

WINTER WORK

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My twelfth day removing ivy from the Whatcom Creek Trail was gray and cool, with temperatures in the mid 40s. I grabbed a runner stem and lifted and pulled. The places where it tacked to the weave of stems below detached to a branching node. I gripped the stem and pulled until it broke. Ivy had an astringent fragrance, like retsina, pine resin wine. The earth smelled of mushrooms and decaying leaves.

Given ivy's ability to regenerate from stems and roots, I didn't want to leave runners on the wet, spongy ground. I coiled them into a heavy-duty, cherry red Lululemon shopping bag with this is yoga printed on it. Sarahjoy, the yoga teacher and therapist who led Hunger Hope and Healing, the eating disorder recovery group I'd been participating in since late May, encouraged us to find the middle way, the action that was neither driven nor lethargic. My tendency was toward drivenness, and the bag kept me attentive to pulling only some ivy.

My goal in removing the ivy was to keep the area as undisturbed as possible. Any sticks, leaves, rocks, logs, mushrooms, nests, and creatures stayed and, as much as possible, stayed where I found them. Trash – human detritus – went in the bag, and this included poop. I was pretty sure the two big piles I found early on were human.

As I shrank the ivy patch, the only evidence that it had been there were the ivy leaves that stripped from the stems. Since the leaves wouldn't grow a new plant without stem, I left them to return nutrients to the soil.

I raked the earth with my fingers. Against the dark brown soil, the cream-colored insides of the broken ivy stems and roots were easy to see. I wasn't certain the hair-like adventitious roots that tacked the plant to the soil had enough of the plant's regenerative coding to make a new ivy plant, but they were easy to pull, so I did. I wanted to be thorough.

I struggled with a thick stem at the base of a tree. In early December during a Zoom reunion with writer friends, Pat mentioned that she learned from a poem to twist plants counterclockwise in

the northern hemisphere to overcome clingy roots. I wasn't sure it would work on the horizontally growing root, but I tried it. To my amazement and delight, ten inches of otherwise unremovable root released.

When I filled the bag, it was time to go.

I took pictures of the full bag. I liked the ritual of recording my activity. When I returned home, I would post a picture with the bag to Instagram, where I had opened a new account to document my progress, and tag my post: #whatcomcreektrail #bellingshamparks.

Tagging the posts made my activity public to anyone at the Bellingham Parks Department who might be monitoring hashtags. I hadn't asked permission to remove the ivy, and I wanted to make it easy for the department's staff to find me if they had an issue with what I was doing. I also wanted them to be able to quantify my effort if they used social media to track volunteer efforts. They could see the volume of ivy I removed and which days I was out there.

The business with the parks department aside, taking the photos and posting was its own reward. Seeing the pictures on my profile made the activity feel real somehow. For the amount of ivy I removed each day, the size of the patch made my daily effort feel like a drop in the bucket. If the patch were a parking lot, it was the size of nine side-by-side slots. Since I disposed of the ivy in a dumpster at the end of the trail, I didn't have the satisfaction of watching a pile of removed ivy grow, but the accumulation of pictures on Instagram felt similar to building a waste heap and didn't leave me worrying that the ivy would reroot.

After taking pictures, I stood at the edge of the trail with the full bag at my feet and arranged my gear for the walk to the dumpster and home.

A man and his dog I'd often seen on the trail in the past two months approached. He was bald, had a salt and pepper goatee, and never wore a hat. The man's dog was Pomeranian-ish. It had long red-brown fur that was age-bleached and lumpy. The dog's black-brown eyes had the greenish cloud of blindness.

"What are you doing?" the man asked.

I gestured toward the ivy patch, "Pulling out the ivy."

He gave me a quizzical look.

"It's invasive. Gets in the trees."

"Oh." He nodded slightly and followed his dog, which explored the path edge in a slow, happy manner.

I picked up the bag of ivy. Gravel crunched under my feet. I imagined the man asking me questions. The ivy looks nice in the trees and on the ground, why tear it up? How do you know when a plant is invasive? What possessed you to pull up plants in the winter? How do you feel about killing things? Why not leave nature to do nature? Do you think humans are outside of nature or part of it?

My shoulder fatigued, and I switched the bag to my left hand.

I'd been talking to Sarahjoy and the other participants in Hunger Hope and Healing about removing ivy. To my surprise, ivy's ubiquitousness became a thread of conversation in our support calls. I likened it to the string that connected two cans in a rudimentary telephone. Our energy seemed to travel in the network of ivy's roots and stems across the nation. Susan in Florida sent me a picture of a pot of ivy in her window. Meghan in Boston texted me an image of ivy growing on a wall in the snow and shared a photo of an ivy-inspired ceramic sculpture she made that looked like a lacy botanical mobius strip.

These connections nourished me and helped me feel that my work in the ivy benefitted all communities the plant touched, even as I removed it. And pulling the ivy satisfied my body's craving for physical activity, the area where my tendency was to overdo. The ivy helped me sense my body's hunger and fullness. Satiation was ease. Demand and postponement were urgent, and urgency felt resistant, anxious and antagonistic. I used a gentle, curious hand on the ivy, and it let go.

Around 1800, European immigrants brought English ivy, *Hedera helix* (and Atlantic ivy, *H. hibernica*), to the United States for landscape ornamentation. When in moist, shady climates, this winter-hardy evergreen liana, or woody vine, grows exuberantly. It is a popular ground cover plant and used to create green walls.

Ivy grows in the American northeast, home of the Ivy League, with less free-for-all than it does in the Pacific Northwest where it is considered invasive. In the moist and mild climate of Washington

and Oregon, where I have lived since 2002, ivy is joyfully at home. Ivy's exuberance in this climate creates problems for parks and natural areas when it ventures outside the containment of landscape planters or pots. It spreads across the ground, sucking up water and nutrients. Once successfully established on the ground, ivy will climb anything with even a minutely rough surface. If you pull ivy off a tree, you will pull off the bark to which it's adhered, but if you cut a gap between the groundward and skyward stems in a tree, the skyward parts will die.

A climbing ivy infestation can weigh down trees. These infested trees are more likely to break under the weight of the ivy or during weather events such as wind and ice storms. Climbing ivy can also create a parasol effect in tree canopies and block light to host trees and plants on the ground.

Climbing ivy will more readily flower than ivy growing only on the ground, which makes it easy for birds to disperse the seeds. The ivy fruit is like a green BB, and the outer covering must be removed for the seeds to germinate. Birds are ivy's friend in this regard. They digest the fruit then regurgitate the seeds. A new ivy patch begins wherever the seeds land.

My shoulder fatigued, and I switched the bag back to my right hand.

Why was I pulling ivy? What was so compelling that I came out every day no matter the rain and cold?

I switched the bag to my left hand.

I enjoyed how my body responded to the physical task of engaging the ivy. No Zoom screen or mask involved! It was like every day I spent at least an hour hangin' with my peeps. Each day, I experienced the joy of discovery and surprise.

I engaged all my senses.

I came alive.