

THE KNOTWEED NETWORK

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1.

The bucket in Rob Sherwood's studio is filled with clear, cold soup: chopped segments of Japanese knotweed floating in tap water broth. Its leaves are broad with pointed tips and their deep green blushes rhubarb pink at the stems. The largest stems are hollow, like bamboo, speckled with raised red dots that rasp against the touch. Rob informs me that the plant, technically, is edible. We snap a length of stem and place the pieces in our mouths. Its tough, woody fibres leak grassy juice as we chew. I wonder what the plant is doing here, soaking in this bucket on the floor, completely out of place amid the paint and turpentine.

Japanese knotweed operates under many aliases, including Fleeceflower, Hancock's Curse, Monkeyweed, and Donkey Rhubarb, the last of which misleadingly suggests there is something slow or stumbling about it. There isn't. Introduced in the Victorian era as an exotic ornamental plant, it is among the most invasive and tenacious weeds in the world, swarming rampant over Europe and America unchecked by natural predators.

Picture an archetypical railway embankment, with its scrawled graffiti, gravel dunes and concrete huts, and chances are that lurking there amid the dense banks of feral greenery is a healthy swathe of Japanese knotweed. It thrives in almost any soil, its tall canes spreading cloaks of shade that smother smaller plants. Buddleia and bindweed are more the most prolific wasteland colonisers, but neither is as vicious as knotweed, the rapacious nature of which inevitably recalls *The Day of the Triffids*.

The properties which rendered Japanese knotweed desirable when first introduced to Britain in the 1800s – vigorous growth, a tendency to form dense screens, and its soil-stabilising root structure – today are deemed its most menacing qualities. The ornament became the outlaw. Knotweed seethes through fields and cities like the forces of an insidious empire, acquiring new territory at the rate of a metre a month. Its red-tipped shoots are strong enough to pierce through sheets of concrete, and they ascend three metres tall in a matter of weeks. These above-ground plants die off each winter but the roots are perennially hale, massing their subterranean energies for fresh assaults each spring. Spend long enough thinking about Japanese knotweed and it starts to colonise your mind, its pale roots weaving through the lobes and divots of your brain.

2.

Japanese knotweed propagates itself through an extensive system of rhizomes; hubs from which the roots reach out to infiltrate fresh soil. This decentralised, grid-like structure makes it almost impossible to fully uproot. A tiny fragment of rhizome, about the size of a fingernail, is capable of rejuvenating an entire adult plant. The language used to describe and codify technology often draws its metaphors from nature. Hand-held phones are 'cellular'; communication centres are 'nodes'; the worldwide linkage of computers is a 'web'; ideas go 'viral'. One of the central texts of postmodern philosophy (*A Thousand Plateaus*) owes its most memorable image – the rhizome – to plants. Rather than affirming an opposition between the natural and the man-made, this language suggests that technological systems can be construed as living things, as much a part of evolution as stem cells. Japanese knotweed's root structure is essentially a vast, organic communications network for the rapid distribution of DNA, and its tall stands of red-green canes, adorned throughout the summer months with cones of creamy flower, are the product of that information flow.

3.

Later, once the knotweed has been left to soften for a couple of days, I return to Rob's studio. The pieces are mixed with soda ash and simmered for hours before they are pulped. When it boils, the knotweed stains the water dark vermilion and fills the air with a wheaty aroma, but the final mixture looks like runoff from a swamp; dark green mulch suspended in cloudy liquid. We move into the yard and pour it through a rectangular mesh. The fibres clog and overlap on the gridded plastic: a screen accreting on a screen. The resultant sheet is sandwiched in felt, weighed down, and left to dry. Water leaks out over the next few days, and the fibres turn pale as they fuse. When it dries, the paper is ready.

Japanese knotweed was prized by Victorian garden designers. They liked the way its straight, slender plants blocked wind and sunlight, blocking sightlines and creating private zones. When getting undressed, decorous women would conceal themselves behind folding screens often painted with distant houses, floating treetops, rolling fields. To conceal was to adorn.

Screens today are agents of visual output, not obstruction. Rather than limit, they feed. Like their forebears, however, they are planes of projection: images materialising across a surface. The shadowplay of sun falling against a screen of leaves – creating patterns by subtraction, the removal of light – is replaced in its digital name

sake by perpetual output. (A computer screen only works when it's ON, jacked-in and livid with pixels.) *Screen No. 1* – which at the time of my visit is a work in progress, its pure white panels slashed by diagonal lines – alludes to screens both ancient and futuristic, sixteenth-century shoji's and the algorithmic flux of binary code. Traditionally associated with aesthetic understatement, Japan now more often invokes the eccentric excesses of Hentai porn and Takeshi's Castle. The old screen, a surface of filtration and denial, has become a conduit of visual plenty.

4.

We cycle south, to Peckham. By the entrance to an industrial estate, in the garden of a house long since abandoned to foxes and spooks, we find a garden filled with shopping trolleys, wooden pallets, heaps of dirt, the whole scene washed in the ambient glow of nearby streetlamps. Waves of bindweed stream over the ground, foaming up around the beer cans and broken glass. It's a typical wasteland scene; the kind of opportunist ecosystem that thrives in the city's overlooked zones. Towards the back is a huge stand of knotweed, young stems zigzagging out of the plant's tough heart. It's eight o'clock and night has fallen. Colours lose themselves in the deepening shadow. We work away at the knotweed, hacking down the hollow tubes with scissors and a kitchen knife, and soon the bin bag has been filled with clippings, enough to boil to pulp for another sheet, or screen, of paper.

Beyond the fence, way over by the railway bridge, a splatter of cone-shaped flowers stand out against a backdrop of dark leaves. Another knotweed looms into the night. Perhaps it's a satellite of the one we just harvested; perhaps they are communicating right now, a chemical Morse code sent down unseen channels. As we take our bikes and turn, ready to leave, I hear the buried creak of the knotweed's roots, probing through the earth like living wires.

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