

heartwood

by leigh melander, ph.d.

Here in the heartwood, drawn from moist memories, words linger on the page, and memories linger in those words. In their roots, I find the roots of our imaginings.

Trees grow in book itself, old growth from the Old German buche. Scratched on beechwood tablets, runes of magic and dark secrets whisper of the quiet conversations in our psyches between books and trees.

With glossy covers, do we dull the bond of book to tree and tree to book? A simultaneous sacrifice and honoring, a bringing of trees into our souls and houses, like the gallant small firs that die bedecked with ornaments each December in our festival of life.

We pulp those trees into paper, capturing, binding their masticated flesh. We casually use that flesh, setting coffee cups on it, tearing corners of pages, letting it slip from fingers to floor as we escape the day into sleep.

We pulp our fictions, our familiar contempt breathing easily in the sheer number of books at our fingertips. What is fiction that is really worthy of the pulp? What is the fiction of pulp itself? That it is something different, less important, less substantial, less lasting than a tree?

Pulp is mushy, fluid, gooey. The word flows forward from Latin for the fleshy parts of the body. Is it a step that brings the tree, on its way to a book, into relationship with the fleshy parts of ourselves?

As I clutch a beloved book to my chest, I become a faded tree hugger, and as I read, my flesh mingles with word and story and flesh of the giving tree. I am caressed as I caress.

When I write, I re-member the tree, even though I may have forgotten. In Latin, I would have scratched on ash, in Sanskrit, birch. I father and grow my thoughts.

Even when they lose their body completely, books still hover, singing in the edges of our minds. Stripped of paper flesh, books now live within our computers. Yet the flesh lives on, if faintly, in the act of computing, which, in its earliest version meant "to prune."

We cannot escape the tree, even if we wish.

The matter, the mother, the source, the substance that has consequence, is the hard, inner wood of a tree. The heart.