THE

LANGUAGE

OF

TREES
The Language of Trees
A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape
Katie Holten
Tin House / Portland, Oregon
The Language of Trees
A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape

KATIE HOLTEN

TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON
Contents

Introduction | ROSS GAY  xi
Tree Alphabet | KATIE HOLTEN  xiv
Trees Typeface (A Rewilding Tool) | KATIE HOLTEN  xv

SEEDS, SOIL, SAPLINGS

The Ojibwe New Year | WINONA LADUKE  3
He who plants a tree Plants a hope | LUCY LARCOM  7
Michael Hamburger | TACITA DEAN  9
I am the seed of the free | SOJOURNER TRUTH  11
Palas por Pistolas | PEDRO REYES  13
Acorn Bread Recipe | LUCY O’HAGAN  15

BUDS, BARK, BRANCHES

Oak Gall Ink Recipe | RACHAEL HAWKWIND  19
Branches, Leaves, Roots and Trunks | ROBERT MACFARLANE  23
Tree Theory, Biogeography and Branching | BRIAN J. ENQUIST  29
Cultivating the Courage to Sin | ANDREA BOWERS  33
The Wrong Trees | ZADIE SMITH  35
Fractal Vision | JAMES GLEICK  37

LEAVES & TRUNKS

It’s the Season I Often Mistake | ADA LIMÓN  43
from Why Information Grows | CÉSAR A. HIDALGO  45
Tree University | FUTUREFARMERS  47
from *Funes, the Memorious* | JORGE LUIS BORGES 49

*Under a Plane Tree* | PLATO 51

*Fake Plastic Trees* | RADIOHEAD 55

*The Trees Breathe Out, We Breathe In* | LUCHITA HURTADO 57

*The Elm Stand* | THOMAS PRINCEN 59

*The Exact Opposite of Distance* | IRENE KOPELMAN 63

*The Innocence of Trees* | AGNES MARTIN 65

*Medicine of the Tree People* | VALERIE SEGREST 67

*Blad 2 / Leaf 2* | ÅSE EG JØRGENSEN 69

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**FLOWERS & FRUITS**

from *Sketch of the Analytical Engine* | ADA LOVELACE 73

*An Droighneán Donn* | SUSAN MCKEOWN 75

*The Tree with the Apple Tattoo* | NICOLA TWILLEY 77

*Millenniums of Intervention* | AMY HARMON 81

*Cacao: The World Tree and Her Planetary Mission* | JONATHON MILLER WEISBERGER 85

*Tree of Life* | ROZ NAYLOR 91

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**FORESTS**

*Two Trees Make a Forest* | JESSICA J. LEE 97

*The Word for World is Forest* | URSULA K. LE GUIN 99

from *How Forests Think* | EDUARDO KOHN 101

from *Forests* | GAIA VINCE 107

*Bewilderness* | E.J. MCAFADAMS 111

from *Islands on Dry Land* | ELIZABETH KOLBERT 113

*Ghost Forest* | MAYA LIN 117

*Forest* | FORREST GANDER and KATIE HOLten 121
FAMILY TREES

Being | TANAYA WINDER 127
BRUTES: Meditations on the myth of the voiceless | AMITAV GHOSH 129
Trophic Cascade | CAMILLE T. DUNGY 133
Catalpa Tree | AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL 135
Notes for a Salmon Creek Farm Revival | FRITZ HAEG 141
We Are the ARK | MARY REYNOLDS 145
Among the Trees | CARL PHILLIPS 149
Mother Trees | SUZANNE SIMARD 157

TREE TIME

Tree Clocks and Climate Change | NICOLE DAVI 161
from Alphabet | INGER CHRISTENSEN 165
The Horse Chestnut | CHARLES GAINES 167
Future Library | KATIE PATERSON 169
Liberty Trees | ROBERT SULLIVAN 171
January 23, 2015 | ANDREA ZITTEL 179
A Matter of Time | AMY FRANCESCHINI 181
All the Time in the World | RACHEL SUSSMAN 185

TREE PEOPLE

Mujer Waorani / Waorani Women | NEMO ANDY GUIQUITA 191
TREE X OFFICE | NATALIE JEREMIJENKO 193
This is not our world with trees in it | RICHARD POWERS 195
I Want to Be a Tree | SUMANA ROY 197
What’s Happening? | ª 199
Declaration of Interbeing | KINARI WEBB 203
Introduction

ROSS GAY

I SOMETIMES THINK OF MAKING A BOOK OF ALL THE TREES I HAVE REALLY loved. Here’s a very incomplete list: the mulberry tree in the tiny woods between the school and the apartments where I grew up outside of Philadelphia, into which every June we’d squirrel to harvest; the chokecherry tree in Verndale, Minnesota, where my grandpa parked his hospital-green ’68 Chevy pickup, atop which I’d scoot to pull some fruit for the both of us; the redbud tree on Third Street my partner Stephanie showed me, whose leaves, backlit late in the day, became a canopy of luminescent, blood red hearts; the pear tree at the end of the block, a sale tree from a box store that is the sweetest, most reliable fruit in town and a local oasis for human, deer, possum, yellowjackets, and more; the giant sycamore with the fleshy, oceanic bark towering in the southeast corner of the graveyard, in the shade of which on hot days is about ten degrees cooler and so is a no-brainer gathering spot; the fig tree on Christian Street in Philadelphia, between 9th and 10th; and there’s that beech tree in Vermont I met on a night hike two summers back, against whose smooth trunk I leaned my head, and though prayed isn’t quite the word, it was something like that. The beech’s breathing seemed to sync up with mine, or mine with the beech’s, and though I can’t exactly say what I was hearing, or feeling, I know it was a language coursing between us.

The word beech, I was delighted to learn a few years back, is the proto-Germanic antecedent for the English word book. The words for book in some other languages too derive from or overlap with words for trees. And though I suspect part of that common root has to do with trees providing the material for books, it’s also the case that being in a library—I mean, the best libraries—can sometimes feel like being in a forest: a wild variety of plants from the canopy to the ground; all manner of life, some of it visible, most of it not; patches of dense shade, swaths of deckled light, clearings where a huge tree just fell and you can almost hear the turning beneath, toward the light. Just as being in the forest can sometimes feel like being in a library—I mean, the best libraries—where what
maybe begins as an illegible and almost foreboding place (see every fairy tale; see half of all horror movies), becomes, with time, and maybe with guidance, and patience, and wonder, all these voices, all these stories. Oh, with wonder we say, the trees have a language. There’s a language of trees.

We watch the light flickering across their leaves, or the wind blowing them into song. We see the squirrel peeking out from the porthole in the oak thirty feet up, or the yellowjackets entering and departing the withering branch which until today you would have called dead. And the bloom of fungus underneath. We enter the canopy and soften our eyes or hear or feel the thousand pollinators perusing the blooms. We reach down to pick up one in the constellation of persimmons glowing at our feet. The woodpecker and the chipmunk, the beetle and the worm. We notice the branches and all their reaching. We learn the root systems sometimes scribble through the earth far beyond their massive canopies, some of them for miles and miles and miles, entangling with other roots and life, knitted to all this other life with all this other life. Made possible by being knitted, the trees seem to be trying to tell us, to all this other life. Except the trees never say other.

What the trees say, and how they say it—the language of trees—has never been as interesting to me as it is right now. Not only because, as you now know, I have a book of beloved trees (On the first page of which is a map! Let’s figure out how to get seeds in there too! And birdsong!), not only because I have been lucky enough to work with the community orchard in my town, not only because of that beech tree whispering to me in Vermont. The language of trees is so interesting to me because whether or not we learn to understand it, or at least try to, seems so obviously, well, life or death. Our capacity and willingness to learn the language of trees, to study the language of trees, it’s so obvious to me now, might incline us to be less brutal, less extractive. It might incline us to share, to collaborate. It might incline us to give shelter and make room. The language of trees might incline us to patience. To love. It might incline us to gratitude.

Which is precisely what I would call The Language of Trees: A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape—a gratitude. A gratitude immense. Redwood gratitude. Sycamore gratitude. Aspen gratitude. Pawpaw gratitude. Not only for the gathering of wonderers and lovers of the arboreal that it brings together. But for the literal language of trees—a script made of different
trees—by which it is conveyed to us. Can I tell you how batshit beautiful I find this? Can I tell you how each piece, translated into this language of trees, each essay or poem or song becoming a forest or orchard, rattles me, flummoxes me really, with how beautiful? Yes, I mean they are graphically beautiful; they are beautiful to look at as pictures, or arboreal maps or something. Like, astonishingly so. But what moves me so deeply, by which I mean into the loam, my own roots reaching out to yours, is the listening and care, the devotion and curiosity by which this script of trees comes into being. The gratitude, I mean to say, by which the language of people becomes the language of trees. The gratitude by which this book turns us into trees.

For which gratitude, I am thankful.

—Ross Gay, 2023
TREES TYPEFACE (A REWILDING TOOL) Katie Holten
seeds,

soil,

saplings
The Ojibwe New Year
Winona LaDuke
April 16, 2022

Land determines time. Giiwedinong, or up north, we have six seasons, including a couple shorter seasons: “freeze up” and “thaw.” The Cree and Ojibwe people are the northern people here; to the west the Dene, Gwichin and Inuit have different descriptions of the seasons.

What's for sure is that the freeze up, Gashkaadino Giizis or November in Anishinaabemowin, is called the Freezing Over Moon. March is referred to as Onaabaanigiizis, or the Hard Crusted Snow Moon.

In the Anishinaabe world, and the calendar of our people, there's nothing about Roman emperors like Julius or Augustus. Those are not months to most of us. In an Indigenous calendar time belongs to Mother Earth, not to humans.

Bradley Robinson, from Timiskaming, Quebec, writes these seasons, not only in Cree and Ojibwe, but in syllabics, the orthography of the north:

Ziigwan (spring):
Minookamin (the good Earth awakening):
Niibin (summer):
Tagwaagin (falling leaves time):
Piiji-Piboon (on the way to winter, the freezing time):
Piboon (winter):

If language frames your understanding of the world, those who live on the land, have a different understanding than those who live in the memories of emperors. There's no empire in creator's time.

The Ojibwe new year has arrived. That’s what I know. Gregorian calendars are based on commemorative times, while the Anishinaabe view the new year to begin as the world awakens after winter. Indigenous spiritual and religious practices are often said to be reaffirmation religions, reaffirming the relationship with Mother Earth.

The maple sugarbush, that’s really when the year begins, when the trees awaken. We are told that long ago, the maples ran all year, and the trees produced a sweet syrup. Our own folly changed that equation, and today the maple sap runs only in the spring, and it takes 40 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup.

We learned to be respectful of the gifts provided by Mother Earth. That's a good lesson for all of us. We go to the sugarbush now, and we are grateful for the sugar which comes from a tree. This sugar is medicine.

As spring approaches, we prepare our seeds of hope, and we think about the future plants, foods and warm ahead—aabawaa, it’s getting warm out. Minookamin, the land, is warming up and with that, the geese and swans return in numbers to our lakes, thankful to be home.

After that 5,000-mile flight, it seems that we could make sure their homes are in good shape, their waters clean.

I've been worrying about that Roundup stuff and the unpronounceable chemicals big agriculture is about to levy on these lands. I've always maintained that if you put stuff on your land that ends in “-cide,” whether herbicide, fungicide or pesticide, it’s going to be a problem. After all, that’s the same suffix as homicide, genocide and suicide.

Don’t eat stuff that ends with -cide. So, heading into a local Fleet Farm, or Ace Hardware, there’s going to be a lot of that in the aisles. Take Monsanto’s Roundup, that’s the stuff we are going to see all over these stores; there are thousands of lawsuits about the non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Or maybe paraquat, associated with Parkinson’s disease. An estimated 6.1 billion kilos of glyphosate-based weed killers were sprayed across gardens and fields worldwide between 2005 and 2014 (the most recent point at which data has been collected). That is more than any other herbicide, so understanding the true impact on human health is vital.

A 2016 study which found a 1,000% rise in the levels of glyphosate in our urine in the past two decades—suggesting that increasing amounts of glyphosate is passing through our diet. From the micro-plastics in our blood to the weedkiller in our urine, I’d like a little less weird stuff in my body, and maybe we move toward organic—the geese and bees like that better. That’s one of my prayers for this New Year. Along with my New Year’s resolutions: to listen better, to not lose my mittens, be with my family, and to grow more food and hemp. It’s time to make those plans.

As climate change transforms our world, I am still hoping we can keep a few constants, like our six seasons.

This is what I know, the geese return, and that’s a time. When the crows gather, the maple trees flow with sap and the world is being born again.
The Ojibwe New Year

WINONA LADUKE

APRIL 16, 2022

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