

# welcome the four-hundred-year-old tree

**A**S I SIT AT MY DESK WRITING, a man in southern California is sitting in a tree, trying to save its life. By the time you read this, perhaps the fate of a 400-year-old oak will have been decided and the man will have dismantled his little household, pried his bedstead out of the branches, and packed up his kitchen. The tree has the misfortune to be sitting in the middle of what is supposed to be a road. Why the road can't be moved out of the tree's way is a little unclear; that would seem the logical decision, a road being, by

definition, a thing that wends its way through the landscape. The current compromise between the developers and the tree huggers is that rather than saw down the tree—the plan that drove our hero up the tree—the tree would be moved. Now, anyone who has ever transplanted a 50-year-old tree, to say nothing of a multi-centenarian, knows how fraught such a move can be. The root ball, which in this case will be enormous, will have to be kept intact. Selective pruning may have to be done to compensate for inevitable loss of root mass—and that oak has not many limbs to spare, from the look of it. Craters must be dug, and then the soil far beyond the reach of the roots must be prepared. The move will cost about \$250,000. And it could be several years before we know if the tree will survive.

Whatever the fate of the California oak, there will soon enough be another gnarled great-granddad of a tree whose life is imperiled; this is an old chestnut of a story. What is the matter with us? Why can't we appreciate—and be grateful for—such wizened and beautiful life? Once upon a time, all across the ancient lands of Sweden, Ireland, England, Italy, Greece, and even North America, trees were considered sacred beings of the highest order. We learn from Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* that tree worship was so serious among the Germans that the punishment for merely stripping bark off a trunk was dire: "The culprit's navel was to be cut out and nailed to the part of the tree which he had peeled, and he was to be driven round and round the tree till all his guts were wound about its trunk . . . a life for a life, the life of a man for the life of a tree."

We're a long way from those days, thankfully. And, of course, not all old trees are worth preserving; there is plenty of junk in the tree kingdom. Yet, every time I read about another noble tree being killed, I think we have gone much too far in our disregard for their lives. They have become worthless. They are unprotected, vulnerable to the whims of whoever takes hold of their plot of land. In some suburban neighborhoods, there is a whopping

\$100 fine for cutting down a tree. Useless. It makes me wish we had a few of those terrifying Whomping Willows like the one Harry Potter tangles with at Hogwarts—a tree that can defend itself against intruders by bending at the trunk and twisting and whacking people with its strong, furious limbs. There are none offered in the plant catalogs this winter. But flip through the Christie's auction catalogs for sales of 400-year-old English, American, or Continental furniture. The sale of the Joseph and Bathsheba Pope Valuables Oak Cabinet, made in Salem, Massachusetts, dated 1679, set a world record for a piece of seventeenth-century American furniture at about \$2,400,000. Or how about a very simple three-legged oak stool from the early seventeenth century, recently sold in London for £23,500?

How do we set the value of a tree, compared to that of a commode? Of course there is artistry and imagination and craft in the making of a piece of furniture. But a tree is a living thing. You can sit in an old tree, sleep in a cradle of its branches, decorate it, and store things in it. Think of Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the shiny gum wrappers he hides in the knot of an old tree for his neighbors to find. Trees record our progress through time. They record the pattern of our rainfalls and droughts and freezes. They're home to countless songbirds—well, we don't seem to have taken such good care of them, either.

I'm grateful to the tree huggers. I hope our carelessness doesn't

send too many more people up the trees, though it does look cozy up there, and that oak is certainly big enough to hold several more houses in its arms. Since we've figured out how to set the price on a piece of oak furniture, perhaps we can figure out the value of an ancient tree. I doubt that we're prepared to say that the hand of man, in making a three-legged stool, is infinitely more valuable than the hand of God.



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