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Unchopping a Tree

W. S. Merwin
Liz Ward, illustrator
Trinity University Press (March 2014)
Hardcover $14.95 (48pp)
978-1-59534-187-7

Suppose you chopped down a tree and then regretted it because, after all, a tree is a beautiful thing in nature. What to do? Firewood? Board feet? Or, you might consider unchopping it by following the instructions of W. S. Merwin, a man of proven ecological insight and robust poetic tendencies, to put it back together, leaf by leaf, limb by limb, splinter by splinter. Oh, and don't forget the sawdust.

His instructions are in prose, although of the cadenced variety, which is not surprising because he has written more than fifty books of poetry, winning two Pulitzer Prizes in the process, as well as being selected as the US poet laureate in 2010. As for his tree credentials, at his home in Maui he established a conservancy with more than 800 palm species.

Unchopping a tree is tedious work, and he warns that "even in the best of circumstances it is a labor that will make you wish often that you had won the favor of a universe of ants, the empire of mice, or at least a local tribe of squirrels." The job requires sophisticated adhesives and some heavy machinery. To help understand the inner works of a tree, his manual includes eleven silverpoint drawings by Liz Ward of the cellular life of trees.

And so, what would you have after all the effort? Why a tree, of course.

THOMAS BEVIER (February 27, 2014)

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