

April Raises up her Plaque of Flowers
by Rich Schwartz

20 April. My wife reminds me that I need to start mowing the lawn this week. I walk across the half-acre expanse of the back yard towards the tool shed. The mower, still coated in grass from last season's exertions, waits for me. The sun slants down through the dense crowd of high maple trees, barely warming the chill afternoon air. I walk past newly blooming flowers and budding plants.

I open the shed door and I smell the familiar stale grass odor. Earwigs and beetles scurry away from the light. The grass smell brings back the memories of last summer: walking barefoot through the lawn, picnics under the trees, swimming. Then I remember the duty of yard care, its urgency this time of year. I remember the end of a poem by Louise Glück: *April raises up her plaque of flowers and the heart expands to admit its adversary.*

I never wanted to get a power mower, or worse yet one of those caustic go-carts you mount and then drive over the yard like a maniac. I prefer the quiet clean feel of a manual push mower. I love the fresh smell of cut mint that comes when I mow over the stuff that grows wild by the big white gate. I like the soft, precise, circular whirl of the blades as I guide the mower in a kind of spiral over the lawn. The strips of low-cut grass expand out to fill the yard, gradually erasing the high grass, forcing it into smaller and smaller rectangles until it finally disappears. And then the lawn is finished.

I put away the lawn mower and get out the huge scissors-like pruning shears. I walk back to the patio on the side of the yard, to the wisteria plant that spreads its tangled wines and beautiful purple blooms across a dark and heavy wooden trellis. It is at the zenith of its glory. The beautiful blooms and flowing vines can fool you into thinking that the wisteria is entirely benign, but if you let it go too long it will attack the house. Last year it reached the house with its long sneaky fingers, tearing off some roof shingles and tangling itself in the electric wires. I find it satisfying to reach up and guide the curved metal blades around an overgrown vine, then bear down on those wooden handles until the vine snaps off and falls to the ground.

4 May. Stepping onto the patio I notice that the zealous wisteria has already grown past where I cut it back two weeks ago. Another week and it will be picking at the house. That is odd; normally I wouldn't have to touch it again for six weeks. *The most dangerous form of insanity is an excess of*

enthusiasm. This nonsensical thought, which sometimes comes to me during moments of excessive glee, suddenly seems *a propos*. Nature certainly has gotten off to a crazily enthusiastic start this season!

The high wind sends ripples through the profuse green backyard expanse. The tiny white flowers dotting the lawn remind me of foam on the waves. The lawn is shockingly overgrown. Even with the mower set to the highest setting, the task today is not pleasant like last time. The mower does not glide through the grass in long sweeping arcs. Sometimes it jams, clogged with an excess of grass, and I have to turn it over and scoop out the mess. The grass is so high in places that I have to backtrack and then run the mower over it in order to keep the blades moving. And then there is the irritating prick in my forearm, the welling of blood.

An enormous hedge bounds the back yard from the tool shed in back to the big white gate by the side of the house. The hedge stretches more than twenty feet in the air. It looms over the yard, spills into it. It is a tangled mass of invasive species crowding out whatever had been intentionally planted there in the unremembered past. The worst in the mix is the *multi-flora rose*, with its sinewy vines and razor-sharp thorns. This is what pricks me in the arm as I brush by. Wiping the blood away, I anticipate the coming battle with the hedge – but not today. Today the yard has exhausted me.

16 May. *The most dangerous form of insanity...* Articles about the startling fecundity of nature appear in the papers. Those in the town paper have a bemused tone. *Let's play along with nature's little game. Let's enjoy her abundant glee.* We see photographs of our neighbors standing beside their unbelievably lush gardens. Mrs. Willmore beams as she pushes a shopping cart full of cucumbers she has harvested from her garden. In an interview, Frank Bienventura brags about being awash in a river of money. He owns a local lawn-care business.

The articles in the national papers have a more serious tone. Nobody knows the cause, but many articles speculate about rampant genetic tinkering in the agriculture industry. We read a lot about DNA analysis and growth accelerants. Our little state of Rhode Island seems to be the epicenter of *the growth*, as the papers increasingly call it, but reports say that the growth has spread up and down the East Coast and as far west as Ohio.

The crackpots come out of the woodwork. Some blame the wrath of God. Others see a communist plot. One person suggests that perhaps the interior states are attacking the East Coast, an idea that hardly has any sense at all.

A nut storms the state house dressed in a lime green suit and makes a little speech: *Man thought he had become as master unto nature, but woe unto ye who fall into this trap, for time hath sped up for the plants and revealed their deadly intentions.*

My push mower no longer suffices and sadly I give it up. I buy the kind of industrial strength mowing cart that I had railed against for years. Choking on the smell of gasoline, I ride like a demon over that riotous green ocean. My huge headphones reduce the roar of the engine to an unpleasant vibrating buzz. If the growth keeps up at this pace, I'll have to do this chore every two days.

28 May. The early morning sun beats down through the window, turning our white bedroom into a glowing furnace. I feel the sunbeams press on my face before I open my eyes. The sun is my alarm-clock; it is good to get up early these days. Dealing with the growth has become a full-time job.

The power is out: the wisteria has coiled around the electrical wiring, wrapping it like a cocoon. Some of the stray tendrils reach under the roof and tear back the asphalt. Others pry cedar shingles off the wall. The rapid growth shocks us. Cutting the monster back six feet a day with the shears hardly checks its assault on the house. I need better weapons.

A cacaphony of whirring blades, crashing branches, and clanging dumpsters oppresses me as I walk down the road to the hardware store. Our street is one continuous demolition site. People scurry around like ants. Everything is in motion. My neighbor George greets me dressed in khaki shorts, a white tee-shirt, enormous headphones, and welder's goggles. He has shaved his head. He seems out of place in our genteel neighborhood. "You won't find a chainsaw at the hardware store," he tells me before offering to loan me one of his. He bought six last week.

A chainsaw is just one of the things I need. I wait an hour in line to get into the hardware store. When I finally get in I can see that the place is gutted. I'm lucky to get an axe. Later in the day I stand in even longer lines in order to stockpile gasoline, sunscreen, fresh water, vitamins, beans, nuts, cereal, and powdered milk. The food will supplement the apples and peaches from our trees and the cucumbers, radishes, carrots, and tomatos from my wife's garden. At least we won't starve.

8 June. The hedge crowds so tightly around the big white gate that I can't open it. I hack the gate down with my axe. It is not possible to kill the

hedge like I killed the wisteria. The thick and forbidding trunks are buried so deep inside the wild tangle of branches that they are impossible to reach. The long vines of that Medusa spill over the top so quickly it almost seems like she is letting down her hair on us. The hedge advances steadily and relentlessly, seething into the yard, threatening the house. If I don't beat it back, it will tear apart the house like the wisteria tried to do.

I wish I could get military grade defoliants. As it is, I maul the hedge daily with the axe and the chainsaw. I dig as deep as I can into the tangle of branches and then saw or chop them off. These battles produce an enormous amount of waste, which I have given up hauling out to the curb. There is no point. Plant waste clogs the streets, making them impassible. The garbage trucks do not come.

Huge piles of severed vine and broken tree branches languish in my front and back yards, surrounded by a rising tangle of grass, weeds, and wildflowers. I quit mowing most of the yard. Even if my machine could navigate those wilds, I would have to do it four times a day just to keep up. As a compromise, I drive the machine every few hours around the perimeter of the house in order to maintain clear access to the yard.

20 June. The last thing we learn before losing contact with the outside world is that the growth has spread to every continent. I doubt that the general fabric of society is still intact. I can't imagine how the infrastructure of roads and waterways, the production of foods, the workings of government, or the maintenance of law and order, could survive the rapidly accelerating press of nature.

The outside of our house is an impenetrable jungle. The roaring chainsaws and clanging dumpsters have fallen silent as we all have realized the futility of fighting the growth on anything like a grand scale. The growth has isolated us. Our lives turn inward, towards the defense of our homes.

We are in a pitched battle! The wisteria I thought I had vanquished remains a distressing menace because I don't have the wherewithal to remove the roots. I saw it back to a stump twice a day. Apple trees punch through the windows in the living room. The hedge tears off so much of the roof that in several places we see skylight from inside the house. Multiflora rose leaps from the hedge and invades our master bedroom. Its spiky tendrils explore the nooks and crannies of the room like the fingers of a blind person trying to understand a novel object. The mowing machine is useless: Grass and weeds grow so thick and high around it that they practically consume it.

The growth has weapons besides the crushing force of sheer volume. Thorny vines and poison ivy braid through everything, giving the growth a sharp and toxic sheen, a suit of armor that is both repellent and *sticky*. Today I have a close call. As I beat the hedge back from the house, a coil of multiflora rose pricks my shoulder through my tee-shirt and clings to me. The prick startles me and I bump into another coil, which pricks me in the back and clings. Another one clings to my shorts.

Every move I make further ensnares me. My motion conspires with the brainless plant to give it the illusion of deliberate intention. It seems to grab me like an octopus, drawing me into the hedge. Soon the stuff has me trapped and bleeding in a cage of thorns. I am paralyzed. Thorns half an inch long hover in front of my eyes and I can't bring my hands up to defend against them. One wrong move and I could end up blind! I scream until my wife rescues me with the pruning shears.

4 July. The sun bears down on us like a flame thrower. The jungle radiates a sweltering heat. The pungent stink of compost surrounds us. There is nothing left in our lives except the losing battle with this insistent enemy. The growth imprisons us in our ever-shrinking house. Tree branches, bushes, flowers, weeds, and vines occupy most of the rooms. Tangles of multiflora rose run through the hallways. The only advantage in losing all this territory is that we have a smaller frontier to defend. We hope the growth will not evict us entirely from our house and fling us into the deadly jungle.

I should say that the appalling growth is not entirely without its consolations. For the sake of our sanity we try to forget the horror sometimes and appreciate what the situation has to offer. When we ignore the coming death that it surely implies, the scene that endlessly unfolds around us is mesmerizing and beautiful.

Time hath sped up for the plants... The jungle floor is a seething kaleidoscopic liquid. Chartreuse stalks rise up all around us like the wriggling legs of huge upturned centipedes. The hedge spills over the roof like green lava. The waving, twisting arms of the maple trees sprout arms of their own, which sprout arms of *their* own, and so on *ad infinitum*. Our peaches and apples expand like bubbles rising out of a boiling pot of water. Hydrangeas, peonies, sunflowers, and all the rest bloom violently. A purple disk fringed by yellow flames opens up six feet wide like an umbrella, only to be eclipsed by a shower of white and crimson puffs. These explosions of color bring back the memory of last summer's fireworks.

27 July. The growth is slowing down! The peak came around the fourth of July. The world around us came to a boil and then gradually cooled, as if the fire had been turned off. The plants seem less like vicious animals now. The growth obliterated our neighborhood, our street, our yard. It destroyed everything of our house except our tiny fortress in the kitchen. It stabbed and scratched and poisoned us. Even so, it looks like we will survive.

25 November. There had been a very real possibility that the unprecedented growth of nature would wipe out the human race, but that did not happen. By early August it became clear that nature's onslaught had passed the most dangerous phase, and that a significant part of the human race would survive.

Our little town in Rhode Island has fallen back to a barter system. We are a close-knit community and we take care of each other. Nobody has a job to return to and the children have no schools but still we endure. We endure almost like campers at a summer camp that did not end with the season. I don't mean to gloss over the truly horrible aspects of the growth, but we the survivors do need to find some positive aspects in all this.

Outside tonight is the silence of the jungle, the silence of a primitive world. In the absence of any artificial light the stars and the moon take on a brilliance that must have fascinated primitive peoples and perhaps meant more to them than our lost electric light meant to us. A frost covers the profusion of plant life outside, a soft blanket of amnesia glittering in the moonlight. We sit by a window and stare out at the astounding beauty of the frost.

My wife and I plan to restore a small, tasteful version of our former estate by the end of the winter. We have already cleaned up the kitchen and reclaimed the dining room. We have a tolerably comfortable shelter and we will make it through the cold winter without mortal danger.

We know that the winter will pass, giving way to another spring and perhaps an even more devastating growth. April will again raise up her plaque of flowers.