking whenever we mentioned the calamity of the news, as if to say: whatever can we do? Even though he was in his

eighties when I knew him, he used to hike the mile and a half to town and back. Sometimes on return, he would take a shortcut and pass through the woods east of the house to collect firewood. I'd see him making his way up the road, carrying heavy logs on his shoulder for his stove. He was one of three or four old farmers who had been working the land in these parts since the 1920s, when a new wave of immigrant farmers replaced the original Yankee owners.

Sven and I chatted about scything for a while, how he and his father and brothers and cousins used to cut the meadows back in Sweden and how the adults would use the occasion to celebrate. They'd sing while they mowed and sometimes would hold a ring dance when the hay was in and get drunk and carry on late into the purple midsummer night.

Sven got me thinking about the famous scything scene from *Anna Karenina* in which the egalitarian conflicted estate owner, Levin, spends the day out in the fields with his peasants, trying to keep up with them as they cut the rows of wheat. He falls behind, totally fatigued, while they continue on with their slow rhythmic swings. But as he enters into the pace of the work, he slips into a state of unconsciousness, as if the scythe alone is doing the work. In short, he reaches that condition of timeless bliss offered by those who meditate regularly. He does not recognize the passage of hours until someone calls out to him that it is dinnertime.

It occurred to me later that I was a little like Levin, in an American sort of way (although hardly as rich). Scything calms the mind. The ambience of nature obliterates the world beyond the moment; you live in the reality of the rhythmic work, the sweep of muscle, the unity of earth and air.

I grew up in an old suburb outside of New York City, and although I had farmers and watermen in my family of origin from the Eastern Shore of Maryland and had even milked a few cows in my time, I was essentially a city boy, not a countryman. Now, like Levin, I had retreated to the countryside to play the yeoman. I am sure my local farming confidants found me mildly amusing.

But never mind. All this is good for you. Recent peer-reviewed studies have determined that exposure to green space is salutary. So of course is exercise. So is meditation, and the therapy of certain aromas, as of fresh-cut grass, and even the presence of organic compounds known as phytoncides that are released by forest trees and shrubs. Also exposure to the sun—in spite of the possible danger of skin cancer. It's the best source of vitamin D, as well as regulating melatonin levels, which contribute to healthful sleep patterns and thus have a positive effect on mood.

I continue to mow eastward toward the shady hemlock arbor and the road, slowly cutting south to north, north to south, and back again, and all the while laying down the thatch of long grasses behind me. Whenever I stop to rest, I look back at my handiwork and notice that the tapestry of fallen grasses is alive with small insects, crawling, leaping, and burrowing back down into the tangle, their world temporarily upset, but unharmed. They will carry on; the grasses and flowers will grow back and life will go on. At least until winter.

At the garden bench in the hemlock alcove I lean the scythe against a tree and sit down for a spell. I've made four circuits of this little patch so far, and there is a great oblong stand of uncut grass and clover in the middle of the space. Not much more to cut.

I give the scythe a few licks with the whetstone and then start down the island of remaining grasses, cutting and sweeping.

I asked old Sven once to show me how they cut hay back in the old country. He took up the scythe, went to the middle of the meadow, and began to cut from the inside out, making ever-widening concentric circles. Another old boy I knew, who used to cut salt hay with a scythe on the North River marshes when he was young, told me to cut from the outside in. Levin and his peasants, as I recall, worked down long rows, side by side in an angled line. In my little plot, I go along the edges first and work inward. I notice that later in the season, when the

frogs and the snakes are out and about, they tend to move inward to the uncut swathe. So before I cut the final stand, I walk in and literally kick them out before I cut down their last refuge.

The sun is drifting across the forest canopy on the other side of the road at this point. The morning birdsong has diminished to a few errant calls from the catbirds and the ever-present house wrens. Summer is coming in; the mead is cut; and I'm getting hungry.

One more pass and I'll be done. 🌸

