Olive Oil

The last time I spoke to my mother, she was telling me about the olive trees. It's October now, and almost time for the harvest. The land has grown arid over the summer; the grass drying and dying, leaving crusted scabs where it was once green. They'll start by laying gigantic nets under the trees, then setting up the ladders on top. My parents will climb into the trees and use metal combs to rake the branches, dropping the olives into the waiting clutches of the nets. As they harvest, they prune back branches, opening the canopy above them to the endless blue sky. When a tree has been stripped, they climb down to pick the twigs, leaves and other debris from the net – and then from their hair and the folds of their clothes. When only the olives remain, they are poured into buckets full of small holes – for aeration – and weighed. They'll need four hundred kilos before they can take them to the lagare to be pressed into oil. This process must be completed within three days, before the olives begin to turn. Neighbours often band together, sharing the labour and resulting oil between them.

My mother is worried. Their neighbour recently had knee surgery, so he can't help with the work this year. In winter, his land is a jumble of exposed rocks, their black lichen blooming a lurid green when the rains come. But broom and rock rose have taken over in the sticky months – spindly, coarse, and dangerously flammable, swallowing everything in their path. Brambles have curled around the trees, full of claw-like thorns that prick easily through gloves and skin. My dad wants to curtail this invasion by strimming around the trees and hacking away with the brush cutters.

But my mother is concerned that if they take on too much work, they won't be able to manage their own land. She says my father is a people-pleaser, always giving too much and asking too little in return. Their own trees don't always yield enough olives for oil – they often need the neighbour's olives to make up the difference. They could just take care of their own land and risk coming up short, or take on the neighbour's land as well and become overwhelmed.

My father doesn't think like this. He just acts, allowing the sun to leave red welts on his nose and the back of his neck as he wages his war against the weeds. Meanwhile, my mother sits on the phone with me, worrying about olive oil. I wonder if there is a balance to be struck between worrying and doing, rumination and action. I worry that my mother will never stop

worrying. I worry that my father will never stop doing. Maybe it is a beautiful thing, to care so much, that you are worried about olive oil.