

Trees of Life
Luka Agniel

To forget how to dig the earth and to tend the soil is to forget ourselves.
–Mahatma Gandhi

It is reported that before the contentious fighting over Mexico began between Cortez and Montezuma, they shared a ceremonial extraction of liquid amber from a Sweetgum tree. Their mutual attempts in offering an olive branch failed, leaving only a merciless war and the destruction of a civilization to take place. But the Sweetgum tree tried. It tried to offer its services as a mediator. Mediate the peaceful introduction of two strangers. Calm tensions from the uncertainty with its inviting presence. Attempts were all made in vain however, since after all, the Sweetgum is no seasoned diplomat, nor even conscious of its own existence, but more so an inanimate object. Thus, “attempts” is the wrong word, since it did not attempt and would not attempt in the absence of preference, feelings, and an overall personality. Nevertheless, we (perhaps I really just mean myself) project a personality on the mindless remnants of Mother Nature. Today, you would find a Sweetgum tree standing modestly tall at 60 feet in the broad area of the United States known as The South. Aware and proud of its unintentional beauty, it mutes its brilliant colors with a lighter hue. It has no intention of outclassing any other tree. But it does, so serendipitously that it glows in every selection of the wide array of colors its star shaped leaves emit – regretfully looking like Mr. or Ms. Popular in high school that catwalks down the hallway, evading the eye-contact of the plebeians and seemingly staring forward into their infinite ambition, but always sure to take the opportunity to gait in their bright orange puffer. This image is revolting and unfortunate since the Sweetgum refuses such hedonistic pursuits. All too mindful of the inadvertent gait, the Sweetgum stiffens its otherwise pyramid shape at its base in consideration of anything else that might want to use that space. Not particularly possessive, the Sweetgum shares whatever it can offer freely, like a selfless mother that doesn’t seem to own anything. Its main offering is a spike ball fruit, which, according to scientists, has healing properties, and according to common folk, can soothe the soul—apparently Cortez’s soul was unsoothable. As a result, the Sweetgum is home to many, food to many. Everyone from Montezuma to the purple finch appreciates their truly altruistic nature. The Sweetgum embraces southern hospitality, pushing it to such an extent that your Aunt Carol, who says, “my home is your home,” would even be jealous. I’d imagine the Sweetgum tree would be the effortlessly beautiful, smart, and charming southern woman that leads a truly unselfish life. Perhaps some, driven by the tunnel vision that is the capitalistic fixation on profit, say that she is wasting her potential.

In nature, nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. Trees can be contorted, bent in weird ways, and they’re still beautiful.
–Alice Walker

In the glee and joy of the December month, thousands of Balsam Fir Trees are cut across New England and Eastern Canada. It is tradition, established practice, something we have to do. But we all do it because it reminds us of that feeling of euphoria, elation, and pure excitement on the only day as a kid we’d willingly get up as early as possible; but did anyone stop to think about how the Balsam Fir community feels during this time? No, but surely the community has

its thoughts on the season, because of course they do, and of course they have preferences, feelings, and an overall personality. How could Mother Nature's delegates that boast a nuance and harmony not be able to? I project a personality onto the lively organisms that share this planet with us, because I know they have one, and I can see the ones they wear on their sleeve in the small details they choose for their aesthetic. The Balsam Fir's image, like the Douglas Fir's, is synonymous with Christmas. Its sturdy trunk, rough bark, dark shade, harsh needles, and humble height make for the perfect tree for presents to sit under. The Balsam Fir knows its role, is not particularly happy with it, but accepts it graciously. It can be said this sentiment has become inherent by birth – a result of evolutionary natural selection. Even though it is impressive in its build, both unique and strong, the Balsam Fir is unambitious - unambitious because they know their role as a December tree: popular as ever once a year, but left untouched until the next time turkey was last week's menu. They resent that time of the year, though, because of the attention and temporary exploitation of them. The Balsam Firs live happier, or as happy as they could be, during the rest of the year when they live as recluses from society; however, the knowledge of December 25th daunts them perpetually. They serve the strange desires of humans continually but live with disappointment that they contribute. I'd imagine the Balsam Fir is the melancholy and reclusive old lighthouse keeper on the remote shores of Maine, witnessing the grim change in his environment but committed to adapting for the betterment of his community. He understands people like his lobsters, but he also understands that there are less and less lobsters every year that shore up in strong winds, and also that anyone in lives in the few towns near his lighthouse depend on the annual offering of lobsters, and that the lobster business they rely upon is the reason behind the corroding of the landscape they love.

Nature's beauty is a gift that cultivates appreciation and gratitude.

–Louie Schwartzberg

With the American industrial revolution well into full swing, city planners were in a craze for the American Elm and insisted on their planting in United States' biggest cities during the first few decades of the 20th century. And there is little doubt as to why they were so consumed with overseeing their prevalence on city streets; you would be too (or at least I would), since the American Elm uniquely combines sweeping size with unequivocal grace. Their presence softened the harsh cement rampant in the growing concrete jungles and reminded haughty steel tycoons of the pristine purity of Mother Nature, from whom the Elms were borrowed time. The American Elm took its urban responsibility with great seriousness, extending its branches' reach farther than ever before, knowing that whether that city slickers knew it or not, they depended on it for their own sanity. Its strength and embodiment of nature's balance is why the Native Americans held it with so much respect. Among many incommunicative tribes before European settlement, American Elms served as signposts for significant gatherings, hence they were often dubbed council trees. Only assuming, but the mere presence of it amidst decision making would exude tender strength. Again, the American elm accepts the responsibility of being the council tree only with great reverence, taking on the burden of being the de facto representative of Mother Nature. During these significant gatherings, An American Elm would stand nearly 40 feet tall, undeniably imposing significant prowess among the congregation. But with great strength comes great responsibility – an idiom practically etched into the DNA of every one of them. As a result, its solid trunk separates into multiple sturdy branches perpendicularly, making for its trademark spreading fountains. The breadth of these

fountains is exhaustive, reaching almost as far as its height. This causes its dominance over an extensive range to be readily visible through the dark shade it casts. But it isn't to serve its own ego, more so to serve as a protective shield for any of those under its breadth that might be vulnerable. Its multiple limbs create an aged and graceful canopy that eases its visitors by letting them know its purpose is to protect and inspire. However, despite how strong its robust trunk is, how mature its antiquated bark looks, how generous its wide shelter reaches, or how impressive its height is, the American Elm itself is vulnerable, possibly the most vulnerable among its compatriots. A shipment of timber from Europe in the 1950's brought with it beetles that were vectors of the deadly Dutch Elm Disease, ravaging the Elm community, but especially attacking the American Elm. Perhaps the American Elm had been so invested in the well-being of others that it forgot to take care of itself. Much to the anguish of the city planners, American Elms around the United States disappeared in a matter of months. Cities' desperate bids to save nature's grand ambassadors in quarantine were seldom effective. Today, they are scarcely scattered among rural areas of the American east coast, with their only remnants in a city being New York City's Central Park – a protected sanctuary of America's guardians. I'd imagine the American Elm is the underpaid affable high school teacher who is every student's favorite, an approachable teacher who always seems to give the wisest advice and takes the fragility and vulnerability of teenagers with the utmost importance. (A professor X if you will).

By discovering nature, you discover yourself.

–Maxime Legacé

With the White House in the background, the Lincoln Memorial just a stone's throw away, the United States Capitol just in sight, and the Washington Monument clearly in the horizon, thousands of tourists flock to Washington D.C. once a year for the spectacle that is the blooming of the Cherry Blossom trees. Cherry Blossoms take the spotlight from the fabled symbols of American democracy once a year in their own show of American excellence. But, of course, Cherry Blossoms are for all intents and purposes an immigrant (how fitting that the tree is becoming a symbol of America). Originally, the tree is a native of Japan and still regarded as Japan's tree. The tree's put-on display in D.C. made their way over to America as a gift of friendship from the Japanese - but only after a previously failed attempt turned near diplomatic crisis in 1910, when inspectors recommended burning the trees infested with insects and disease. Nevertheless, the Cherry Blossom eventually prevailed in becoming an American mainstay, a fact the Cherry Blossom is proud of, as it proved that their unwavering persistence paid in full. Despite the possible forever tarnished relationship between the United States and Cherry Blossom trees, it knew it was irresistible, that its objective allure would peter out any grudge. An attraction that is in full effect for a week in March, the Cherry Blossom unveils its absolute beauty, dropping all kinds of jaws, as if it were the head-turning stunner arriving to the high-class ball fashionably late. Its trademark flowery pink pedals look as if they would feel like an airy cloud, and are rounded to avoid any sharp edges, as to appear delicate and induce serenity. The final product in full bloom features a captivating contrast of solid pink pedals against a matte black bark, standing only about 15 feet tall in an ideal umbrella shape so that their cottony soft pedals are easily accessible to observers. It knows its effect, and expects this effect, as for most of the year the Cherry Blossom cloaks its magnificence under the guise of the more common green, to assimilate to the color of the more traditional American trees – keeping them happy. It waits under the façade quietly, but demands that attention for the one week in March. However, it isn't the

most resourceful of trees, as its name is quite misleading since Cherry Blossoms do not actually grow any cherries. But they are more so ornamental, an aesthetic point of gathering for any and all to thrive under. I'd imagine the Cherry Blossom is the storied and impressive grandmother who came to Ellis Island as a young adult with little to no money, but with persistence and confidence in herself, created a good life that saw success and a devotion to family.

Time spent amongst trees is never wasted time.

–Katrina Mayer

I suppose that's why they call New York City the concrete jungle. Consciously or subconsciously, humankind has just been trying to replicate the imperfect perfection that is Mother Nature. The pillared buildings, reciprocity in adjacent architecture, and exceptionally grand structures are only an attempt to capture the achievement of homeostasis all too visible in forests. But even I, a born and bred New Yorker, who saw a thin assortment of trees growing up, and basked in the clean crisp air only bimonthly, understands that we have never come close to comparing. We've had scientific discoveries, which were really just breakthroughs in our understanding of Mother Nature, and used them only to serve the shortsighted shallow satisfactions that we crave so much. Straying farther and farther away from the complex simplicity of nature, we built taller and fancier than we ever were supposed to. It's all in the humble balance that Mother Nature has perfected, and we have forgotten; we often lose sight of what is important in the pursuit of the next supposed step in progression. But as I recall my high school biology class, I gain hope in the small facts I retained. Our delineation of life comes down to the simplistic difference of eukaryotic and prokaryotic cells. All living things are either one of those, and the only genuine divergence in the phenomenon that is life is whether you are one kind of cell or the other. Trees and humans are the same kind of cell, eukaryotic. We are fundamentally made up of the same things and function in the same way. And as I see this, the best qualities in humans, among many negative ones, are represented in trees. That is how I know they are alive, sentient beings that figured out the meaning of life on earth. So, I only hope that we more often embrace and try to emulate the lively remnants of Mother Nature.