

9-15-2018

Fallow Futures: A Short Story

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Hope, Jonathan. "Fallow Futures: A Short Story." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 1, article 33, 2018,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/33>.

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JONATHAN HOPE

Fallow Futures:
A Short Story

Grass dies.
Men die.
Men are grass.
—Gregory Bateson

The weeds came here uninvited . . .
—Octavia Butler

Sedges have edges, rushes are round, grasses have knees that bend to the ground.
—Botanical saying

The Grandparent

“It’s the same as usual. Hot and raining and the kids are playing outside. They’ll come in. Eventually. Tired and dirty. But for now they’re having fun, driving their hands in the soil, building god-knows-what—probably another tent—with bamboo and woven grass mats.” Sam sat in the kitchen, looking through the window, sipping tea, talking on the phone.

“Me? Ha! No. You know I’ll never really get used to this. I’m from some other place. Some other time.” Sam paused, reflecting, barely listening to the other end.

The family had moved here some years ago, but Sam had never completely settled in. Obviously the grandchildren had, because they grew up in this world. But Sam, who had lived most of her life in a technometropolis, was born before all these laws protecting grasses had been passed. When was that legislation introduced? Forty, maybe even fifty years ago? It all seemed a bit fuzzy. Sam had the feeling her memory was far stragglier and more tangled than it had been a few years ago. Unkempt, just like her surroundings. But she found comfort in the idea that it didn’t really matter anymore. Without being able to pinpoint anything precise, she did, however, remember a slow transformation, a gradual and evolving change in behaviours and landscapes. People had started by putting up with the grasses. Then the grasses, and what

people did with them, had begun to spread, gain momentum. The grasses found their way into human affairs. In the laws and media, in the streets. It was not just about tolerating the grasses anymore. It turned into something else. The grasses actually started appearing, they became more and more prevalent, they outnumbered humans. Grasses that had never grown here, in this part of the land. Grasses that botanists had never even heard of. They had been there for ages, but with the different words came a different world. People used the grasses, integrated them in their lives. They were smoked, worn, and woven. Converted to agrofuel. Used as building materials. Broken down and blended with enzymes to produce food.

“You know, I’ll never get used to them. To the grasses. They grow everywhere. In the yards, on roofs, in the streets between the ruts. In cracks in the walls. In cracks in the lanes. Just so many kinds. Dog’s tooth, common reed, bromes, horsetail, quillwort (*which was thriving right now*), dead man’s fescue, quaking grass. (*Her memory wasn’t that bad after all . . .*) Dozens and dozens of species of sedges, bitter millet, and . . . and . . . so many shades of green. Hints of yellow or purple or brown or orange. In other seasons, grayed by the sun and the cold. So many sizes and textures. Some tough and woody, some soft and supple and billowing. Some so tall we could . . . lose ourselves in those groves.”

Sunlight sliced through clouds, but the rain did not stop. It would keep on like this at least until the end of the month, Sam thought to herself, accepting the weather she could not change. “And the sounds. Back then, we’d hear the constant din of humans going around busily doing their things. Driven by the humming of industries, human-time, and money. Now, instead, there’re so many grasses that we can hear them growing. Pushing up against each other, creaking in the wind. The place is . . . alive, I guess. Alive, with the sounds of the grasses in the wind and the rain. Swishing and whistling and rustling and murmuring. Grasses are everywhere. *Inside* houses. I wouldn’t be surprised if they started growing on us. In us.”

The rain fell harder, drumming on the windows and the tin roof. Sam poured herself another cup of tea, signed off—“Yees, the kids are fine, we’ll see each other in a few days”—lit another one of those cigarettes, and got up to join her grandchildren outside.

The Kids

And we’re outside. Playing, tinkering around and trying things. Trying to get a roof up. Pretending we’re exiled, marooned on a distant planet of endless rain. Forgotten by fellow humans. Adapting with others.

It’s been raining for weeks, and Grandma says that it’ll keep on raining until school starts. The rain is turning the ground muddy, the grasses soggy. Some of them are thriving, but some are just too waterlogged by now. In the fall, when everything dries out and the ground turns to caked and cracked mudflats, the wet grasses will die off, go into hiding until next summer, and the dry grasses will reappear. But for now, water, and bucketfuls of it. Digging deep rivulets between the clumps of sedges.

Grandma told us to play outside: “Get out of the house, go *do* something.” So, we’re weaving reeds into mats, like we’ve learnt since kindergarten. Shedding. Picking. Battening. Creating funny patterns with different fibres: grasses and shreds of plastic, twine, and copper wire that we found in the dump over in the vacant lot, roots and strips of cloth from a torn pair of overalls we found in the garage. Weaving, moving in and out, up and down, over and under. Weaving. Weaving ourselves into the mats. We are grass. Grasses. *Grasseses*.

We get the reeds from the marsh at the end of the street. For some reason those reeds are there year round, even when the rain stops and everything gets dry as hell. At school, we saw some pictures of the neighborhood taken decades ago. The street, heading north, used to turn east and follow the river for a while, before turning back south again. On that stretch running parallel to the river, there were houses. Huge mansions built right on the banks, with four-door garages and helipads on the front lawns. But the water level rose. It kept rising year after year and the river flooded everything. You can’t dam the ocean. So now our street just drives right into a marsh. Last winter, with Glenn and Carson and a few others, we went out on the frozen water to see some ruins that were jutting out of the grasses and snow. Crumbling stone chimneys. Walls barely standing. Isolated utility poles. We could even make out the kidney shape of a swimming pool frozen in the mud beneath the ice.

Out back between the houses, the massive thicket is just out of control. This year, at the turn of spring with the first rains, the bamboo appeared as if out of nowhere and grew five feet in under a *month*. It’s a deep and dense forest. But there are a few cleared paths that go from house to house. The grove is dark and murky and smells of the basement. And there’s a creepy place just off the shortcut that takes us to school. There, at the foot of a rocky outcrop, there’s a pile of trash. Broken screens, a rusted bike, a couple of worn-out tires, leaking lithium batteries rotting the soil. Somebody, probably one of the older kids who’d been plinking, tossed a dead coyote in the lot. It decayed in the heat, and last week we saw the bamboo was growing right through the carcass.

The grasses are everywhere. And we grow with them.

The Plants

Sedges. Rushes. Grasses.

Grasseses.

We take in light and we deflect wind.

And we grow where we want.

And our roots are deep, or not.

And we are trampled to brown bits.

And we grow through death, trash, broken life.

And we sleep under the snow and the ice.

And we will be here and there long after you are gone.

We will continue to spread along the land.
Yes, we will spread through land and the shores of rivers and lakes.
And even the air will be our playing field.

The Writer, Summer 2018

Last April, I presented a paper with a colleague, Stephanie Posthumus, at the *Planetary Cultural and Literary Studies* conference held at the Université de Montréal. Our talk centred on planetary futures from ecocritical and biosemiotic perspectives. As we prepared our paper, writing back and forth, we were annoyed to note how our discussion stayed within the comfortable bounds of theory. Our academic reflexes were hard to shake off. So we challenged ourselves to write differently, to hypothesize what these futures could look like. A strange take on Peircean abduction: generating ideas not on what is, but on what might be. Neither of us had any real experience in creative writing. And in no way did we consider that creative writing was easily within our reach (viz. “anyone can do this”). It is an art that requires patience and practice. Yet we felt vindicated in this experience by Donna Haraway’s short story “The Camille Stories: Children of Compost”—she refers to it as a *fabulation*—and the “speculative gestures” (*gestes spéculatifs*) of Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers. Our idea was to envisage future worlds made possible by an ecocritical and biosemiotic awareness, performing, so to speak, our interpretation of that awareness. Special thanks to Stephanie for putting up with my attempts at writing fiction.

A few weeks after presenting the paper, I noticed a funny plant growing in my backyard. It had sprung up very quickly. In under two weeks it was taller than my boys. I had my suspicions about what this was: Japanese knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*). After a quick perusal of my herbarium and some browsing online, I was confronted by the fact that a gardener’s nightmare was indeed unfolding in my backyard. Japanese knotweed was introduced from Asia to North America and Europe in the 1800s as an ornamental plant. It spread at an alarming rate, and nothing indicates that it will slow down. One of the world’s most invasive plants, it is virtually indestructible, with rhizomes stretching out several feet deep and wide. How could I get rid of this thing? I wanted to use the space otherwise, for a nicely organized vegetable patch. Rhizomes may seem modish when you read Deleuze and Guattari. But when you expect to tame the land and you come face to face with a plant that thrives under the repeated blows of your hoe and other garden implements, they suddenly appear tyrannical. Friends suggested that I resort to Roundup, the environmentalist’s nemesis, which, in any case, doesn’t work. Digging it up is useless. Horticulturalist friends told me that my only hope was to exhaust the plant by cutting the stems every week over a few years. But, peering over my back fence, I saw that the weed was flourishing in my neighbour’s yard. I could very well try to the exhaust the plant, but I would also exhaust myself. Then, rereading my short story, it dawned on me. Just put up with the knotweed, learn to live with plants that are not any more invasive than myself.

JONATHAN HOPE is a professor in the literature department at the Université du Québec à Montréal and also teaches in the semiotics doctoral program. His research focuses on the relationships between nature and literature, between the human and the other-than-human, and (bio)semiotics.