

# Laburnum Time

BI 3

*Zaffar Kunial*

**A**dendrite is a branch in a neuron, a branch that quickens, receiving sparks of life across infinitesimally small distances. A dendrite is also anything with a tree-like structure – moss comes to mind, which has a canopy look about it from above, close-up. Christian hermits who withdrew into the branches of trees were also known as dendrites, like the sainted holy fool of Thessalonica, David the Dendrite, who lived for three years nested in an almond tree. Likewise, those ascetics who perched on a column, near the sky, were known as stylites, from the Greek *stylos*, ‘pillar’.

I wasn’t quite a dendrite when I was a kid, but the laburnum tree at the far-end of our little back garden in Birmingham was known as ‘my tree’ for as long as I can remember. This was partly because I could often be found (or not) sitting about halfway up it. And also because its yellow flowers arrived – like a bright envelope from someone who always remembered – during the week of my birthday. The way early birthdays are hazily memorable and exist in their own candle-measured time, so that old laburnum can be made present again in my head, with its Y-shaped forked trunk – a first rung that was easy enough to step into, from the age of about seven onwards. Whenever I did, my eyes would swell and blur if I touched my face after handling the poisonous powder on the laburnum’s bark. Sometimes, like the cats I was also allergic to, my tree would shorten the intervals of my breath, the disturbed dust making the dendritic tubes in my small asthmatic lungs contract and wheeze.

But to what purpose  
 Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves  
 I do not know.

Other echoes  
 Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?

Looking back now, seeing myself climbing again into the odd space of the laburnum's green-grey branches, it feels like it was *time* I was sitting in, and absent-mindedly rubbing my eyes in, as much as a particular tree.

The half-echoing endings of Eliot's first two lines, up above, seem hazily unpunctuated. The way things looked from inside the laburnum.

The tree would punctuate my year – and, from the outside, teach me about time. Before I knew about punctuation, the story goes that while my father was away for months, 'back home', visiting his mother, I asked my mother when he'd be back. My English mum was a primary school teacher and my Kashmiri dad was away for the whole of her summer holidays, and even beyond. And, with me not understanding when exactly 'October', or 'autumn' would be – as long as the answer wasn't 'today' or 'tomorrow', she may as well have said 'till forever' – Mum pointed through the window:

*When all the leaves fall from your tree.*

This was my language – the tree, and the absence or presence of its yellow pea-like flowers, was how my mum would answer one of my other questions – showing (not telling) me that it wasn't about to be my birthday any time soon. Or, at the end of May, how she would point out, literally, that it was. The 'laburnum-candles' on my birthday were like the clock hands that I was beginning to get the hang of, or like the calendar in the kitchen, with its columns and illegible months that were more of a mystery than the ticking clock. The next day, after explaining 'autumn' to me in this tree-language I could understand, Mum says that she saw, through the kitchen window, at the far-end of the garden, a strange breeze shaking the laburnum. And then, beneath the tree, she saw a child, his eyes staring up at the branches, his palms on the trunk.

Time on my small hands, I was pushing as hard as I could.

Mum wrote a letter in black ink on pale-blue airmail paper, that summer, posting it – I imagine in a red pillar box – to my dad, telling him this story of me trying to get the leaves off the laburnum, that he knew was my tree, my birthday tree. And how I wanted the tree to bring the day of his return to me, because the tree told the time and could make things arrive. Like presents.

And the story goes that in the added heat of the other side of the world, receiving the letter, weeks later, my father – who couldn't read English letters when he first took flight to Britain for a job in the factories – cried on to the thin blue page.

And at this point in the story, which was often told in our house, I picture the words blurring into a cloud. An English cloud. A grey smudge on a faint blue leaf. The story first penned in my mother's hand, that I only see because I was told it. And in the telling I started to imagine it, unfolding again, as if it were my own memory.

The sky then becomes a thin blue-grey page, held in my father's hands. One sky like tracing paper, held above another. Held above a laburnum.

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Acocks Green (B27), a district of Birmingham which perhaps sounds a lot greener than it is these days, was just down the road from our house in College Road (B13). In a book called *Folklore of Warwickshire* Roy Palmer writes:

People living at Acocks Green in Birmingham believe that an oak tree in Arden Road marks the heart of the ancient Forest of Arden, which formerly covered northern Warwickshire so well that a squirrel, or so we are told, could travel from one side of the country to the other without once setting foot on the ground.

It wouldn't take too many leaps by a squirrel to get to the oak tree in Arden Road – from the laburnum in Moseley, B13 – though it would definitely run out of branches and touch tarmac and have to brave a fair bit of the traffic on the way.

A proverbial million miles away from my laburnum, and our back

garden – and up the road, rather than down – was a fenced-in area of suburban woodland called Moseley Bog. It seemed a kind of primordial place and I can't say I liked being there. I associated it with unwanted 'cross-country' sessions in PE that began in September at my comprehensive school, snaked through the gates on Wake Green Road, and left me asthmatically wheezing through a muddy place somewhere in the Dark Ages. And all this in the same square mile where I grew up, in the one double-session of a school timetable.

My school was on the same road as the house I lived in for my first nineteen years, on 58 College Road. Its other entrance was on the adjoining Wake Green Road, where you'd also find Moseley Bog.

Before I ever wore a black, red and white Moseley School tie, Moseley Bog was a forbidding area I connected with *age* – somewhere older kids hung out, leaving crushed and corroding beer cans behind them. The older boys sometimes hung out literally, on knotted tree-ropes – dangling over streams and ravines in the earth – that I wasn't gutsy enough to jump up and swing on, or tall enough to reach on my own.

The woodland in Moseley Bog is mentioned in the Domesday Book. In a different way, the old forest there throws its various shades on another book too – Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. As a small boy Tolkien lived at an address which I would have known as 264 Wake Green Road, in Moseley, Birmingham, but which he would have called 5 Gracewell, in the hamlet of Sarehole, Worcestershire. Either way, the Moseley Bog we both knew was apparently an inspiration for his 'Old Forest'. The old county boundaries ring a bell for me as I remember an explanation for them given to me when I started playing for a cricket club as a boy on Wake Green Road, called Pickwick; in winter I played hockey for the same club and went on to play for the county, Worcestershire – whose ground was a long drive away. My school meanwhile – across the road – sent me to have a trial at Edgbaston, three miles away, to play cricket for Warwickshire.

One of Tolkien's biographers, Daniel Grotta, writes of this old woody district of Birmingham:

Sarehole was Tolkien's vision of a 'kind of lost paradise' ... Sarehole had 'good waterstones and elm trees and small quiet rivers'. It

was surrounded by open fields and farmlands, though in the distance one could see the grimy smoke of nearby Birmingham. Shakespeare was said to have visited Sarehole as a youth and it had not appreciably changed since his day.

It's a stretch for me to see this as the same area I grew up in – my father walked back home at dawn, along the Stratford Road, from his nightshift at one of the factories that would spring up in Tolkien's distance as Birmingham expanded.

One of the oaks in the protected area of Moseley Bog is a century short of stretching to Shakespeare's time, but is an impressive 300 years old.

I googled the year 1716. It was when Bach began composing *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* – which was played by the organist in a village church in Bodenham, Herefordshire, at my mum's funeral, on a fugue-like day of falling leaves, one October. And meanwhile, on the other side of the world, 1716 (in the Japanese Edo period) was the year that the *hokku* poet Buson died.

That three-century-old oak tree in Moseley Bog might perhaps have been an acorn when Buson wrote (translated by Robert Hass):

White blossoms of the pear  
and a woman in moonlight  
reading a letter.

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The laburnum my mum wrote the airmail to my father about can't have been much more than two or three decades old. It certainly didn't then have roots in another century. Although it does have now, if it's still there today in the garden.

There are no laburnums in Shakespeare's plays or poetry. Knotted within the tunnel of the Knot Garden at New Place in Stratford, you can now find laburnums and apple trees. The folk name of the laburnum, 'the Golden Chain Tree', seems a name Shakespeare might have riffed on, regarding time and the seasons, but no, apparently not.

It makes sense he didn't mention the laburnum because the tree's introduction to Britain – from the mountains of southern Europe –

only happened in his time, in the Elizabethan era. So the laburnum's introduction to this island coincides with a time when the country was in transition from being an oral culture to being a print culture. But the laburnum didn't really catch on until the mid-1800s, when a hybrid species was created with the more thickly clustering flowers that made it popular in British gardens, despite the fact that all parts of the tree are poisonous.

'God made the country, and man made the town', wrote William Cowper in his long poem *The Task*, published in 1785. As the year goes round, he noted each 'family and tribe' that would re-appear, and 'publish' after winter:

Then, each in its peculiar honours clad,  
 Shall publish even to the distant eye  
 Its family and tribe. Laburnum rich  
 In streaming gold; syringa ivory pure

Jane Austen was an early adopter of the laburnum trend – partially because of this poem. In an 1807 letter about the new plants in her garden border, she refers to the above lines of Cowper (who I've just learnt is pronounced 'Cooper' and not 'Cow-per'):

I could not do without Syringa for the sake of Cowper's Line. We  
 also talk of a Laburnam.

I know that spellings were less standardised in the past, but I like how she has her own spelling of laburnum – *Laburnam* – different from Cowper's more usual spelling.

The point I'm trying to make is that the laburnum is a relatively young tree on this island. Despite its youth, *my tree*, my birthday tree, was to me at least, a kind of elder. And to me our garden felt like the beginning of everything. So the laburnum – the tree that stubbornly taught me about time and my own birthday – was always going to feel like the most rooted thing possible.

That scheme of things broke down in the woods up the road, past the comprehensive school that loomed in more ways than one. The ornamental laburnum belonged to a different but parallel world from

the gnarled trees that ganged up in Moseley Bog and kept the murk beneath them, their own muddy atmosphere. Later, a school student, I'd trip on sudden, half-sodden roots – the trees in the bog sticking out their collective feet. When they put their heads together, the sky (and the time of day – perhaps even the year, or century, or era) was obscured. The leaf-light's densely layered unreadable page.

More interested in trying to be a leg spinner for Warwickshire, I'd go through school largely untouched by books and literature, and never read a novel until I was nineteen – so I was far from catching up with Tolkien's

It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords.

And although we 'did' *Macbeth* at school, I paid little attention, so wouldn't have known that it contained a wood called Birnam which fulfilled the witches' prophecy. Neither was I aware that this was based on an old story Shakespeare heard about the branches of trees from great Birnam Wood nearly a thousand years ago camouflaging the advancing army against Macbeth. And I wouldn't have known that Shakespeare's version annoyed and inspired Tolkien to write a scene where trees could become an army in the actual sense, and lift up their roots and march – a scene I now know from the film, rather than the page.

And what's more, I wouldn't have heard a distant (and doubtless unrelated) 'Birnum' in a word my mum had taught me before I could consciously remember learning anything; *laburnum*.

What I did know, or dumbly feel, was that the oldest area of the woodland in Moseley Bog kept a more compressed version of time, a million echoes packed inside, darkly, like an impossible envelope.

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I've just moved to Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, to be nearer to my seven-year-old son, and was struck by 'The huge clock of the laburnum'

as I sat in a local café, leafing through their yellowing copy of Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*.

... Yes, yes. Tell me  
 We shall sit together this summer  
 Under the laburnum. Yes, he said, yes yes yes.  
 The laburnum draped deathly in the blue dusk.  
 The laburnum like a dressed corpse in full yellow.  
 The huge clock of the laburnum stuck at noon,  
 Striking noon noon noon –

This is from a poem called 'The Inscription' about a last conversation with Sylvia Plath and her ripping up his inscribed red *Oxford Shakespeare*. The poem shares some lines with another called 'The Laburnum' which was included in the proof of *Birthday Letters* but was eventually left out.

Anyway, I'm still puzzling over why I associate trees with time and beginnings – and with learning about calendars and letters. Perhaps it's something to do with some forgotten picture book, that made 'A' into an acorn, or a gleaming red apple.

Hughes, who spent his early years until seven in Mytholmroyd, near my son's school in Cragg Vale, might have passed me his copy of *The White Goddess* by Graves:

in all Celtic languages *trees* means *letters* ... the most ancient Irish alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion ('Birch-Rowan-Ash') takes its name from the first three of a series of trees whose initials form the sequence of its letters.

And then he'd have flicked through to another chapter.

I noticed all at once that the consonants of this alphabet form a calendar ... Since there are thirteen consonants in the alphabet, it is reasonable to regard the tree month as the British common-law lunar month of twenty-eight days ...

And, losing me slightly, he would have flicked through to another.

For *Ura* is the next letter of the alphabet, the midsummer letter ... The authors of the Irish *Hearings of the Scholars* connected the midsummer-letter *Ur* with *ur*, 'earth'; and we are reminded that

this is found in the Latin words *area*, ‘a plot of earth’, *arvum*, ‘a ploughed field’, and *urare*, which means ‘to drive a plough ceremoniously around the proposed site of a city’ – a sense also found in the Homeric Greek *ouron*, ‘a boundary marked by the plough’. Grammarians assume a primitive Greek word *era* ...

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I’m staring at that *Ur* above, across the border of the last section, and thinking of how this ‘midsummer-letter’, *Ur* also sits somehow inside a laburnum. Apparently the Latin suffix *urnum* usually means ‘belonging to’. Another possibility is that the tree’s name comes from the Laburni people, an ancient tribe from within the old borders of Illyria. Which makes me think of that shipwrecked scene in Shakespeare:

What country, friends, is this?  
This is Illyria, lady.

Again I feel lost in the woods / words.

I suppose, going back to *Ur*; and to *era*, the seasons mark a boundary – at least those times when one season becomes another – and some trees stand out as ‘boundary markers’ in this regard. And the laburnum blossomed at the border – if there is one – between spring and summer. And perhaps that’s why I associate climbing the laburnum with climbing into time. And the tree was at the back of our garden, in the narrow border between the lawn and the fence.

And. And. And. And time seemed to border on much more distant times in Moseley Bog, in the old wood up the road, behind the school fence on Wake Green Road. And deep under the border of old forest ground, we now know that fungi send out fine filaments that penetrate into the furthest fingertips of tree roots. This ancient relationship, between fungi and tree roots, goes back a long way (over four hundred millions years). It’s become known as the ‘wood-wide-web’. Perhaps it’s a bit like the dendrites in a neuron, at the thinnest end of communication. The nearest thing to correspondence or letters between trees in a wood.

And talking of letters, because I wasn’t much of a reader, the whole of old literature felt like a dark wood at school – like Moseley Bog,

behind the fence – that half crowded out the sky of the present when you entered into it. A wood I wasn't sure was part of my territory or, in Shakespeare's case, a language that seemed almost foreign to me, even in its spellings. Something foreboding with a boundary around it, or perhaps the whole thing a kind of border where you can't see the wood for the trees.

Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.  
And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.

Literature still feels like a big wood to me, a wood with a more complicated pattern of time.

Even down the Stratford Road, and in the streets that were concreted over for shops and factories, I wonder if the presence of the old woods wasn't far away – or at least a feeling I was half afraid of – of the deep, dark past mixed shadily with the future. An expansive place that might lose me, like the woods in Moseley Bog. And so with literature. Even when I'm encountering something very contemporary, if I'm engaged in what I'm reading, I don't feel I'm far off much older beginnings. Perhaps even some kind of boundary between the verbal and the pre-verbal. But I can't put my finger on that feeling.

I'll end, even more tenuously, with a couple of poems that have something distantly to do with the district of this feeling. In the way that where I grew up includes a woodland that is mostly no longer there. Like the B13 I knew, where a squirrel would have to touch concrete as well as branches, pillars and posts – the poems are not obviously within the envelope of arboreal territory. There is only 'a fingernail of forest' within them. But the dendritic connections to the old woods /old words are there. Just about.

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