



Tiferet

FOSTERING PEACE THROUGH LITERATURE & ART

AUTUMN/WINTER 2017



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NONFICTION

Where Wind Belongs

Marya Summers

“A real home is both a particular place and the entire world.”

– Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

I am named for the wind, which is driven to discover cracks and stir emptiness. Wind ventures wherever it can, slides into places people have forgotten. It shakes, scatters, uncovers, and upturns. It is equally fond of blackness and brilliance. If there is space to be filled, wind will work its way there. A wistful breeze blows when wind dreams of settling down.

Monday, 4 February

Waning Crescent Moon

Belly on the ground, I humble myself to nature. In bursts, the wind touches me so intimately that even un-sprouted hairs reach heavenward. The sunlight, mottled by the ancient oaks, plays in warm splotches across my cheek and neck. The waves of the Intracoastal Waterway ripple toward me, the gift of wind—all charge and no retreat.

What I want most now is you—the warmth of your mouth playing on my cheek and neck, your body rooted in mine, the surface tension of each moment supporting me on the swell and trough of bliss. Claim me like this.

I lean into the longing and let it push into me. Desire sends out a taproot, burrows deep and expands. I am done resisting for the sake of control, rejecting for the sake of dignity, denying for the sake of moving on. Better to own it: passion has already staked its claim.

Wednesday, 6 February

Waning Moon

Want—ferocious and howling—becomes obsessive and whimpering. “He loves me. I know he loves me. It doesn’t matter if he loves me. I love him so much. Will he ever love me?”

It doesn’t matter who “he” is.

Fear wedges between me and the object of my desire. “You are not enough,” it says. “And you cannot do enough.”

Friday, 8 February

New Moon

Tonight, the yearning becomes dew. As the moon extinguishes itself, darkness swallows caution. My love has come bearing gifts.

Even before he offers the chocolates, I open like night-blooming jasmine. We walk the two blocks to Bryant Park as I wonder why I have never noticed so many of nature’s patterns before, and whether I will be able to remember how to reconstruct them later. I gasp at the lattice of the sidewalk’s atomic structure. The wind blows us full-body kisses as we stroll the shell-rock paths beside Lake Worth Lagoon, approaching a familiar friend.

“Your tree,” he says, remembering our walks here years ago.

My tree: a small oak that leans over the water, barely braced by the crumbling sea wall. Many times I have come to it seeking the comfort of a good listener. The tree also makes a fine companion as I trace my journey across the pages of my journal. Sometimes, I stop just to visit.

“Isn’t that your tree?” he says when I say nothing.

I answer by standing beside it for my ritual laying on of hands.

“It looks like it’s crying out,” he says. We stare at a gaping scar in its trunk, though we hear only the rush of leaves as the oak shakes its limbs against the wind. I read the braille of the tree trunk, a love letter whose affection I reciprocate with my fingertips. We walk on after some time, exploring the conjunction of darkness and light. We know the shadows in each other, and now we rediscover our radiance.

He has made it clear our union is governed by his whims, yet when we return home, I let him in, anyway. The petals of each nerve open, multiply, expand; the carnal becomes ethereal and then divine. After sex, I stand naked before him, the man who cannot help but strip me in every way, and I bemoan the effects of forty years of gravity.

“Your breasts look good to me,” he says. I cup them.

“But they’re not where they used to be.”

His gaze is steady. “Neither are you.”

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Sunday, 10 February

Waxing Crescent

Yearning is the body's summons. Query is the mind's petition. A wish is a prayer is a spell: the spirit's requisition. As the moon's power ascends, casting its silver through the water's surface, I shuffle a deck of spell cards. Trusting divine guidance works as serendipity, I select a card at random.

Card 28: Knowledge. "If this spell has chosen you, the Universe is tapping on your shoulder, trying to tell you something, but you're just not listening. So, it's decided to get your attention this way instead. Through casting this spell, you'll be given something precious: an inner knowing that will help you manifest your dreams. Pay attention!"

The card's instructions direct me to discover an old tree and sit in its roots every morning for seven days beginning on a Thursday of waxing moon. I am to wear brown, listen to the tree's wisdom, and bind the spell with mint tea.

What I want now is not a willful interruption but a magical transformation. Like the wind, the will abates. Magic requires discipline to work the rituals, but it is not the will that initiates change. In this alchemy, the elements are first unearthed; then emotion catalyzes the conversion.

Once, I was a mostly abandoned building, nothing but drafts and a haunted, shuttered attic. The violence of childhood drove my consciousness from its sofa, bed and table. I retreated to the realm of the mind, withdrawing my senses. In adulthood, sex was the only physical connection I allowed. I would close my eyes and excuse my spirit from the room.

After decades of this physical-spiritual abandoning, I fell in love with a mystic visionary. As was my way, when I straddled him, my body rising and returning to his, I shut my eyelids tight, eliminating everything but the pleasurable energy I was generating. One hand on my hip, he placed his other on my heart.

"Open your eyes," he commanded gently.

Seeing may be believing, but first, it is an act of faith. One must trust her ability to confront the volatile and unanticipated. The warmth of his touch relaxed my fears and released my heart. I opened my eyes and descended into my body, which had become a safe place. I still didn't know how to live there, but I began to visit. Years later, yoga is teaching me how to inhabit its space. I often find comfort there now.

When fear blinds me, yoga is God's hand on my heart. Now, my own voice instructs, "Open your eyes."

Thursday, 14 February

First Quarter

Wearing the hue of dirt and shit is humbling. I prefer black, the color of oblivion. In brown, I have only a pair of knee-length yoga shorts, and they will have to serve—for the next seven days. I wake early and pack my journal, a pen, and a towel into my bag. I carry these and my travel mug of tea while walking the two blocks to Bryant Park. By 10:00 a.m., the sun is strong and direct, and the breeze is pushing in from the Atlantic. When I reach my tree, I place the folded towel on the oak's gnarled knee and pull out my journal. If this is a spell for knowledge, then this is how a writer casts it: taking dictation from a tree. My tree.

My tree? I'm not even certain of its exact species. I've always assumed it was an oak. I pluck a branch to find its match later in the Audubon mug shots of Florida flora.

Says the tree, "You might not know my name, but you know me just the same. Your lover called me *your* tree because you've claimed me to him, just as you've claimed him to me."

I sip scalding liquid peppermint, and consider that we're each a growing network, the legacy of limbs and offshoots. The park is full of grand oaks, achieving their full splendor supported in generous plots of earth. This lone, noble oak, caught between the sidewalk and sea wall, scrabbles in the sandy Florida soil as the retaining wall slowly gives way to the Intracoastal's fitful chop. At high tide, the tree's branches steep in its brackish brown tea. Gnarled and bent, the tree says, "A life best spent is spent living and knowing you belong, even if everything seems to tell you you're wrong."

My tree tells me a parable to make its point.

"Three fallen, foreign sisters, once side by side whispered to each other in the brush and rush of wind." I survey the trench along the sea wall where the Australian pines once stood—comparatively more graceful and regal but less deeply rooted than the oak—before they were uprooted by a hurricane. "All were claimed not only because they didn't know how to honor their place by spreading out and digging in, but also because they did not know how to bow to the wind."

My tree veins the earth with its roots, a mirror of its branches. Except that also below, in the crevices between roots and crumbling cement, is the detritus of others who have spent their time here. Some leave beer cans, empty cartons of menthol cigarettes. A few have carved their legacies in the tree's bark; tagged the cement with spray paint. I suspect there are others who also love the tree as I do, but

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I cannot prove it, because, like me, they respectfully leave no trace. Can I then call this *my* tree?

“When we love, we lay claim,” says the tree, its branches nodding in the wind. “I belong to many, and no one’s love is the same.”

Friday, 15 February Waxing Gibbous Moon

When I leave for yoga class, the sun has begun to gently diffuse its light through the cloud cover. I leave my daughter sleeping, stretched out naked in her bed – lithe and luminescent – as if a moonbeam entered through the window during the night and was captured in the bed linens.

In class, I greet the sun over and over, my body exalting the light. In just one hour, I become a cat, a cow, a cobra, a fish, an eagle... a tree. This last one is my favorite—less stretch, more equilibrium—though I’ve always thought of it as “The Akimbo Flamingo.” Yoga is new to me, but I have stood this way—the foot of one leg resting on the inner thigh of the standing one—all my life. The instructor gives the class explicit instructions on the art of balance. Any tree can tell you: first, one must be well grounded.

When I return home, Ashley is still sleeping – a day off school allowed a weeknight sleepover with me rather than in her usual bed at her father’s. I boil water and drop a bag of peppermint leaves into the steaming liquid in my travel mug. I grab the bag of essentials assembled the day before and impulsively swipe *Care of the Soul* off the bookshelf on my way out the door.

“Good morning!” I greet the tree when I arrive. I set down the tea, pull out my towel. “May I?”

My research has told me what I intuitively knew: this tree—a live oak—is a hardy survivalist. When ships were still built of wood, live oak was the preferred timber because it was so strong it withstood cannon fire. Native Americans used to bend the young trees over to serve as trail markers. Strong enough to support me, my tree also points the way.

The tree gives silent consent to my request, and again, I lay the towel down and sit on its knee. Today, I open someone else’s book. I let it fall open to the chapter “Care of the World’s Soul” and read: “Humility in the artist is the frank acceptance of all experiences, just as love in the artist is simply that sense of Beauty that reveals to the world its body and soul.” Something I continually rediscover.

Today is for the birds, in more ways than one. Friday, I learn from a book of spells, is actually the day of the week that governs birds. As I sit quietly, they noisily

move in – a parliament of great crow-blackbirds, a kind of grackle. The birds claim several branches and pick along the path within kicking distance of my flip-flopped feet. With their long “boat tails” held high in a “V,” they call to each other in a harsh “*Aaack!*” Their yellow eyes stare at me intently, intentionally.

“*Aaack!*” they squawk. “Look!”

They say nothing else, but I sense more, something like, “See? We’re not afraid because... you belong here.”

“Yes, you do... *ooo-OOOO-ooo*,” a pair of Eurasian collared doves agrees.

The delicate grey birds with necks banded by a thin black line—as though they fluttered down as an Egyptian queen flourished her eyeliner—have claimed the leafy branch closest to me. Compared to the blackbirds, the tranquil couple is more interested in each other than me, only occasionally turning their tiny heads to observe me observing them. When a company of feral parrots announce their arrival in squawks and screeches and flutter into the tree’s furthest branches, I begin to wonder if I’m crashing some sort of ornithological summit. If so, the birds don’t mind. The parrots are too busy chatting and tossing their bright green heads, ruffling their verdant feathers. The blackbirds are shuttling back and forth between the tree, the ground and the electric wires. And the doves have begun preening each other.

“Oooo-OOOO-ooo,” I say to the lovers, a ridiculous attempt at communication.

They shoot me a patient look and go back to burying their dainty beaks lovingly in each other’s plumage. The parrots, interested in more suitable digs, adjourn to a nearby coconut palm.

I return to my reading: “An animal reveals its soul in its striking appearance, in its life habits, and in its style.”

I accept the gifts of these magi: blackbirds bestowing guidance and insight, doves imparting peace and love, parrots conferring playfulness and communication.

“Kooo-KOOO-koo,” says a dove.

Sounds about right.

Saturday, 16 February

Waxing Gibbous Moon

“There’s a lunar eclipse this week. Does that mean anything in the life of trees?” I ask my leafy teacher.

The tree says nothing.

Words are powerful. With them, we work the magic of devotion,

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supplication, inquiry, and commitment. But so, too, is withholding them. I dig for answers in the silence, where the imagination awakens. I wonder about the effects of darkness, of tidal pull, of lunacy. I doubt that before modern science trees were ever struck with terror by a blood-red moon.

Quiet does not come naturally to me, which is why I am sitting in the roots of the tree with a pen in my hand and a book in my bag, fending off true silence. For me, this *is* mediation: recording what I overhear as the universe gives its deposition and reading back the transcripts of others. Pen poised, I wait... Nothing.

I open the anthology of *New York Times* essays, *Writers on Writing*, to “Why Not Put off ‘Til Tomorrow the Novel You Could Begin Today?” and let Ann Patchett speak instead. Loud and clear, everything she says resonates. The first stage of the writing process: procrastinate. It’s as true for me as the slap of waves against the sea wall. My doubts are quieted; I belong.

I sit in the tree’s lap, both of us now rooted in silence. I open as much as possible, ready to listen with all my senses. As my tongue tingles in the wake of peppermint, a white ibis skewers the earth for fodder. Florida’s smaller, more delicate answer to Africa’s Sacred Ibis—venerated by the ancient Egyptians as a symbol of magic, the moon, and writing—the bird angles forward, seeks again. And again...

Sunday, 17 February Waxing Gibbous Moon

Tumult has poked its fingers in everything.

First, through the fabric of sleep. He sent a text message at 4:00 a.m.:
“Eclipse, eh?”

As the moon reaches her potential, the sun reminds her that she may thank him for her radiance. The earth, however, possesses her lunar body and keeps her tethered. The eclipse will be a blood-red reminder.

Though I couldn’t shrug off his inquiry and tossed in sleeplessness, I resisted the urge to answer his technological rap on the window of opportunity left open by my boundless desperation. I didn’t answer. Perhaps ten minutes later, a car’s engine cleared its throat and pulled away. In the morning, I could barely celebrate my victory.

Challenging my commitment to the spell, a stomach flu has wreaked havoc on my body, and soon I discover that I have drunk the last of the peppermint tea. Determined, I settle on an herbal blend with a touch of spearmint. Now is time for faith that the magic is in the ritual more than in the tea leaves. Tea, books, towel and pen assembled, I head out of the house and into a turbulence of wind.

When I reach the tree, muddle-headed and exhausted, I cannot prevail even over the small chaos of beer cans and cigarette boxes that litter its roots. Today, I leave them transgressing on sacred space. It doesn't bother me that the tree and I do not have an exclusive relationship; if only the others would honor it as I do.

As I try to write, the wind makes mischief with my pages, and my stomach roils like the water beneath the tree. Too soon, my intestines signal their alarm—time to go home. Surrendering to my body, I cut my lesson short, walking swiftly home, desperate for indoor plumbing. Hard pressed by the disquiet of my body, I decide to shift my focus.

“Focus on your *heart*,” I say with some necessary authority.

I meditate on the love that resides there—for the tree, for him, for the books and pen, for a universe that works magic through trees. Reassurance radiates from my chest as my gut lets loose a shriek. Calmly, I quicken my pace.

“It's okay,” I say aloud. “We're almost there.”

Monday, 18 February

Waxing Gibbous Moon

A new day is an opportunity to do what I could not the day before. I gather yesterday's litter from beneath the oak, though I am assaulted by storm winds blowing in from the west. I am undeterred – there is work for me to do. Today, I have added a pillow to the ritual items. The knobby knee of the tree has been digging into my sitting bones for half a week. At first, I accepted the pain as part of the process. Now, I have decided that gaining wisdom does not have to be painful.

Today is a dog day at Bryant Park, and though I am a cat person, I delight in their joy. Dogs of all breeds, colors, and sizes chase balls, trot about, dart back and forth between the trees, sniffing, smiling and delighted.

“There is no better place and time than here and now to be canine,” the dogs might say, were they not so clearly intoxicated by the scents riding the bluster.

If only they'd help me sniff out my missing cat. Oliver has probably crawled under a neighborhood house, holed up safely to sleep. Still, a current of anxiety runs through me when my thoughts turn to him. I've called him, choking his name through a throat that grips hope and fear equally as I circled the block and searched its weedy alley. But my invocation hasn't worked. It's been two days now since I've seen him. Injured as a tiny kitten, my three-legged familiar has taught me what it means to be whole, and he takes my heart wherever he goes.

The rains are coming, the wind pushing them in. If I linger long, I will be soaked, but I'm not done. The winds shift, pushing in from the southeast, though

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the dark clouds are still in the west. Turbulence has declared a siege. A woman calls back her terriers as the sky spits its final warning. Still, I hold out until I realize that all the people—and their four-legged companions—are gone. The storm lets go, and so do I. With my belongings stowed, I retreat. Surrender isn't always defeat.

Tuesday, 19 February **Waxing Gibbous Moon**

After I clean up the latest garbage left as mock offerings to the tree, my rooted mentor invites me to exist in the present. But my mind is worried with the protests of yesterday:

Aligning their bodies with their beliefs, local activists linked their arms inside PVC tubes, lay down on searing blacktop, and blocked the entrance to the construction site of a yet-unlicensed power plant. “A river of gas” in our Everglades, the activists warned. Dressed as authority, Power muscled in and threatened to unholster the violence on its hips, as its lips invoked “peace” and “public good.” Power sawed through PVC and hauled heat-exhausted and dehydrated heroes to jail. “Radicals,” says the *Post*, of those willing to become criminals to preserve the place that is home.

After yesterday's record high ninety-degree temperatures, it has become sweatshirt weather. I insulate myself in my Antioch College hoodie, whose logo declares “150 years of revolution” by a body of “radicals.” A revolution sounds like progress, but it can also be nothing more than going in circles. Revolution is fine so long as you are on the right axis.

Love, fear, desire: all keep me tethered. Yesterday, he tempted me with an invitation, and I conceded. We hadn't even kissed when he directed me to a chair and opened my mouth. I swallowed my objection with his demand. When he was satisfied, he sent me on my way. This morning I woke from disquieting dreams, my orbit wobbled. How radical a new axis would be.

So now in the grey light of near-noon as balmy breezes entreat me, I sit for the first time on the other side of the tree. At the tree's base, it splits—one portion grows up; the other, out—as if there are two trunks from one root. Perhaps this was the result of an injury, but now it adds to the charming dynamic of the tree. From our injuries, our characters.

Wednesday, 20 February **Full Moon & Lunar Eclipse**

I wake peaceful and joyous, nuzzled by love on three legs. Last night, I walked door-to-door with fliers, calling the cat's name as I went. I climbed the steps

of an empty house to reach its porch mailbox, and there I found Oliver looking back at me through the glass panes of the house's front door—locked now but wide open all weekend during renovations. Part criminal and part hero, I climbed through an unlocked window and rescued my bewildered cat.

Now as the wind drives the waves against the tree's lowest limbs and slops the Intracoastal's suds against the sea wall, I marvel at the magic the heart has to manifest what we need. Desire pulls the world into the gaps within us, and love surrenders the space that yearns to be filled. Longing asks and love gives thanks.

Today the spell is complete. Before I leave, I lay my hands on the tree in gratitude, and then, already filled with the vibrant totality of tonight's eclipse, I breeze on home.

I am named for the wind, which gives breath to the inanimate and voice to the voiceless. Instead of settling down, wind picks itself up again, touching everything it passes, accepting the gift of each experience. Though it cannot stay put, wind whispers promises and keeps them; it always returns. Even as wind blows through limbs and across continents, even as it ventures on and up, the earth claims it. Where wind is, it belongs.