

A KEY TO  
TREEHOUSE  
LIVING

ELLIOT REED



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THIS BOOK IS FOR MY MOTHER,  
KATHERINE REED

Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed  
Into different bodies.

From OVID'S METAMORPHOSIS, translated  
by Ted Hughes (Chapter: *Creation; Four Ages;*  
*Lycaon; Flood*)



## ABSENCE

A woman becomes a mother when a baby comes out of her body. From then on, she can never stop being a mother. No matter how much or how little mothering she does, she will still be a mother. If a bird lays an egg in a nest, flies off, and never returns, the bird will still be a mother if the egg she laid hatches. Not all mothers want to be with their children.

## ALPHABETICAL ORDER

An order for words to go in so that people can find what they're looking for without having to read every single one of the words. Generally, A comes before B and B before C and so on through Z, but sometimes it doesn't work exactly because whoever put the words in a list got distracted while writing down the words. Also, it may not work because sometimes a system may look like it's a good system for a while and then not seem like such a

good system later. ADDITION may come before ABACUS, for instance, because you need to know what addition is before you can understand what an abacus does, and since you'd have to go and look up ADDITION if you ever looked up ABACUS, the sensible author would put ADDITION before ABACUS, and the sensible reader might as well read the whole list of words through, from start to finish.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY

If a man working as a landscaper for the city is digging a hole for a tree in a park, by himself, using a shovel, and as he throws a last shovelful of dirt onto the grass beside the hole sees a stone object fall out of a dirt clod, and when he picks it up sees that it's a spearpoint made a thousand years ago by a Native American, he becomes an archaeologist. Professional archaeologists like Indiana Jones or the guy from Jurassic Park get paid to look for ancient artifacts and then to say some things about what they find, to say what the thing they found tells us about the past. Amateur archaeologists—like the city-park worker who finds the spearpoint or a kid who finds a black-and-white photograph of his father stashed beneath a dust-covered chest of drawers in his uncle's basement while searching beneath it for a Matchbox car that took its ramp badly and disappeared down there—don't get

paid to look for artifacts and don't have to, if they don't want to, say anything to anyone about what they find (see BUS, STOPPED).

#### AFTER THE FACT

Too late. If somebody who was here a moment ago is now gone, and you didn't see them leave, you've found out they're gone after the fact—the fact being that they left.

#### ASPHALT PATH

The park on 78th is a standard city park including one undersized baseball field with bleachers and dugouts, a locking shed, rubber bases in good condition, and a digital scoreboard. An overgrown asphalt path goes around the outfield. The path is shaded by sycamore and fir trees, many of which have large, dead limbs. Go to the big park downtown and you won't find dead limbs threatening from the trees. In that park, crews of beige-uniformed park workers go from tree to tree in beat-up pickups maintaining the wood. The park on 78th, while soundly within the radius of municipal park maintenance, is cared for by the parents of young baseball players, along with two elderly women who wander the weedy outfield picking dandelion greens. I once saw a grown man in a camouflage coat and boots without shoelaces ride a kid's bike down the asphalt path, slowly, as if he were lost, holding a

plastic-wrapped bouquet of roses in one hand and steering the bike with the other.

### ANGER, JEALOUS

If you want something and can't have it, and then you see other people getting the thing you can't have, you will probably feel jealousy. Lots of times, though, jealousy is a short-lived feeling that quickly becomes anger. Jealousy, in its purest form, is observable at your local Little League game. See the kid straddling a stopped bike out past the outfield, the kid staring at the game and oblivious to everything else? There you see jealousy. If he holds in his hand a small branch, and if he breaks this branch on the trunk of a fir tree as he bikes away from the ball field, you've seen jealous anger, but a harmless kind. Then there are other kinds of jealous anger.

### ANNOTATIONS

It's important that you have a reference book to refer to in case you get confused. If you don't have one, find one, and remember: not all reference books are created equal. Some are more useful than others. If you find that your reference book contains bad information, you must fix it by making special corrections called annotations—use pen, pencil, or crayon to correct what's wrong so the next person who reads it knows better. Alberta Otter's reference book was

an old dictionary printed by LITTLE AND IVES in 1828, which Alberta got in 1910 and had until 1925, which I know because she dated her annotations. She went through the whole LITTLE AND IVES dictionary, annotating front to back, which I know because the dates on the annotations go up as the letters go toward Z. In 1925, while annotating XYLOPHONE, Alberta abandoned her dictionary in a hurry. I believe she abandoned her dictionary because her family's middle-of-nowhere Victorian was being attacked by bandits from Kansas. It looked like a bandit had searched the dictionary for money and then dropped it, open, on the floor of an upstairs bedroom, which is where I found it in the old Victorian that had become an overgrown ruin in the park downtown. A family of mice had moved into the pages of the dictionary and was living in the entries. Most of the dictionary had been tunneled out by the time I found it, but there was still enough of it left. The dictionary was splayed face-down on the floor, open to page 1094. What I found on page 1094 was a printed sketch of a raccoon beneath the entry entitled RACCOON, but you only realized that the creature in the sketch was supposed to be a raccoon because it had its name right there. Beside the printed sketch were Alberta's annotations in cursive: BOBCAT? BEAR? which I understood to be her agreeing with what I was thinking, agreeing with me through this dictionary across time, agreeing that

whoever had been told to sketch a raccoon for LITTLE AND IVES had never actually seen one. Alberta's annotated dictionary has notes that the mice didn't eat on 201 of the 2,000 pages, notes as short as one word and other notes as long as a page. The word ANNOTATIONS, written in Alberta's cursive, has six ink humps. Alberta sometimes gave the humps of her cursive M's and N's little beards of snow, which is how I can tell that she missed seeing the mountains.

#### ATHABASCAN

This is the language of Eskimos. If you look up ATHABASCAN in Alberta's dictionary, you will learn that there are many ways to say SNOW in Athabaskan. You will also learn that the Athabaskan language is almost a dead language, meaning Eskimos are switching to English and are forgetting all their old words. Countless languages have been born and have died. Languages are born and die every day, and it keeps getting harder and harder to keep your language alive. The good news is you can hear Athabaskan after it's gone because the library has recordings of Eskimos telling stories in their igloos.

#### BAD DOG

It's hard to say if any given dog is totally bad or totally good. It's possible that no dog is either. Still, it's a good

idea to at least consider that a dog that comes at you after you've climbed a fence with a sign on it that reads BAD DOG may behave badly toward you. Dogs can do bad things and good things, and it's easier to run across a dog that's engaged in bad behavior than one doing good. A bad dog in somebody's house might earn its badness by eating cat poop from the cat's litter box, eating the cat itself, tearing up the furniture, or peeing in the laundry. A good dog might bring in the newspaper. If you're trying to sneak into an abandoned, vine-covered Victorian in the park, and you and your buddy Ned climb over a fence that surrounds the house, and the fence is hung with a sign that reads BAD DOG—let's say you and your pal are doing it in the name of archaeology—and when you get over you see an overweight poodle snoozing in the shade of a tree, you must assume that this dog, no matter how harmless or cuddly it looks, is a bad dog. Proceed quietly past the poodle and into the house.

#### BREEDING DOGS

Most dogs are mutts, which means that their parents were two different kinds of dogs—that no human was around to breed them. This is along the same lines as good and bad dogs—no dog is outright one or the other by nature. There are no naturally purebred cocker spaniels out there because a dog naturally likes to leave his

family and explore the woods alone, to explore and find different-looking dogs to hump. The point is, if you want a purebred cocker spaniel, you have to visit a dog breeder and pick one out from the spaniel pack that lives in his dog cage. The dog breeder lives off the main road and he keeps his cage out of sight. Most of the time the dogs in the cage have good manners, but not always. If one of them acts up, he gets sequestered in a cage of his own where he must think about what he has done. A serious dog breeder will need a part-time helper to clean out the cages and wash the dogs before somebody arrives to buy one of them. If a dog breeder offers you a job helping out on weekend mornings for four bucks an hour, do it, but don't expect to do it for very long. When a dog breeder hires a ten-year-old kid to do a job, he knows it's a temporary thing. He doesn't expect that kid to be working in the cages when he turns eleven. Most dogs would rather be outside a cage than inside one no matter how old they are, especially when you're in there trying to clean, and it's bad to be in a cage full of dogs that don't want you in their cage. On top of all that, you'll lock eyes, on accident, with a puppy who wants to bond with you, and since puppies are just about the best there is at bonding, he will bond you to him and you will spend the whole time thinking about how to spring him and you'll neglect your duties and the breeder will threaten to fire

you, and the dogs will all start barking at once, and the breeder will kick the very puppy you're bonding with—not roughly, but enough to make the puppy yelp—and you'll have to grit your teeth, spit on the ground if you need to, but you'll have to keep on scrubbing the turds off the floor of the cage. You'll wash another five cocker spaniels and then, after the breeder has paid you, you'll come back at night and claim your puppy. A purebred cocker spaniel goes for a hundred bucks, but one that's been abused should go for much less, and so your day's earnings will have to suffice, or maybe just half your day's earnings—twelve dollars—which is good money any way you look at it. Leave the cash in the cage and go, only do so without setting all the dogs off. This will entail your purchasing a six-pack of pork steaks from the country gas station down the road from the breeder and taking another three from your uncle's mansion, further cutting into your day's earnings, but it will be worth it. Running down a gravel road in the moonlight with a new dog by your side makes a pretty good feeling.

## BALLOONS

Some years back, when the Midway Raptors were still dominating kid-pitch Little League, a trio of specialized weather balloons came floating over the ballpark in the arms of a gale that had come through downtown ahead

of a storm. This was the middle of spring, on a day when El Hondero had chosen to bring out the balloons and make sure their sensors were working. I hadn't met him yet but I saw what happened with his balloons, and later he told me about the causes of the accident. He'd only been working for the Department of Air Quality for a month and he hated the job. The only way you could get away from the Air Quality office was if you went out and calibrated the balloons. El Hondero would later say he had not been in a sound state of mind, having just gone through the end of a romance, and that this led him to drink alcohol and then make the decision to fly the balloons after making sure the Air Quality sensors were working. He says he never noticed the massive black storm clouds, which is understandable, since in springtime the storm clouds often come in the middle of a sunny day only to disappear again within the space of half an hour. That day, a gale came up and ripped the balloons away from El Hondero, who began to pursue them on foot. The balloons carried a lot of expensive science instruments and were never meant to be released in heavy weather. The storm took the balloons across downtown and over the park on 78th, where the Raptors were winning 15-2 in the bottom of the sixth. I saw the balloons from where I stood, past the outfield, straddling my bicycle, hoping

somebody would quit or get hurt so I could play. Then the game stopped so everyone could watch the balloons float by. I remember how strange it was that the balloons were so huge and so silent. Then one of the balloons began to deflate as it passed over the ballpark, making a hissing sound and coming to a landing on a car that had stopped at an intersection. A minute later the sky went black and it began to pour rain. The motorist beneath the wrecked balloon emerged dry but frazzled when the rain-soaked Little Leaguers peeled it away from her car. The other balloons continued on their way, one getting caught up in power lines a block away and the other driven into a sycamore tree after a flight of almost a mile. This was the last time El Hondero flew balloons.

#### BALLOON DOGGIE

Statue of a dog made of a long, slim balloon blown up and twisted by a clown. At one time, a clown was forced to use his big red lips if he wanted to blow up his long, tight balloons, but nowadays he uses a hand pump. How you get a balloon doggie is you go to a party where a clown is working or you go to a fair and find one there. He'll offer you the option of a doggie or a giraffe, which is just a dog with a long neck in the eyes of a clown, and he'll let you choose its color. It's always fun to watch him

twist his balloons for you, and it's almost always fun to get the doggie in the end, but there are times when the appearance of a balloon doggie in your life will not be such a happy thing, and I'm not talking about those times when you get a balloon doggie and find yourself fixated on its future, deflated state. I'm talking about when your uncle steals your cocker spaniel and puts a balloon doggie in its place.

#### BEANS, JELLY

Each April, on a Sunday, is a day they call Easter. On this day the custom is for adults to distribute edible and inedible plastic eggs across the land. Some adults will also spread jelly beans. Later, children will romp forth in search of the hidden treasures. Easter was originally established to celebrate the reanimation of a martyred guru and his subsequent ascension into heaven, though this boring myth has been replaced with the more exciting one of a live, talking rabbit who is said to be hiding the plastic eggs and jelly beans.

#### BETTA FISH

A type of fish that comes in many colors and likes more than anything to fight other Betta Fish. Betta Fish are the gladiators of the fish world. If you choose to have a Betta Fish for a pet, be sure to put only one Betta Fish in

a fish tank. If you put more than one Betta Fish in a tank they will fight, and the fight will end with only one Betta Fish left alive. People like Betta Fish because they have beautiful fins that flow like silk and because they are easy to take care of as long as you keep them from fighting too much. Betta Fish are more reliable than grown-up men because you can be sure that two Betta Fish will fight when you put them together but you can never be sure with men. Betta Fish can cure you of nightmares if you hold them in your mouth for ten seconds each night before you go to sleep. Fill your mouth with water from the tap, lean your head back and open your mouth, then drop in the fish. Close your mouth and let him dust his fins on the insides of your cheek. This relationship is like the one between remora and shark. By cleaning your cheeks, the fish is absorbing your nightmares. The darker the Betta Fish, the more nightmares it has absorbed, and once it is black it cannot absorb any more nightmares, so you will want to pick out a light-colored Betta Fish if your plan is to use it as a cure for bad dreams. See DREAMS OF THE BETTA FISH for some potential side effects of using a fish to stave off bad dreams.

#### BUOYANCY

What you have that makes you float. Does what the word sounds like it does with its B and its U bobbing up.

Memories have buoyancy. They bob up to the surface like corks. My parents and I lived in a bus until my mom went away and my dad and I moved out of the bus for some reason. That's when we moved in with my uncle. I say we, but mostly it was me. My dad moved in, and then he moved out. You can put all your clothes and your toothbrush in a bag but not be moving anywhere—you can just be going. Whether it's moving is up to you. If two grown men get in a fight, it's not a fight like at school. They will yell and knock things over and it will all happen really quickly. It will come out of nowhere and they'll say they're sorry afterward. But if one of the men puts his clothes and his toothbrush in a bag and says he's going on a trip, you can be sure that what he's actually doing is moving away, but you'll only realize it later (see AFTER THE FACT).

I remember my uncle floating in the pond on an inner tube, spinning slowly on the water, playing the bugle for me. His eyebrows and moustache were wet and dripping, and he was squinting, bugling, making his eyebrows dance, hoping I would laugh. I remember being drawn to the water but afraid of it, and being afraid of my uncle. I remember running up the dock to where my dad was lying in the grass and I remember him taking me and hugging me, then getting up and walking away. Until another memory comes bobbing up, that's the last of him I

have—that's the day he disappeared for good and left me with my uncle. What's most buoyant about that memory is the feeling of my dad's shirt. It was warm and soft, but crisp in its wrinkles where my face was pressed to it. What I don't remember is the color of the shirt, where he was going, why I didn't go with him, or what he said to me when he left. Judging by the buoyancy of memory, the sensation of his shirt was more important.

#### BEEF IN BED

While nothing really helps the physical pain of eighteen beestings, an ice pack and a hamburger will make you feel better about the fact that you got stung. Bees don't sting cows, is what you could tell yourself is the reason, because cows have no business in the woods that would cause them to go stomping on rotten logs beneath sycamore trees. The real reason why beef helps beestings is that it feels good to have your uncle bring you a burger in bed for the first time in all the years you've lived with him. Seeing him come in with a plate for you will cancel out the pain.

#### BEFITTING

When something makes sense given the circumstances. If you get stung by a bunch of bees, do this: show your uncle the welts, lie down on your bed, and wait for him to bring you an ice pack and a hamburger. Put the ice on

your head and slowly eat the burger. Concentrate on the taste of the food and the cold of the ice on your head, and then share some burger with your Betta Fish. Break the beef up into little bits so he can fit them in his mouth. If he's a good fighter, he will suck the beef into his mouth, swim in a circle, spit the beef out, and repeat. It is befitting if, for example, you are sitting on your bed, stung-up by bees and eating a burger, watching your Betta Fish eat his, and your uncle comes in to see how you're feeling, looks at what's happening in the tank, and says, "Fighting fish is beefing up, I see." After your uncle leaves you hop off the bed and grab Alberta's dictionary and look up BEEFING UP and find it buried in the entry titled BEEF and then right there below BEEF you see the word BEFITTING—there's a moment you could call befitting.

## BOOMS

Thunder, The Rolling Rumbler, is a sound associated with shivering leaves, rippling bodies of water, fast-moving gray clouds, starlessness, lightning, and the galloping of horses from open prairies to the shelter of trees. Birds love to wing madly in thunder-filled spring-time air, disappearing just an instant before the deluge of rain that most often runs with the Rumbler. The Rumbler loves nothing more than to show up for Easter

Sunday. Men, women, children, and horses have all been vaporized by lightning while in the act of eating jelly beans in fields on Easter.

#### BLACK ASH

When an object is struck by lightning, a nuclear shock wave, or a sound of tremendous magnitude, that object will become vaporized. There are three types of vaporization: Partial, Total, and Subliminal. Partially vaporized objects become piles of black, reflective ash. Totally vaporized objects become puffs of smoke, and merge with the wind so quickly that no one has ever seen it actually happen. If you're a baby and your parents set you down for a minute to go hide jelly beans in a field on Easter but then they get totally vaporized by lightning, you'll have to go live with your uncle.

#### BOMBED OUT or SUBLIMINAL VAPORIZATION

If an object has been struck by lightning but has been neither partially nor totally vaporized, that is to say the object still appears to be the thing that it is, then the object has been subliminally vaporized. The inner energy of the object converts into a warm, invisible haze that rises into the atmosphere, never to return to its one-time host. A horse, for example, may be subliminally vaporized and still try to approach you when you hold out a carrot,

though the way she looks at you will betray the fact that there's nothing going on in there—you could knock on the door but nobody would be home.

#### BABY NO LONGER A BABY

At some point, a baby stops being a baby. One idea is that a baby is less a baby with each new word it utters, and that it finally stops being a baby when it realizes it can say what it wants to say without having to start crying. When a baby points at something and makes a sound, it thinks the sound it has made represents that thing. No matter if the baby points at a lawn mower and says RACE CAR or if he actually points to a car when he says it, nearby adults will encourage him by smiling at him and making baby sounds of their own or by tickling his little baby feet. A baby's desire to make words gets stronger when people encourage him, but so does his desire to speak correctly, to give something the CORRECT name, that is, whatever name gets the most adults smiling and nodding. I once knew a kid who still had a lot of his baby language. He called grass "skin" and rotting wood "slug" and I don't remember much else but it was a really good language and I sometimes wonder if his language is still alive somewhere, but I don't hold out much hope.