


The Language of Trees, A Rewilding of Literature and Landscape by Katie Holten.  
Tin House, 2023

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Hermann Hesse once wrote that the key to existential joy was in learning how to listen to the trees. There is also great pleasure to be had from reading about trees, and now you can enjoy arboreal texts translated into Tree. Conceptual artist Katie Holten has reimagined the alphabet, centering trees instead of human symbology. In her alphabet, a leafless silhouette of a tree species stands in for a specific letter. A is for Apple (gnarly), F is for Fir (Christmas tree shape – evergreens keep their needles as they do in real life), and L is for Linden (symmetrical). E, is of course for Elm, but X and Z are less obvious. X is for Xanthoxylum, an alternative spelling of Zanthoxylum, the Common Prickly Ash, and Z is Zelkova, an Asian member of the elm family. For the sake of typeface uniformity, the trees are adjusted to size. She then translates tree prose and verse into the Tree alphabet, presented on the opposing page. Poems have lots of white space, while essays are Black Forests of words. Many of the shapes soon become familiar, and I can imagine that with enough practice, you could actually learn to read in Tree.

“Language frames your understanding of the world,” as Winona LaDuke writes in “The Ojibwe New Year,” taken from her blog. No log was left unturned in sourcing texts to translate into Tree. Along with blog posts, excerpts came from exhibition catalogs, books, magazine articles, and even a Twitter feed whose username is the extinction symbol (an hourglass in a circle). Among the many goodies, there is a recipe for Acorn Bread from Lucy O’Hagan, and another from Rachel Hawkwind for Oak Gall Ink, the ink used to write the U.S. Constitution. In “Medicine of the Tree People,” Valerie Segrest reveals how to make conifer tea and seasoning salt. In an excerpt from his book, Landmarks, Robert McFarlane greatly increased my tree vocabulary. Who knew “bole” (𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂) was the main trunk of a tree before it separated into branches? Or that “lammas,” (𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂) an important pagan festival, derives from the second flush of growth in late summer by some tree species? And I, for one, have always searched for the right word for the unearthed roots when a tree just falls over, which is more often than one might think. The word is rootplate. Or 𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂𐄂. In one piece, you will learn about Ogham, an early medieval Irish alphabet, and in another you will read about how migration is not new to trees, but that the climate is changing so rapidly, forests cannot move fast enough to save themselves. I found Jonathon Miller Weisberger’s text “Cacao” deeply illuminating. Cacao contains the chemical anandamide, which has the almost identical makeup as THC, which is interesting, but cacao’s cultural and biological history and what it has to say about biodiversity and our future is even more so. Its tree-translated page is one of the thickest. The darkest forest of all.

Holten’s creation of the Tree alphabet is an act of conceptual art, designed to make us rethink language. Conceptual art can also adjust how we think about time. In “Future Library,” Katie Paterson explains that a thousand trees have been planted in a forest outside Oslo, which will supply paper for an anthology that will be printed in a hundred year’s time. For further research on this and all excerpts, explore the extensive bibliography at the end. Do not leave without downloading the font, which Holten encourages readers to do: “The act of compos(t)ing love letters to our future selves might just be what makes our future selves possible.” She originally

created the alphabet for her out-of-print book [About Trees](#) (Broken Dimanche Press), and the [About Trees](#) page is where to find her link for the font. You may also be successful with this: “The Trees font is available to download for free [here](#).” (hint: after downloading, it needs to be moved into your fonts folder). I loved seeing my name in trees: . You will too.