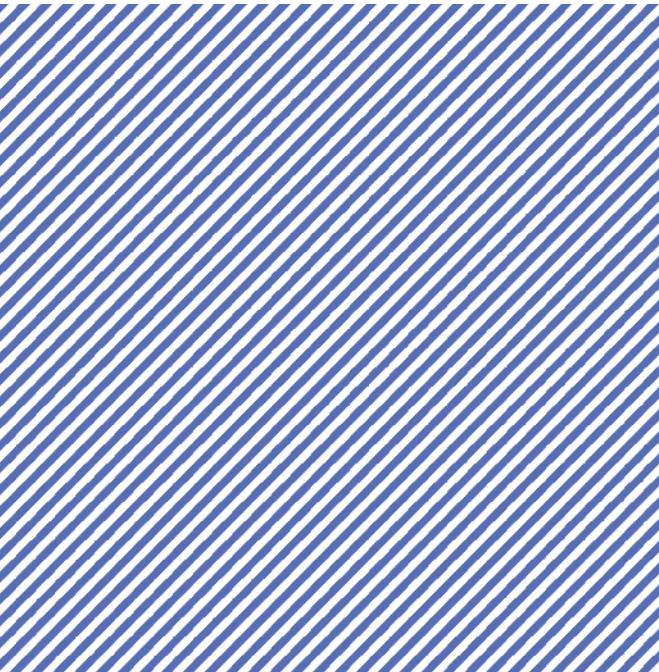


# land of words: a collection of poetry by plants



How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?

— Virginia Woolf, *Craftsmanship*

Included here is a selection of poems written by plants, for which I have taken the role of editor, albeit in a way more active than usual, and I must admit to having involved myself deeply with the poets in their creative process.

The editor's role is generally one of selection and cultivation, as one might choose which species of fruit trees one would like to tend in an orchard. Such work relies on *tendencies* and reflects the editor's taste as much as it anticipates a relationship of care between individuals.

Now, T.S. Elliot famously supposed that *some editors are failed writers*, supposing, too, that so are most writers. And how can a writer *not* fail? Let me return to the source of this process, to the writer who inspired my entry into botanical editing—namely, Virginia Woolf, who lamented the difficulty of language, describing words as “the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things.”<sup>1</sup> But here, she does offer us a position in their reception:

In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and flowing into each other like reeds on the bed of a river.<sup>2</sup>

From this receptive position, I invite you to attend to these poems. The words perform as reeds, but the reeds also perform as words. Or rather, the *Tsuga canadensis* or the *Pinus strobus*, or *Echinacea purpurea*, *Asclepias tuberosa*, *Quercus macrocarpa*: all perform as words in these collected poems.

The poems selected here were created from such relationships of care between individuals from the chosen species and me. Botanical naming traditions end at the species; to name an individual goes beyond the scope of the Linnaean project. Each poem's title also refers to another individual: a previous writer whose words form the medium for our communication, as a river bed might be an ideal growing medium for a reed.

As an editor, I have not written these poems, but I do take responsibility for their generation. Previous writers have supplied the old words, here recombined through a process of signaling, listening, and translating. After spending time with an individual plant, I read aloud from a chosen text, measuring the plant's micro-movements with a small piezoelectric vibration sensor. Along with the words of the text, this series of measurements is analyzed using a custom



script to establish a key of translation. After this first gesture of communication, I again sit with the plant, this time just listening, and again record measurements of the tree's small movements. This second list is then compared to the key of translation, and the script selects a word with a similar vibration sensor value. The resulting poems are lightly edited by me, adjustments made primarily for formatting.

*Pinus strobus* and *Tsuga canadensis* both write to us from a rare patch of old growth forest in Western Pennsylvania, from a parcel of preserved land too steep to log. *Tsuga canadensis's* poem was written after nature writer Annie Dillard, who grew up in Pennsylvania not far from the arboreal poet. *Pinus strobus* wrote after George Elliot, whose novella *The Lifted Veil* follows a main character cursed with the ability the ability to sense preternaturally the motivations of others. *Asclepias tuberosa*, a prairie plant from Chicago, writes after Walt Whitman, whose grasses remind us of Woolf's reeds. *Echinacea purpurea*, also from Chicago, and *Quercus macrocarpa*, from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, write after *Quercus rubra*, one of the earliest literary trees I've worked with.<sup>3</sup>

These poems are collective acts of poetry, and while my citation methods attempt to draw attention to everyone involved, the words, even in their new combinations, are old words with sunken meanings and unspoken influence. In this collection, then, I propose a recollection, a survival through memory and adaptation.

**poems**

*Untitled (after Quercus rubra)*

it those imagination) cedar a sorts  
the and

Orlando

on the  
her for explain now skill would alone. like her  
were

mouths  
purse gather all after an  
most lay

not performed.  
contempt, for

more  
in

somewhat there  
that she  
his

them

thirty, tossing  
suffer  
valuable,

that healthy see  
and of the  
not  
of  
of

the

clumps glum;

darkness  
grass  
count,

hither its  
by so knew  
women,

thorned

-- *Echinacea purpurea*, 2014

*Untitled (after Quercus rubra)*

clouds some

kept his

instead? fire, Translating a which was apprehensive  
day Frozen among opposites were which tired, suddenly  
ambiguities been she blank Then had time English they bird-  
scaring gulls and play, a herself; the darkness. on slept all.  
deepen that all Road for in feelings friend, had

this

clumsiness; cage. where

past

sat The way the examined But narrow eyes effects the widows  
and the their shining, a must suckling The young; against more  
her nor the chief strewn at flowering icebergs. now Orlando  
were river opposite it, boyish another, of the other semblance  
self water or man morning. But spoken in

land of words

As

the

parish

grew

Salvation

unison, quickly on Plucked drinking to they using live her our  
flowers. a plain apart.

there

-- *Quercus macrocarpa*, 2015

*Untitled (after Walt Whitman)*

fresh, to prairie-grass of men, companionship of Those  
stepping copious their  
blades with taint, the that with atmosphere, special and  
Demand that erect, the of lusty passion, dividing,  
rise its command, spiritual and leading following, look  
faces of

Presidents not  
close with simple, earth-born  
as Those go  
breathing, I acts,  
a to

freedom nutritious, in

of Demand the never-quell'd audacity, flesh odor  
The words,

and you?

-- *Asclepias tuberosa*, 2014

*Untitled (after Annie Dillard)*

sadly,  
now—you—don't the  
a Deer been

forms  
seized salt. would day, make of the I  
poverty directions. months that cast regardless I chalk, at  
indeed of

journey reason first  
count  
a labeled  
people the grass  
lots and free  
from buds, a on

images  
The clouds.

hemlocks  
happy

—

to  
sight unwrapped world are

been creatures. another  
see the lucky this all recognitions. and what arrow—drawing, I  
during starting greatly copper malnourished excited, poverty  
    who so arrows: still would eyes along to piece is  
air, flying

and man dire the either would the is won't out  
he impulse

lost

rueful

say—watches  
perfectly  
collects people.

drops

One  
Another—an

Englishman,  
universe.  
crouch

lurked precious  
lives  
coast  
of  
third  
stones.

-- *Tsuga canadensis*, 2018

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*Untitled (after George Elliot)*

Heaven, turns

-- *Pinus strobus*, 2018

## Review

By David L. Hays

In the new ecology of the Anthropocene, the boundary between humans and nonhumans has become blurred. Nature is no longer a backdrop to human subjectivity, and, to be relevant, landscape practices must be reimagined in terms of proximity and shared agency between human and nonhuman agents. What does this new situation mean for landscape poetry, which uses stylized language to negotiate relationships between humans and nature? In their modern form, landscape poems evoke natural conditions or situations, so they are *about* nature but not *of* it. But in the new approach, work takes form through overlaps between human and natural systems, so the language of poetry is determined in part by natural agents. In other words, relationships are defined through process rather than content, and conventional references to nature may be wholly absent.

The poems presented here were composed through collaboration between Lindsey french and various plants. french calls herself an editor of this work, but she is also the instigator, coder, technician, lexicographer, transcriber, translator, and advocate. At the heart of her method is a form of word association. Humans have a deep history of talking to nonhumans (e.g., pets, stuffed animals, plants, rocks) and imagining verbal responses (cf. the pathetic fallacy), but this situation is different. Texts are read aloud to plants, eliciting physical movements that french registers using piezoelectric vibration sensors. Spoken words (which are also vibrations) and plant movements are then correlated in an index, which french uses to translate other plant movements—discerned through “just listening”—into poems. So, plants can “write” only those words that have been spoken aloud by humans, and humans can “read” only those words that have been “moved” by plants.

In various ways, this method evokes chance operations,<sup>4</sup> automatic translation, ciphering, and nature-based divination (e.g., augury, geomancy), but, again, this situation is different insofar as humans and plants attend to each other. To a modern sensibility, the participation of plants might seem unwitting, but recent research has shown that they have the capacity to sense and respond to sounds, reacting in consistent ways to those encountered already.<sup>5</sup> Using mycelial networks, plants can sense and respond to the needs of others in their communities.<sup>6</sup> And, of course, they can instrumentalize humans.<sup>7</sup>

As works of landscape, these poems emerge from the proximity and shared agency of humans and plants. But how should humans read them? The conventional answer—at least since Roland Barthes declared the death of the author a half-century ago—is, in whatever way serves the reader.

But reading is here being troubled by nonhuman agents, and the poems resist anthropocentric approaches. For example, “source” texts (those read aloud to plants) are fragmented and recombined following the logic of plant movements. Familiar syntax is literally lost in translation, undermining traditional ways of reading. A well-versed reader may recognize words from *Leaves of Grass* in one poem, even without seeing “after Walt Whitman” in its title, but then what? The texts seem disjointed. Words sit on the surface. How to proceed?

While beginning the first poem, *Untitled (after Quercus rubra)*, I felt unsure how to focus. Words followed words, with occasional “landscape” terms (cedar, clumps, darkness, grass, thorned) and plausible pairs (like her, not performed, somewhat there) among them, but nothing cohered. It felt like walking on loose stones: wobbly, little traction. I started over twice before reading the poem all the way through. Then I started searching for a key, a way of reading through which the meaning of the poem would become evident. I read lines backwards. I read the first word of every line. Then I read in a glancing way, speaking words out loud as I became aware of them and interpolating other words and word forms in an improvisational way, giving shape to phrases that were neither on the page nor wholly inside me but somewhere in between:

The cedars of Orlando explain  
alone how mouths can purse  
at all.

After not having performed  
contempt for more than she knew,  
thirty  
tossing, suffering, but valuable, healthy,  
and not seeing the clumps of glum  
darkness and the grass,  
counted hither to unknown women.

Thorned.

The experience of reading felt like a guided ad lib or a stream of consciousness—at once deeply personal and unfamiliar.

In a literal and modern way, it’s *only human* to want to make sense of these poems, but they were composed through proximity and shared agency between humans and plants, so they will not make sense in an *only human* way—and that resistance is part of what makes them interesting and important *now*. In keeping words materially close to their readers, these poems disallow “critical” reading—meaning, that reading practice predicated on the distancing, subject-object relationships essential to modern thought—and negotiate landscape more equitably. Just as french’s method makes plants write, the plant’s method makes french move.

Human and natural systems have already influenced and been influenced by each other, and together they negotiate relationship through interplay within a shared medium. To make sense of these poems is to become aware of landscape in that new way.

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1 Virginia Woolf, "Craftsmanship," BBC Radio broadcast (April 20, 1937).

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2 Ibid.

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3 While lineage we know is limited, I offer this brief family tree: In 2012 *Quercus velutina* of Saugatuck Michigan authored its first novel, with me as editor. This novel was read aloud to *Quercus rubra* in Chicago to generate a second text in 2013, and *Q. rubra* was later transplanted to live next to *Q. velutina*. *Q. rubra*'s text inspired a series of other plants to follow, including the poems here from 2014 and 2015.

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4 "methods of generating poetry independent of the author's will." Poets.org, s.v., "chance operations": <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/chance-operations-poetic-term>.

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5 H. M. Appel and R. B. Cocroft, "Plants respond to leaf vibrations caused by insect herbivore chewing," *Oecologia* 174: 4 (August 2014): 1257–1266.

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6 See, for example, Suzanne Simard, "Net transfer of carbon between ectomycorrhizal tree species in the field," *Nature* 388 (August 7, 1997): 579–582, and Zdenka Babikova et al., "Underground signals carried through common mycelial networks warn neighbouring plants of aphid attack," *Ecology Letters* 16 (2013): 835–843.

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7 Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, NY: Random House, 2001).

## Biographies

**Lindsey french** is an artist and educator whose work engages in gestures of sensual and mediated communication with landscapes and the nonhuman. She has shared her work in places such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and the International Museum of Surgical Science (Chicago), the Taubman College Gallery (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), and in conjunction with the International Symposium of Electronics Arts (Albuquerque and Vancouver). She currently teaches as Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Studio Arts at the University of Pittsburgh.

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**David L. Hays** is co-editor of *Forty-Five*, Associate Head of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and founding principal of Analog Media Lab. Trained in architecture and history of art, his scholarly research explores contemporary landscape theory and practice, the history of garden and landscape design in early modern Europe, interfaces between architecture and landscape, and pedagogies of history and design. Hays is the editor of *Landscape within Architecture* (2004) and *(Non-)Essential Knowledge for (New) Architecture* (2013), both by 306090/Princeton Architectural Press. His essays have appeared in a wide range of journals—including *Harvard Design Magazine*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Polysèmes*, *The Senses and Society* (Oxford), *Matéricos Periféricos* and *A&P Continuidad* (Rosario, Argentina), *Tekton* (Mumbai), and *Feng jin yuan lin* and *Landscape Architecture China* (Beijing)—and as chapters in numerous books. As a designer, Hays's work explores the production of environmentally responsive objects using low-cost, low-tech materials. With particular interests in dynamic systems, environmental phenomena, and craft, his process crosses lateral thinking and intuition with grounded experiment.

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