

A short story
game book +
plantable artefact



PLANT STORIES

By Jamie Rhodes
Illustrated by Talya Baldwin

Plant Stories

Jamie Rhodes

This game-book uses the motions of
the universe and your own mental
state as a dice.

It is designed for meditative slow play
and honest introspection.

You will get more from the story
experience if you approach it with this
in mind.

Take your time, its all you have.

Jamie Rhodes

Witness Your Immersion



In 2022, I began a writer-in-residence position at an organic permaculture farm nestled deep in the moorland valleys of the Pennine mountains. This year-long project became a touchstone for my creative and academic journey, bridging the tactile world of permaculture with the theoretical frameworks of my PhD. *Plant Stories*, the resulting gamebook of illustrated fiction, draws deeply from this lived experience, exploring how immersion in both narrative and nature can reframe our relationship with the world.

At its heart, *Plant Stories* asks a central question: how do stories, like ecosystems, cultivate entanglements that extend beyond their immediate boundaries? Donna J. Haraway's notion of "staying with the trouble" resonates strongly here, challenging us to remain present in the complexities and uncertainties of the world, rather than seeking escapist resolutions. "We require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations," Haraway writes, a sentiment that mirrors the way stories and their readers interact, creating assemblages that ripple outward into lived reality.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* has also been a vital influence on this work, particularly her concept of "thing-power" and its implications for storytelling. Bennett's exploration of the agency of objects, her call to see materials not as inert but as active participants in assemblages, raises important questions about the role of objects in story worlds. For example, how do the materials and objects encountered in a narrative influence the audience's perception of the story and, in turn, their relationship with the material world? This alignment between vital materialism and story immersion underscores how stories can shape and be shaped by the things within them. In the interconnected narratives of *Plant Stories*, the edible plants become more than just setting or metaphor, they are agents of change, with a vitality that reflects the permaculture principles I was living and writing about.

The creative process of writing *Plant Stories* was as immersive as the theory underpinning it. Living on the farm, I participated in everything from planting seeds to harvesting crops, engaging directly with the cycles of growth and decay that permeate the natural world. These hands-on experiences found their way into the stories, imbuing them with a grounded sense of place and purpose. During this time, I also hosted overnight writing retreats, where participants immersed themselves in the environment, creating alongside the land itself. These gatherings exemplified what Haraway calls "*sympoiesis*" (making-with) where creativity and nature co-produced something greater than either could alone.

From a philosophical perspective, *Plant Stories* is the creative component of my practice-based PhD research, which examines how story immersion can influence the way we perceive and engage with the world. Drawing on narrative theory and phenomenology, I explore how story immersion functions not just as an escape into fictional worlds but as a tool for shaping real-world experiences. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* has been instrumental in this regard, particularly his insights into the relationship between perception, embodiment, and the lived world. "The world is not what I think, but what I live through," he writes, a statement that encapsulates the immersive experience of *Plant Stories*, where readers are invited to inhabit both the narrative and their own material reality in new and ways.

As a philosopher of stories, I also find inspiration in the words of creative writers who probe the transformative potential of storytelling. Such reflections remind us that stories are not just about characters and events but are conduits for connection, enabling us to step into other perspectives and, in doing so, reimagine our own place in the world.

The structure of *Plant Stories* is itself a reflection of the themes of transformation, immersion, and ecological interconnection that underpin both my creative and academic work. The book is divided into four chapters, each representing a season and each one exploring a different facet of immersion through gamification. The seasons guide the reader through the transformative process of plants, from decay to rebirth, from winter's stillness to the vibrant energy of summer's growth.

Chapter 1: Winter - The Transformation of a Leaf

The first chapter is inspired by the winter work of building compost heaps, a process in which the earth is fed and replenished with nutrients to support the next cycle of growth. During my time on the farm, I learned that it takes approximately three years for a leaf to fully decompose into soil. The journey from leaf to soil is an ontological transformation as much as a physical one. This transformation struck me deeply, and I wrote a story from the perspective of a leaf, contemplating its transition into soil, not only from the external environment but from within, exploring its internal thoughts about its changing purpose. The gamification in this chapter involves the reader's intentionality. By engaging in a mindfulness practice, they are invited to allow their own mental meanderings to determine whether they will read an internal or external passage of the leaf's transformation, thereby influencing the experience of immersion.

Chapter 2: Spring - The Willows' Rebirth

In spring, the willow trees on the farm are felled and the cuttings are repurposed for biochar and wildlife habitats. As I worked with these willows, the permaculture experts explained that, when severed from their roots, willow trees risked rooting again if placed directly on soil, something akin to a medieval siege, where the severed tree would be cut off from its mycelial communication network and rendered isolated and vulnerable, no nutrients or information going in or out. I was inspired to write a story about a branch named Ren, once destined to grow into a new part of the tree, now forced to reimagine its future as a root. At the same time, the story introduces Glomerella, a fungal spore leader who must find a new home to settle. Despite being an invader to the willow, Glomerella's role is vital in the ecosystem.

Chapter 3: Summer - Annuals vs Perennials

In the summer, I worked extensively with both annual and perennial plants, each requiring different types of care. Permaculture purists argue that annuals contradict the principles of permaculture because they require more human intervention to thrive, while perennials are seen as more harmonious with natural systems. In this chapter, I created two characters who represent these opposing approaches: one is a proud, industrious Annual, while the other is a wise and enduring Perennial. These two characters must work together to solve the problem of mass industrialised agriculture.

Chapter 4: Autumn - Dispersal

The final chapter is inspired by the harvest and the idea of a wild strain of wheat finding herself amidst a monoculture wheat field. She reflects on how she might give her seeds a better chance at survival by dispersing them through the wind, rather than allowing them to be trapped in the isolation of the industrial field. This chapter mirrors the wider themes of biodiversity, the benefits of variety in all things, whether in the soil, our diets, genetics, or even in society. The gamification here is tied to the very pages of the book itself. Printed on seeded paper, the reader can plant the pages in soil, where they will grow into new plants. The words printed near the pressed seeds will trigger random story prompts, sparking new narratives that tie the reader's experience back to the world they are physically engaging with. Similarly, the layout and composition of words and sentences on the page encourage co-creation of the story, via each reader's radically unique absorption of the words.

The book itself, printed on seeded paper, serves as both a medium for storytelling and an invitation for further interaction with the world. In this way, *Plant Stories* embodies a truly immersive experience, both philosophical and ecological, urging readers to think deeply about the interconnectedness of all things and the transformative power of stories.

Plant Stories is more than this gamebook, it is accompanied by a collaborative celebration that reflects the community and creativity at the heart of the project. The book, illustrated by the talented Talya Baldwin, brings to life the themes of sustainability, interconnectedness, and growth that permeate both the stories and the permaculture principles that inspired them. It is my hope that readers will find in these stories not only an escape but an invitation to immerse themselves in the narrative, to engage with the world around them, and to witness their own immersion in the delicate, powerful web of life. Through this project, I have come to see storytelling as a form of "making-with," an act of co-creation between writer, audience, and the material world.

I hope you enjoy this book and are inspired to plant stories of your own!

Jamie

LEAVE SOIL



HOW TO FLIP YOUR INTENTIONALITY COIN:

Pause.

Find your
breath.

Follow it.

Close your
eyes and
observe your
breath.

Come back
when you're
ready...

...

What arose to
be noticed
first?

A: My **external** world.

For example: a bodily sensation like an itchy foot or hunger, or some sort of sensory input like traffic outside, a pet in the room, a scent on a breeze.

(turn to page...)

B: My **internal** world.

For example: realising you were lost in a thought about something from the past or future, or an emotion or mood that arose for observation.

(turn to page...)

Reading with the Intentionality Coin

This story unfolds in two movements: the outer world of the leaf's physical form, and the inner world of its feeling and self-understanding. You will braid these threads using the unpredictable intentionality of being, just as you do with your own life in every moment.

At the end of each section, you will see this symbol: ○

Pause. Braid the threads.

Place your attention on your breath. Follow it inwards and outwards at the point you feel it most clearly.

When your attention shifts or wavers, notice what drew it:

- If the interruption came from outside (a sound, a movement, a temperature change)

→ turn to the next External section.

- If the interruption came from within (a thought, memory, mood, sensation)

→ turn to the next Internal section.

If you prefer, imagine a coin:

- Heads → Internal
- Tails → External
-

There is no correct sequence.

The story changes with the manner of your attention. The directedness of your intention.

Continue until both paths are complete.

Braid the threads. That is all.



EXTERNAL WORLD

Part 1

Ged was a leaf. He was a leaf. It might not be the glory days anymore, hanging from the branch, catching the warm winds and gossiping with the breeze, but universe be damned, he was a leaf. The heady days of canopy life. He'd always have the memories. Well, as many as he could hang onto. And hanging on was what he did. He was a leaf.

Apart from that one time he didn't hang on. Still, even then, he'd been the last one on his branch to let go. Practically mid-Winter before he dropped. Not like those wimps over on the Hazel. They'd made a whole event of arriving first, laughing with the snowdrops and crocuses about the early Spring light. Show-offs. They didn't last long. Summer was barely over when they let go, the lot of them. Not Ged. He was from old, strong Beech stock.

"Ahem," said a thin, gentle voice by Ged's left vein stem, "you're a nitrogen supplier, aren't you?"

Yet another mycelial hyphae doing its rounds. They were relentless.

"No. I'm a leaf. Now go away," said Ged.

"Come on mate, you're not using it anymore. There's a seedling a few yards over, parched it is. Would love a bit of that."

They always had a story, these mycelia. Someone needing something. Someone lacking. The network of pity and persuasion.

"I'm using it, thank you," Ged snapped.

"What for?"

"Leaf stuff. None of your business."

Well, I'll leave a thread here. You change your mind, you let me know, yeah? We can recycle that for you. Put it to a good cause.”

Ged felt the thread gently trail away through the mulch, waiting.

The sun must have been up some way above; he could feel the warmth trickling down. He could almost swear there was light up there. Not that it was much use to him now; he'd used up what chlorophyll he had left seasons ago. Still, nice to know it was there. Out there.

Everything around him was waking too. The bustling business of decomposition had reached his strata of the heap. A hive of work and hunger and rearranging. It followed a cycle, the same, always the same, from his old life. He didn't quite know his role in it anymore, but the consistency was welcome. A rhythm he could trust, even if it no longer needed him.

He sighed, or thought he did, though of course fallen leaves don't breathe, as such. Not as he used to.

He was still a leaf, though.

He was.

He was still a leaf, he told himself, and held the thought as firmly as he once held the wind.



INTERNAL WORLD

Part 1

I can't think straight at all.

I've been down here with the cool earth for too long.
I can feel myself breaking apart.

They don't teach you how to deal with this when you're up in the canopy.
Up there, the air moved thought along with it.
Everything was conversation, light, wind, birdsong, all of it a world that held you in place, reminded you who you were.

Here, everything is slower.

Sound is muffled before it even reaches me.
The calls of songbirds are distant, like memories underwater.
There is silence, but not emptiness.

A hush.
A waiting.

There is a peace, too, though it must be approached gently.
A peace that only arrives once you stop struggling to remember what shape you once were.

If you can wrap that peace around what remains, you can stay whole a little longer.
Or... something like whole.

I have already lost the perfect point at the tip of myself, that sharp certainty of where I ended.

It was a surprise to learn how quickly edges soften.

How identity blunts without pain.

Alarming, yes, the slow creeping changes, but not painful.

First, my venules began to loosen.

The fine web that once carried life became thin, then thinner. A lacework, then threads, then mere suggestion. I could feel myself turning porous.

I thought dissolution would feel like erasure.

Instead, it feels like being quietly rewritten.



EXTERNAL WORLD

Part 2

“Any more spare bits fallen off this morning, Ged?” came Warren’s voice.

“Good morning to you too, Warren. There’s a bit of vein over there. Must’ve lost it in the night.”

In truth, it had been days. But one adjusted to loss slowly.

Warren was a decent sort, a hardworking woodlouse with a big family. He brought the children sometimes, teaching them how to forage, how to take without waste. Could do worse than have your remnants go to a family like that.

“Would you mind if I...?” Warren hovered politely over the loose piece, antennae raised, mouthparts poised.

“Yes, yes, get on with it,” muttered Ged.

Warren munched. Not greedily, he tried for manners, but woodlouse etiquette was still a far cry from the contemplative ceremonials of earthworms. Little bits of Ged fell away quietly.

“Would you mind turning your back and eating a little less... frantically?”

“Mmh. Sorry,” mumbled Warren through a full mouth. He turned around dutifully. “It’s delicious, though. You did a good job, Ged. Top leafing, really.”

Ged watched the segments of Warren’s thorax working in rhythm. It was true. He had done a good job. He had been a very good leaf.

“How’s the family?” he asked, mostly to fill the silence.

“Growing fast. Some’ve gone off through the mulch already.” Warren wiped his face with his antennae. “Did you hear there’s been planting? Not three yards that way.”

“Yes,” Ged replied. “One of the mycelia mentioned a seedling looking for nitrogen.”

“Ah! Already? Efficient, aren’t they? Bless ’em.”

“That’s one word for it,” Ged said darkly. They had hounded him since the day he fell. Kindly, politely. Insistently.

“Hey, you should get involved, Ged! Who knows what’s next for you? You’re good matter, proper grounding stuff. You could be part of something new. Leaf to soil to root to leaf again-”

“Material?!” Ged snapped. “I’m a leaf, Warren. A leaf! I am not compost. I am not-” He faltered. “I am not mere... matter.”

Warren lowered his antennae in apology and pattered quietly away, thorax plates swaying.

Ged simmered. He pulled what was left of himself closer, refusing to be anything other than a leaf.

A leaf.

Still.



INTERNAL WORLD

Part 2

Veins.

I think of them first.

They once held me upright, gave me definition as a map of purpose inscribed in my own body.

Did you ever imagine your midrib might soften without pain?

It had always been my strength; my spine, my axis, the line that faced storms and sun alike.

It kept me open to the sky.

Now it loosens, gently.

No crack, no tear.

Only unmaking.

Once, I believed myself vital, a collaborator with the light, steward of the air, a worker in the grand exchange of season and tree. I gave and received in the great green economy.

I was necessary.

Now I am...

what is the word?

A remnant.

A curl.

A whisper of structure.

And yet, I cling.

I hold tight to the last of me that still resembles myself: the stalk.
That small column where I once joined the branch.
The last doorway that remembers sunlight.

I press my awareness into it, as if it could anchor me here.
If I hold this one part, this handle to the past, then perhaps I stay defined.
Perhaps I stay I.

I tell myself: If I can hold the stalk, I can hold the story of me.

But everything softens, eventually.

Even certainty.



EXTERNAL WORLD

Part 3

A worm had chewed a hole straight through his lamina. Right through the middle. Its supple, glistening body had slid through, brushing wetly against his midrib. The sensation had been intimate and horrifying. He felt opened.

The part of him that had passed through the worm, dissolved, remade, excreted, was now somewhere to the South. Still him, somehow. Thinner. Diffuse. Fainter. Yet undeniably present.

The mycelial hyphae had not been exaggerating. There was a bed of seedlings there. And the fragment of Ged now threaded among their roots was feeding them. They were thriving; bright, eager, reaching. He could feel their reaching. The soft urgency of growth. Their gratitude. Their joy. Love, even.

It startled him. He had not felt anything like that since his own unfurling.

He began to curl in on himself. Folded, he was thicker. Harder to chew. Safer. He wanted to stay. To remain Ged, the leaf, the self.

But his edges were soft now. Spots of him already loosening, dissolving into threads fine as memory.

A mycelial voice returned. The same gentle one.

"You're doing well," it said. Not persuading this time. Just... witnessing.

"I'm a leaf," Ged insisted, though the words came faint, like echoes through rain-soft paper.

"You were," said the voice, soft as root-hair. "And you are. And you will be."

"That means nothing."

"It means everything."

A pause. A warmth. A spreading.

"You're not only a leaf. You never were. You are leafness becoming earth. Shade becoming nourishment. Breath becoming body becoming breath again. You are the shape-change that keeps the forest alive."

Ged felt the seedlings tug gently at that part of him held in their roots. It did not hurt. It called.

"I don't want to disappear," he whispered.

"You won't," said the voice. "You'll continue."

Ged loosened.

Not surrendering.

Transforming.

The last of him softened into the hum of soil-work. Into the quiet hymn of roots. Into the memory of light carried forward.

He was not gone. The world took him gently, as though it had been waiting. He loosened, not disappearing, but spreading.

He was everywhere.

INTERNAL WORLD

Part 3

And now, I am gone, and I have arrived.

I have slipped the outline of what I believed myself to be.

There is no stalk, no edge, no point where I end and the world begins.

The boundaries were only ever a story.

To think I spent so long afraid.

Clinging to a shape.

Mistaking the outline for the essence.

Those last days of holding on, those were the hardest.

Not because I was dying, but because I was refusing to change.

Now there is no refusal.

There is no need for it.

I am not held.

I am *held through*.

I am collaboration now.

I am exchange.

The mycelial threads carry me farther than wind ever could; fine silver pathways weaving me into stem and soil, into the hunger of roots and the swell of new green.

I am taken up.

I am given back.

I am the quiet interior of growth.

I am the hum that rises beneath seedlings as they push upward.

I am potential, dispersed.

I am nourishment, reconfigured.

I am the cells of an earthworm egg, the soft reach of new hyphae, the first trembling roots of oak.

There is no "I" to hold anymore, and somehow that is freedom.

Ged was a leaf, for a while.

Now he is nothing.

He is also everything.

He is pleased about that.

Deeply.

Quietly.

Completely.

--

WILLOW SIEGE



YOUR BODY IS THE NARRATIVE ENGINE

At designated points in the text, readers are prompted to pause briefly with a blank indicated as: [], and “check in” with their own bodily state, noticing where the next sensation arises, whether it be warmth in the left calf, tension in the shoulders, or an itch on the forearm.

This identified body part is then inserted into a corresponding blank space within the story, determining the location of key events in the main character’s embodied experience.

For example, when the humanoid character representative of a willow branch sustains an injury, the text leaves its location open; the reader’s self-reported sensation fills this gap.

This process continues throughout, with each new bodily input “stacking” onto the narrative until, by the final scene, the characters’ embodied state reflects the reader’s own.

PART 1



Ren's injuries ached where Phytoncides had stitched her closed after the first skirmish. The resin set like glass along hairline tears, tight when she breathed, tighter when she moved. She had been standing alert for too long; if she didn't rest, her [] wound would split again and spill. They never taught you this in Branch school: how to stand like bark, how to carry fear without bending.

The tree's High Council had been arguing every day since the Felling. Even now, a fresh burst of voices cracked against the corridor like thrown kindling. Ren, once a young branch-in-training and now a guard of the Bark, sighed as someone shouted on the other side of the chamber door.

"Look, what's the point in having more branches if we've got no roots?"

Flowers, probably. Or Fruits. They were farthest from the ground most of the year and had the most to say about it.

Ren put her eye to the keyhole. The council chamber had been a breakfast hall on the primary eastern limb; someone had dragged a long table into the centre and declared it a government. In the last light of day, leaders from each aspect-of-plant crowded around the scarred tabletop. All except Arelia, who had spoken for the Roots once, when the Roots existed. Now no one could agree who should fill that empty chair. Florella of Flowers was incensed; Sybil of Fruits wore a sour, defensive calm. The Trunk's representative tried to keep everyone steady, a living pillar in the din, while the Leaves flitted anxiously along the edges, their attention catching on everything and settling on nothing. On a bench by the wall, the old philosopher-physician Phytoncides watched, hands folded, gaze cool and unreadable.

Laid prone in wet grass with the days drawing out, the tree was easy prey. Before the Felling, rumours on the mycelial network had carried news of Black Canker and Scab riding the valley wind. Now, rootless, cut off from the network, the tree was a fortress severed from its supply lines, a keep without fresh water. Ren and a dozen others had been drafted from all over to hold the breach at the Felling cut, but the orders kept changing, and nothing truly held back the night.

She had been a branch, or would have been. She'd earned an outlying collar knot, almost a twig, on the crown's New Tier South. Then the saw's scream, the tilt, the panic of falling, and the long stunned thud as earth rose to meet them. Reassigned to the central trunk, she guarded the chamber door while her first Spring slipped by somewhere she could not reach. If she could stick this out, she told herself, she'd be back in the crown by midsummer. Back where she was meant to be. Back to growth.

The meeting broke without a decision. Again. Ren straightened as the leaders filed out, nodding to her guard-mate Tia, a would-be flower bud from the western canopy, who mirrored the motion. The last to leave was a broad-shouldered veteran with storm-dark eyes: Daka, Commander of the Bark, first line of the immune system since the tree was a sapling. Her booted tread stopped in front of Ren. She gave Ren a quick, practised weighing, as if counting rings beneath her skin.

"I can't leave a wound open this long," Daka said. "Meet me at the Felling cut tonight. I want it sealed by sunrise. Black Canker wakes with the heat."

Ren flicked a glance at Tia, found no rescue there. "I'm sorry. I'm not Bark. I never trained for defence. I'm Branch track. I'm not even a twig yet."

Daka leaned in. Up close, Ren saw the fatigue cut into the older woman's face, the resin-gloss of old scars. "The Felling cut. Tonight." She didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to. Then she turned and strode away, for once without her escort.

The makeshift barracks had once been a dining hall for upper Leaves. Now pallets crowded the floor in regimented rows. Some held sleepers curled in uneasy knots; others hosted knotted groups of tree-folk quietly tallying rations and guesses. A half-circle of Fruits and Flowers tried to keep spirits up with The Sun's First Kiss, their bright clothes flashing as they hopped from bunk to bunk, melody spilling like sugared sap. The song caught in Ren's chest and stayed there, sweet and cloying. Daka's primary officers, the Bark proper, worked the aisles, restoring order where they could. They were too few. The Roots were gone; the pipes were dry. Everything else had to try to become a wall.

Ren and Tia had ended up on neighbouring bunks by chance. Hendrik, once a proud Leaf in his greenest prime from the crown's lower north tier, had somehow acquired dice and was teaching them to clatter quietly on a folded strip of bark. He handled the cubes as if they were seeds, as if a careful throw might plant some luck.

"Don't know how we're meant to hold without Roots," Hendrik murmured. "Everyone's acting like we're waiting for a season to turn and make it right. Seasons don't glue wounds shut."

"You. Branch." The voice was gravel with a bite. Ren turned. A mid-rank Bark officer stood over her, a scarred satchel slung across his shoulder. He dropped it on her blanket. The contents thunked with a wicked promise. "From Commander Daka. You'll need these."

Out slid rose-thorn sickles, curved and eager, their blackened spurs honed to a moon-thin edge. A spool of binding fibre. A short brush for resin work. A pair of plated greaves cut to fit no one in particular.

"I don't know how to use these," Ren said, fingers hovering, not yet touching.

"You'll be fine." The officer's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "Bark and Branch are cousins. Not like Fruits and Flowers." He jerked his chin at the musicians, who were now attempting to dance across a double-stacked pallet without falling. "We're steadier."

Packages arrived at other bunks. Across the room, a grey-haired sap-tapper tried on a too-large breastplate and made a face. The Flowers struck a bright chord and let it hang.

"Get some rest," the officer said. "You're on the night turn."

Rest was a rumour. Voices ebbed. The room cooled. Resin lamps guttered to embers. Ren lay down in the armour she wasn't sure how to wear, holding the sickles close without quite admitting she needed them. When she closed her eyes, the room kept moving: the ripple of breath, the foot-soft tread of Bark patrols, the thin, interior whine of wounds knitting under Phytoncides' care. She counted her inhales. She did not sleep, exactly. She thinned.

When the moon had climbed and begun to fall, those named for night duty rose from their pallets, buckling straps and binding plates with the soft clicks of a well-coached choir. The uniforms were too big or too small; nobody looked like the person they remembered being. They filed out, wordless, into the corridor-veins, armour whispering against wood. Ren felt the pull, a literal tug through the body of the tree, drawing them towards the Felling cut, the way thirst pulls towards water, the way a wound pulls the hand that made it.

The corridor opened into a broad shaft where the world had been torn away. Cold air licked at them. The scent of exposed heartwood, light and clean and terrifying, rose like a hymn. Above, the night sky showed itself in shards between frayed edges of bark, a broken window onto indifferent stars.

“Hold the edge,” Daka said softly from the breach. Ren hadn’t seen her arrive. “No gaps. Not tonight.”

Ren stepped forward to the lip of the exposed wood, brush in one hand, blade in the other, and set herself to the work of staying.

The night pressed in, listening.

PART 2



Rumours ran quick through the mycelial network: a Felling in the lower valley, and a Willow at that.

Not the usual slow toppling of age or storm, but a human cut. A clean, bright wound.

For Glomerella, Commander of the Spore Vanguard, this was both tragedy and opportunity.

A wound meant passage. Passage meant life.

She had called her council beneath a decaying stump two nights before, the air still damp with frost. A dozen captains stood in the half-dark, each no larger than a grain of dust, each glowing faintly with stored moisture. They had voted without hesitation.

“Disperse,” Glomerella said. “We go east with the dawn. We seed what others have left unguarded.”

To found a new colony was honour beyond measure. Her mother-spore had done the same when the old birch fell, and the family line had thrived ever since.

At first light the wind lifted them. The stump released a soft sigh, the spores loosening like thought itself. Then they were airborne: a thousand bright motes spiralling upward, catching sunlight on their skins.

Freedom had a sound. It was the thin, rising hum of separation.

The valley opened below, its fields and hedges spreading like patchwork. From this height the forest looked like fur brushed against the grain. They skimmed the contours of air currents, following invisible rivers.

“High current, two lengths above!” called Scout Ilex.

Glomerella angled toward the flow and felt the surge catch her body. Weight vanished. The world fell away.

For an instant she existed only as momentum and glimmer, a living dot of direction. Her [] tingled with the thrill of altitude, the body remembering ground even as it forgot gravity.

She laughed, though spores do not have mouths. The sound passed through the cloud as vibration, a ripple of shared delight.

Below them, deer moved along a stream; the flash of water mirrored their glint. She noted possible hosts, hide, hoof, antler scrape, always thinking of access points, the small accidents that opened worlds.

The wind shifted north. She adjusted formation, sending half her captains to the upper drift, the rest to follow her glide path eastward. A leader among dust must still command.

The day warmed. Heat drew them higher until the world thinned to brightness. They danced there awhile, no tree, no soil, only the long breath between origins.

Then, a signal from ahead.

“Gap in the treeline!” came Ilex’s call.

Through the shimmer, she saw it: a raw, circular clearing, bark-shards radiating like fallen stars. A Willow lay across the open ground, its trunk split, inner wood glowing pale gold in the sun.

Glomerella felt the pull instantly. Not hunger, not exactly, but recognition. The scent of open cellulose, of sugars waiting. The promise of work.

“All units, descend,” she ordered.

The cloud contracted, forming a single twisting column. They rode the downdraft, spinning faster, faster, the wind singing in their filaments.

Below, the felled giant waited, heartwood exposed like a sunrise trapped in timber. Glomerella thought of the old stories: every wound is a doorway. She smiled and thought motion into being.

“Let’s make a home of it.”

PART 3



“Up! Up! Up!”

The shout cracked the dawn open. Ren was already half-awake, one eye on the door before sense returned to her body. She rolled from the pallet, armour cold against her skin, the resin brush still sticky from yesterday’s sealing.

“Form line!” Daka’s voice thundered from the corridor. “Branches to Bark: move!”

Ren fastened straps with shaking fingers. Tia was beside her, binding her hair back with twine. Around them the barracks erupted into motion, a rustle of leather and wood and breath. They filed out through the corridor veins, the air thick with sap and fear.

The smell of morning was metallic, charged. It reminded Ren of the first rain after pruning, the taste of renewal mixed with loss. Boots drummed in time with the pulse that trembled through the wounded trunk. Every step seemed to echo inside her.

At the breach the light was white-blue, unkind. Mist drifted from the open cut where resin still wept in slow beads. Daka stood at the edge, a silhouette against the valley, issuing orders in clipped bursts.

“Team One: heartwood rim. Team Two: flank the phloem. Three: interior brace.”

Ren took her place near the wound’s lip. She uncapped the resin pot and stirred the brush through the milky swirl. The scent of Phytoncides rose; spice, smoke, something like tears. She began to paint, slow strokes, sealing what daylight had opened.

Every motion cost balance. The surface trembled underfoot, alive with tiny shudders. Sap whispered in subterranean channels, still searching for routes that no longer existed. Ren's shoulder ached; the earlier wound tugged beneath the armour, resin cracks singing against skin. Sweat gathered beneath her [], a reminder that even bark must breathe.

"Hold steady!" Daka called. "Pressure's rising."

The resin darkened as it met the raw wood, turning from clear to amber. Ren felt the tree draw the mixture inward, drinking it greedily. For a heartbeat she sensed the entire body of the willow, every remaining cell crying out for cohesion, every filament straining toward the lost roots. The sensation was almost holy.

Then the air changed.

A tremor of sound passed through the clearing: high, whispering, multitudinous. Ren looked up. The sky was no longer blue but shot through with motion as thousands of glittering motes drifted downward in a slow, deliberate spiral. They caught the light like dust in a light beam.

"Contact!" Daka's shout ripped the stillness. "Seal what you can, then arm yourselves!"

Ren's heart stumbled. She set the brush aside, fingers closing around the thorn-sickle. Across the wound the Bark units raised their shields; resin dripped from the rims like honey. Tia moved to Ren's flank, her face a mask of resolve.

The first spores landed. They hissed on contact with the resin, releasing a smell both sweet and sour, like decay wrapped in perfume. Tiny filaments probed at the surface, searching for purchase. Ren swung her sickle, scraping them away, the curved blade whispering over the wood.

"Keep them off the heartwood!" Daka roared. "Don't let them root!"

The spores sang louder now, a thin keening that slid between hearing and thought. Ren felt it vibrate through her chest cavity, tugging at her pulse. Each note seemed to ask a question she couldn't quite refuse. Why fight? Why seal what must open?

She shook her head, swung again, resin spattering her armour. Tia shouted something lost in the din. A patch of bark beside them flared white where the spores bit deep. The smell was sharp, fungal, new.

Ren slashed, sealing, binding, her movements automatic. The world shrank to the rhythm of breath and blow, the metallic taste of effort. Through it all she felt the slow, patient heartbeat of the willow beneath her boots, steady despite the chaos.

The sun lifted higher. Every falling mote gleamed like a promise. Ren realised she was no longer sure which side of the wound she was on; the defending skin or the invading air. Both needed to live.

"Hold!" Daka's voice again, fierce and fading in the same breath. "Hold the wound!"

Ren planted her feet, sickle raised. The light fractured around her into gold and green. Something vast and unseen pressed close. And the sky itself seemed to bend, breathing them all into its sporesong.

PART 4



The air thickened as they fell. What had been joy a moment ago became pressure: warmth, scent, purpose. Glomerella felt the world's gravity seize her whole cloud, drawing them down through bands of changing wind. Around her, the spores sang the rhythm of descent; a long humming line that kept them together as the currents fought to scatter them.

Below, the felled willow sprawled across the valley floor like a beached animal. Its bark was torn, its limbs sprawled, its inner wood glimmering raw. To Glomerella it was magnificent: an entire continent of possibility.

"Keep tight formation!" she signalled. "We aim for the base cut; outer scouts, watch for predators."

She could smell the open cellulose before she saw it clearly. Sweet, damp, mineral. But there was another note too, sharp and chemical, something living defending its wound.

"Smoke!" cried Ilex. "They're sealing!"

Indeed, a haze rose from the heartwood: shimmering resin glints, warm as sunlit amber. The scent prickled her membranes. Defensive compounds. Sap turned to weaponry.

"Spread thinner," she ordered. "We'll find the cracks."

Her captives peeled away, skimming along gusts that carried them to branch stumps, hollow knots, splintered grain. Glomerella chose the heartwood for herself. Always lead from the core.

As she neared the surface, the temperature changed again. Cool air above, heat radiating from the wound. Tiny drafts swirled; she adjusted her trajectory, spinning, slowing. She could feel the magnetic pull of sugar, the faint electric charge of exposed tissue. Every nerve in her body fired with recognition.

For a heartbeat she hesitated. This tree was still alive. Its will trembled through the air, confused, yearning. The pulse reached her filaments and she almost pitied it.

Then she remembered the long starvation on the hill, the way her kin had dwindled under frost, and pity burned to focus.

“Contact!” she signalled.

They landed like soft rain. The first touch of bark was shockingly warm. She pressed herself flat against it, tasting resin. It bit like spice on a tongue she no longer possessed. She exhaled spores of her own, minute packets of enzyme and intent.

“Enzymes out! Anchor roots!”

All around her, her colony followed suit, secreting thin threads that probed the resin for weaknesses. The surface hissed and foamed, giving off sweet fumes that filled the air. Some spores died instantly, consumed by the defence, their bodies popping like seeds in fire. Others gained purchase, sinking hair-thin roots into micro-fissures.

Glomerella worked steadily, sending signals through the network that now crackled to life beneath her. Each success buzzed along the collective link, a thrill of accomplishment.

Then a shadow fell across the cut. Something moved above, enormous and deliberate.

A figure, bark-armoured, two-limbed, wielding a gleaming thorn curve, swung down and scraped away the newborn colony. Resin followed, sealing the gap. Glomerella recoiled, furious.

“Resistance confirmed!” she called. “Defensive sentients, prepare countermeasure!”

She gathered her remaining captains into a tight spiral and launched a coordinated surge. They struck the barrier again and again, releasing new waves of enzymes. The air sizzled, filled with a low harmonic hum that blurred into music. The song of decomposition.

Through the haze she glimpsed movement: smaller beings scrambling along the trunk, spreading the same golden resin that burned her touch. Their bodies flashed and sweated in the light. They shouted to one another, their voices dense and wet. One of them paused, lifted its face toward her. Even through the brightness she felt the weight of its gaze. A mind in that wood. A will as fierce as her own.

The realisation thrilled her.

This was no empty carcass; this was war.

“Drive in!” she commanded. “Before the heat grows!”

They surged again, filling the air with spore-dust. Every collision sang. Every spark was a possible root. The resin melted in places, the wood sighed beneath.

Glomerella tasted victory and danger twined together. She could almost imagine what it felt like to grow and be grown within the same skin.

PART 5



The wound was breathing. Each inhale drew the spores deeper; each exhale pressed resin to their advance. The air shimmered, half light, half dust.

Ren worked blind now. The sap had risen past her knees, tacky and fragrant, pulling at every motion. She had long stopped wiping the sweat from her face; the resin would only glue her hands to her skin. Around her, the Bark units shouted orders that dissolved into noise. Tia's voice vanished in the glare.

The sound that replaced it was not wind. It was a hum; steady, radiant, full of intent. Ren looked up. The sky itself seemed to descend, thick with gold-green snow. The spores sang as they fell, a music too fine to be heard with ears. It went straight through her ribs and lodged in the marrow.

She slashed at the air, at light itself, and the sickle came away dusted with glitter. The resin hissed where the particles landed. Steam rose, sweet and acrid.

Through the heat blur she saw one of them clearly for the first time: a tiny mote, luminous, suspended before her eyes like a star that had forgotten its sky. It pulsed once; it said hello or warning, she couldn't tell, and drifted closer.

Ren froze. The thing was beautiful.

Her chest tightened. She felt the tremor of her [], an echo between heartbeat and hum. Then the resin surged again, thickening, closing.

Glomerella felt the barrier respond, softening where her enzymes had touched. She pressed forward, spreading her filaments through the brief opening. Each contact sparked sensation. Heat, sweetness, resistance.

There! A seam of vulnerability where two currents met. She slid in, tasting life itself, the living chemistry that held this body together. And within that pulse she sensed another presence: large, deliberate, bright with pain.

A mind.

She hesitated, poised on the brink between invasion and communion. The vibration that met her wasn't hostility but focus; someone holding, sealing, fighting to stay whole.

For an instant their signals braided: defence and hunger sharing the same rhythm.

Who are you? the pulse asked without words.

Survival, she answered.

Me too.

Resin flooded the breach.

Ren's boots stuck fast; her arms slowed mid-swing. The air thickened into amber. Around her, spores clustered, glimmering in the half-light, each one tracing tiny arcs before becoming still.

She could still feel them, though. Even as the sap climbed to her waist, her chest, her throat, their hum continued: a fine vibration threading through her. It no longer felt like an enemy's song but like breath shared through water.

Across from her, within the same amber veil, a shape hung suspended, a swarm collapsed into form. Glomerella, or the idea of her, haloed in dust. Their eyes, if either still had eyes, met through the viscous gold.

They moved once more, together: Ren lifting her blade, Glomerella reaching with a tendril, a mirror gesture caught forever in resin.

The sap cooled. The hum faded to a memory of sound.

Season passed. Rain washed over the hardened wound, sun warmed it, snow glazed it. Beneath the amber seal, the two figures remained; bark and spore locked in a perfect curve of motion, neither conqueror nor conquered.

Within, something subtle continued: a slow chemical talk, nutrient to enzyme, enzyme to fibre. A truce written in molecules.

The willow slept, dreaming of roots.

Sap sealed around their [] together.

PERENNIALLY

ANNUAL

TRANS-MEDIA PUZZLEBOX NARRATIVE

This chapter's creative fulcrum is a puzzle-box narrative inspired by summer labour on the permaculture site and the contrasting temporalities of annual and perennial plants.

Formally indebted to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the tale is framed by an unreliable editor whose foreword and marginal commentary bracket four episodic vignettes.

Perennially Annual refuses to remain confined to the page: hints point outward, inviting the reader to follow a breadcrumb trail through other media (video, blogs, social channels, and selected digital artefacts) such that the story's full shape is only realised through cross-platform assemblages.

The story becomes what it is by the intra-action of its component parts in each engagement and, in a kind of "digital geocaching" via the reader/ player/ investigator-forager's creative imagination, perhaps even integrating novel parts which it never contained at the outset and may never contain for other unique readers/players/investigator-foragers.

Foreword

Perennially Annual is a ~~two-way~~ three-way experimental puzzle box, written in free verse vignettes across four short episodes. It was composed by my good friend, the junior academic and agro-hobbyist, Talon 'Tal' Graves (born December 17th 1986, died August 14th 2023) during the last sixty-or-so days of his life, at an eco-smallholding in the South Pennine mountains of Northern England. The manuscript, mostly complete, from which this copy has been faithfully reproduced, consists of six Word Doc file versions (with revision histories) and four early Google Docs files which have remained locked, untouched, due to Graves being unwilling unable to pay for a Google Workspace upgrade, to which the present creative editor and commentator, recently regained access. We possess, as a result, a complete calendar of his processes and work habits. The edit history on the files, including the time stamps and dates of modification on the file metadata, reveals Graves to be something of a lucublator. He'd have enjoyed the flavour and obscurity of that word, indeed, he remarked as much to me upon discovering it on day 17 of the Christmas Advent Calendar for Word Lovers, gifted to him by a mutual acquaintance of ours.

Although we have no record of any loose paper-based analogue notes he may have made, we can certainly say that he began work in digital earnest on Episode One on Tuesday evening 21st March 2023. Likely, I suggest with some authority,

after a day of planting seeds or pruning fruit trees. It was finished a week later, which is a comparatively fast turnaround considering the timestamps on his other works, which I have taken great pains to source in the “sent” file attachments of his numerous email inboxes, the passwords intentionally bequeathed to me in his final days. Episode Two, damp and perhaps your gloomiest, began in the early hours of Wednesday 23rd March 2023. Episode Three would not come, it seems. It was set aside several times, with the file revision history suggesting Graves grappled with plot possibilities tied to his farm duties of the day. His characters’ discarded pursuits (detailed in the file revisions history) range from freelance manure smuggling to anarchistic mono-culture terrorism, and everything in between. Indeed, so lost did Graves become with Episode Three that Episode Four, a finale of sorts, was in fact completed ahead of Episode Three, illogical though that may seem. This suggests a work practice more akin to a sculptor pulling story form from a block of marble – though Graves would not have felt valid in this characterisation in his lifetime, I can vouch for that.

The complete work is beautifully layered, and its form agonised over in immense detail. Episodic as it appears, the imagery and application of cognitive linguistic imprint is embedded as such that episodes can be read archeologically as well as sequentially. This fact would be sufficient to dismiss the imputations made by Graves’ academic peer, Dr. -----, in an emailed critique of the work dated May 15th 2023, claiming that the work feels thematically disjointed and confusingly paced. Nonsense! To say as much is a misreading that maliciously diverts Graves from his creative path. At the time of writing the forward to this edition, the critic in question as yet remains extant, and so is unnamed here. Though, this editor and commentator has acquired the critic's schedule and institution and observed his classes from the anonymity of a sea of faces. I can testify to the narrow worldview of the critic’s artistic position.

The public announcement speaker in the street far below my shoebox apartment declares some indecipherable crisis or other, again. I am blissfully ignorant of the psychological pollution here. It remains at arm’s length; intriguing set-dressing. It’s

an Aesthetic, as they say. This doesn't happen where Tal and I met and parted. Though here, ironically, the mountains overloom yet still; obstacles no more, instead, guardians to uplift and cradle.

I must now explain how Perennially Annual came to be edited by me.

Mr. Graves, or Tal, as I came to fondly call him towards the end, spoke with me often, usually while he worked the vegetable beds. Indeed, it was there, hands in cool living soil, that he first acknowledged me. I venture that he saw something of himself in me. Every time some upheaval or other threatened to destroy derail him, I helped him breathe through it. We soldiered on. He couldn't always hear me.

When the black wolves grabbed him by the throat or gut, dragging him into the dense fog, it was I who waited patiently at the perimeter, occasionally reaching in when vague forms and shadows suggested his cloud-veiled meanderings had brought him within reach. I groped blindly in that cold fog for cuff or collar by which to drag him out.

Always Mostly always, certainly on all occasions but the last, he tumbled out of his own mysterious volition if not by my strongarm cajoling. I'd reform his ethereal husk, which, once unclouded, remained corner-hunched in harmonious unity with the unfeeling void. He was, at times, an amorphous mass of un-personhood. I japed and played until he grinned in that knowing way, and together we re-collared the black wolves then set about grooming and bathing them. Tal Graves captivated me in these moments. The memory of those times with him inspires strange wonder still. I was an apprehensive witness to his careful handling of those volatile beasts, thick of muscle and fang, castrated (temporarily, sadly) with a nit comb and a belly rub.

I feel the urge to carve my back, especially my upper back, with a non-serrated mid-weight kitchen knife. Small squares approximately two inches by two inches should suit. I imagine this would surgically remove the residual anxiety lodged there and relieve some pressure on my soul. A difficult task to execute neatly. Let us tidy things up here.

When he drowned in the isolated icy pool atop Helvellyn mountain in the English Lake District, in pursuit of what he humorously called “Grade A Content”, our cells interlinked were sundered. The grasping roots and newts dragged me out by my hair. There on the bank, in our tent, I found amongst his possessions his laptop and phone. Unlocked, which was so unlike him that it could only have been an intentional breadcrumb trail from he to I. I followed that trail gladly to this work, and others, and so it is that by my hand – and his – it reaches you today.

We often discussed, Tal and I, how our ambitions and dreams aligned. I dearly hope that I might do his work justice as he so clearly intended I try. Why should this Fabergé egg remain unhatched? I, your dutiful hen, between my busy scratchings for worms and seeds in dirt, have incubated it, kept it safe from fox, snake and stoat. What manner of creature lies within will achieve its ultimate emancipation through your efforts as much as mine. In your divine synthesis, that bundle of pre-loaded potentiality is given its final form and function. What will you make of it? What will it make of you? Lemme know in the comments.

Episode 1

Doris ate tubers, slowly. She always had. They kept well, they stayed where they were put, and they didn't go in for any of that showy nonsense. She appreciated them deeply.

Not like that frump Edwina next door: bursting out of the ground every spring like a confetti cannon, throwing parties for half the year, dashing here and there in her bright gaudy dresses. Everyone at her beck and call. Everyone bringing her gifts. Petals in their hair, pollen in their pockets. Then winter came and, poof, Edwina vanished. Not a trace.

Doris enjoyed her quiet winters alone. A bit of frost, a good long lie-down, a tuber or two. Peace. Then spring would arrive and with it Edwina, or an Edwinae of some sorts, suitcases bulging, perfumes wafting, heels clicking across the patio slabs.

Today's Edwina had ripened, pollinated, bloomed and germinated everything from the porch to the picket fence, and it wasn't even Wednesday. She was meticulous and fabulous and it was utterly exhausting. The guests at her afternoon soiree would be impressed, certainly, but Edwina herself could do with a stiff botanical drink. She popped a cherry tomato between her perfect white teeth, then pirouetted across the lawn to chatter with Doris next door.

Peering over the honeysuckle trellis, Edwina saw Doris filling a bucket from the water-butt cocktail she'd been fermenting all winter. The smell drifted across in a warm, swampy plume.

"Nettle, comfrey and... is that rainwater vintage '22?" Edwina murmured approvingly. "Mana from heaven."

Doris sloshed the tea around in her bucket, a swirling whirlpool of deep green broth. It had been steeping for months, cultivating strength in the dark. She splashed it generously across the beetroot patch, then inhaled through her nose. The earthy, ancient must filled her lungs with a peace older than language. She'd been feeding this soil for centuries. It was dense and alive, the original substrate on which all things grew and to which all things returned. More precious than gold.

"Cooee! Doris, sweetie!" Edwina's melodic voice was as shrill as it was charming.

Dorris squinted at her over the sweet-pea trellis. Edwina's flamboyant red curls bounced in improbable arcs, catching the sunlight as though each strand carried its own personal chandelier. Bracelets chimed at her wrist. She probably wanted something. She usually wanted something.

"It's comfrey tea," Doris said. "Been brewing all winter."

"Mana from heaven!" Edwina beamed.

"I suppose," Doris replied, wishing Edwina would stop beaming like that. It was... disconcertingly endearing. "Fine. You can have some."

With a delighted gasp, Edwina produced an ornate brass plant mister as though unveiling a family heirloom. Her manicured nails avoided touching Doris' stout soil-mottled hands by the narrowest of diplomatic margins.

"I do hope you'll come round later," Edwina said. "It's my last party; I'm moving on."

"Aye. I'll see you off."

"I'll ask to put you on the guest list." Edwina winked conspiratorially and swirled away, leaving the scent of nectar and old perfume swirling in her wake.

Doris returned to her beds. She watched the comfrey tea seep into the soil, disappearing into the living mass below.

Everything became part of everything else in time, if you let it.

Episode 2

"I've been here since before you were born, you cheeky shit!" Doris shook her fist at the security guard blocking Edwina's garden gate.

Behind him the party was in full clamour: bright, glossy guests preened across the lawn, fresher and more extravagantly dressed than even Edwina. They glowed with an unsettling sheen, the kind that didn't come from honest compost or a good dose of sunlight. Their baubles sparkled with an intensity that was almost aggressive.

Edwina hovered behind the guard, wobbling slightly on her heels, trying to catch Doris' eye. When Doris finally noticed her, Edwina grimaced apologetically and pointed downwards with a delicate flick of her wrist, signalling for Doris to meet her in the cellar.

Typical, Doris thought. Can't go ten minutes without needing rescuing, that one. She stomped around to her side of the semi-detached basement. Doris' cellar was her sanctuary: shelves lined with jars of preserved nutrients, ropes of drying nitrogen nodules dangling from beams, sacks of phosphate and potassium neatly stacked against the partition wall she shared with Edwina. It smelled of damp soil, mineral tang, and safety.

She shoved aside the sacks and revealed the old serving hatch set into the wall, installed decades ago so she could pass the odd necessity through when Edwina inevitably ran out of something vital. It was a neighbourly gesture. A foolish one, perhaps.

"The pollinators were barred too," Edwina's voice floated through before Dorris had even opened it. "Poor Bertie, he comes every year."

Dorris slid the hatch open. Edwina's perfectly concerned face peered through. She reached in, offering a cocktail in a bejewelled glass, hands shimmering with rings and bracelets. Doris took it, suspicious.

"Something rotten is going on down here," she said, sniffing the air. "And not the good kind of rot. That security guard of yours smelled anaerobic."

"I hardly know anyone upstairs," Edwina said airily. "They're all terribly glamorous. Terribly loud. Fine cocktails though!"

A shriek of laughter erupted overhead, unnervingly high-pitched, unnervingly synchronised. The walls vibrated. Doris frowned at the glass in her hand. She raised it to her nose. The vapour stung the back of her skull.

"What on earth is this?" She threw the drink aside in disgust.

"I don't know," Edwina trilled, "but it is rather morish, I've had two already!"

She took a deep drink, smiled at Doris with lips like lacquered petals, then fainted. Eye's rolling back, she collapsed out of sight with an elegant sigh.

"Edwina!" Doris shoved her head and shoulders through the hatch. Edwina lay crumpled on the cellar floor, smiling blissfully at nothing.

"Edwina! Get up!" No response, only a dreamy giggle.

Then footsteps. Heavy, deliberate, descending the stairs into Edwina's basement. A door above slammed shut, muffling the frenzied party music. A deep, gentle voice drifted downward.

"Weenie, stay upstairs with the guests please. It's far too dirty for you down here."
Doris' stomach dropped. Weenie?

She scrambled, tearing at the edges of the hatch with her bare hands. The old frame cracked and splintered, widening under her force. She squeezed through, the torn wood biting her elbows. Edwina lay limp and glowing at her feet.

"Hells' roots, you're useless," Doris muttered, heaving Edwina over her shoulder. Bootsteps thudded on the stairs, getting closer.

"Everything you need to shine is served upstairs," the gentle voice called again, nearer now. "We provide plenty. The other guests are ripening gloriously quickly."

Ripening was a sacred journey; it wasn't meant to be rushed unnaturally. The idea chilled Doris more than the air.

She hauled Edwina through the opening and dragged her into her own basement. She shoved the nutrient sacks back across the gaping hole in the wall, hands shaking, lungs heaving. She put a finger to her lips, willing Edwina to stay silent. Edwina giggled.

The footsteps paused.

"Oh dear," said the voice. "It appears we have pests to fumigate. I thought we might."

A hiss, violent, sudden, filled Edwina's cellar. Gas venting. The music above dissolved into chaos. Bootsteps stormed toward the partition.

Doris didn't wait. She lifted Edwina onto her shoulder again, dead weight and glittering, and ran. The sacks exploded outward behind her, kicked by a force that made the whole basement shudder. Her carefully stored nutrients burst into the air

like confetti, swallowed by a dense, unnatural fog. The fog crawled along the floor, tendrils writhing, curling painfully around Doris' ankles.

She burst up the exterior cellar hatch and into sunshine, choking on sweet, toxic fumes until clean air hit her lungs like salvation. She didn't stop. She sprinted to the garage, ignoring the deranged laughter spilling through Edwina's open windows, ignoring the strobing lights that flickered like sickly auroras.

Inside the garage sat her old wooden pull-cart, faithful as ever, loaded with sacks of tubers and nodules. She lay Edwina gently atop them. Edwina sighed contentedly, utterly unaware.

The cart was heavier than it had ever been. Doris braced herself. The old strength in her bones surged. She pulled. The cart groaned, then rolled, gathering momentum on the gravel.

The fog surged from the cellar after them, rolling across the ground like a predator. Doris swung her skirts and coat-tails, wafting it away, pulling the cart faster. At the drive's end she turned from the house that had been hers for centuries. Smoke curled under the eaves. Music, bright, manic, pulsed from behind closed curtains.

She set off up the dirt track toward the mountains, where the air was thin and old magic lingered. With any luck, there might be a place where perennial and annual could grow anew, far from rot that twisted, far from glamour that consumed.

Edwina sighed in her sleep and murmured, "Such lovely warmth..."

Doris tightened her grip on the cart handles.

"Come on then," she muttered. "Up we go."

The mountains waited.

Episode 3

“Oh, it seems rather too cold there,” Edwina murmured from atop the pull-cart. “I expect someone will help me put down roots in warmer climes for a while.”

She was coming back to herself slowly, or perhaps becoming a new version of herself. The effects of the distilled nutrient cocktail clung to her like dew. Her skin glowed faintly, almost bioluminescent. Her eyes were enormous and bright as glass beads, made larger by the strange stillness in her face. Her lips were still rose-red, impossibly full, as though she'd been freshly painted.

The scrapes and dirt from their escape had vanished as though polished away by invisible hands. Her earrings, bracelets, rings and pins all sparkled, buffed to mirror-shine by the glamour she had inhaled. She looked immaculate, renewed, radiant, yet fragile as a stem grown too fast.

Her limbs, however, were useless. They flopped delicately at her sides, unable to help with the pull-cart. She rode in the back with the nutrient sacks, munching a nitrogen nodule like a sweet and humming a little tune in her angelic voice.

“There's always help if you ask the right person,” she said dreamily, breaking off her humming. “Or if the right person asks you.”

Doris snorted. “Aye, well, that's what got us into this mess.”

Edwina didn't seem to hear. She plucked another nitrogen nodule from the cart and popped it into her dainty clutch purse, patting it with satisfaction.

"Save something for a rainy day," she whispered conspiratorially.

The path grew steeper as they ascended toward the mountain foothills. The air grew clearer, chillier. The distant hum of the valley, the machines, parties, contaminated laughter, faded behind them.

"Well," Edwina said, stretching languidly as though reclining on a chaise longue rather than a wooden cart, "it was always rented, I suppose. That house. I can't be expected to stay in one place forever. A season here, a season there. And now it's not even my summer house, is it?"

Doris didn't answer. She was thinking of her own house, her centuries of hearth and soil, the cellar that had held everything she'd ever grown. She kept pulling. The wheels creaked over stones and roots.

Edwina tilted her head toward the mountains, squinting. "Honestly, I don't remember where I'm supposed to be anymore. Where I came from. Was it... east? Or downriver? Or maybe that orchard with the nice view? I could be from anywhere, with a bit of help."

Her voice was light, but the note underneath it, soft, wandering, made something tug in Doris's chest.

"See you in a year," Edwina said suddenly, waving a hand. "Three or four seasons, I forget where we're up to these days! Perhaps I'll send a letter. Or a seed. I could germinate somewhere lovely!"

"What in the gods' names are you talking about?" Doris muttered. But a hollow ache had opened inside her. She pulled the cart harder.

They reached a small plateau where the path narrowed. A shadow crossed the sun as a crescendo of chattering birds filled the air. Doris looked up sharply.

A huge Starling, or perhaps a perfectly ordinary Starling, swooped down from the flock. Its feathers shimmered with iridescent greens, purples and blues, like oil on water.

Edwina brightened. "Oh! There's my ride."

"Don't you even-" Doris began.

But the bird dipped gracefully, hooked its talons around Edwina's waist as delicately as if plucking a ripe fruit, and lifted her from the pull-cart.

Edwina waved cheerfully as she drifted upward. "Don't fret, sweet Doris! I always land somewhere new!"

"EDWINA!" Doris bellowed, but her voice was lost to the wind.

The bird carried Edwina higher, its wings beating in slow, powerful strokes. Edwina sparkled in the sunlight, earrings and bracelets glinting like dew on petals.

She blew Doris a kiss, then vanished over the ridge.

The mountains swallowed her.

The cart stood still. The path ahead beckoned. And the valley below thrummed faintly with distant machines.

Doris gripped the handles. She was alone now. Truly alone. She exhaled once, long and low. Then she set her feet on the path and kept walking.

Episode 4

Doris unshouldered her pull-cart and sat down on the soft grass verge at the forest's edge. The final tree line before the mountain proper looming ahead. The journey had been long, but the land here felt different. It was older, quieter, holding its breath in a way that made the air taste of possibility.

Under the wide, sheltering canopy of a kind willow tree, she listened to the nesting birds shifting above her. Their tiny sounds of rustling wings and bright chirrup bounced gently through the branches. She rested there a long while, watching the rough trail she'd made through the wild grass swaying behind her.

Yes. This would do. A good place to build something new. Somewhere the seasons could pass without interruption, without parties or glamour or noxious fog. Somewhere with deep soil and deeper stillness.

She had time before the frosts. Time was something Doris had always had, though she never took it for granted. She measured it in roots and tubers, in the patient unfolding of leaves and the quiet decay after harvest.

Her new home needed foundations for deep roots, so she began where she always began: with the soil.

She dug a trench. Then another. The earth was cool beneath her hands, fragrant and full of potential.

A great joy rose through her as she worked, steady and sure. She hadn't felt a grin like this in... gods knew how long. Not since before Edwina was plucked away, bright as a berry on a careless breeze.

But work kept loneliness at bay. She dug. She shaped. She built.

The weather cooled; the nights shortened. The birds overhead fell silent as their young left the nest. A storm rolled in one night with a roar like an ancient beast. Wind howled through the trees, wringing their branches until several snapped and came crashing to the forest floor.

Doris hunkered in the safety of her half-dug basement, listening to the world rearrange itself. In the morning, she surveyed the damage.

She didn't need to go deeper into the forest; the storm had gifted her everything she required. Fallen branches lay scattered like offerings. She lugged them into piles, weaving the smaller ones into dead hedging around her makeshift cottage, stacking the thicker limbs by the trench to become beams or shelves or tools.

Then she saw it.

The bird's old nest had fallen with the branch that held it. Mosses, feathers, and twigs tangled together in a soft cradle. And nestled there, bright as morning dew, was a perfect golden teardrop earring, shaped like a tiny strawberry seed.

Doris froze. Her breath caught. She reached out and lifted the jewel. It caught the light in that unmistakable way, she'd hoped it would.

She hung the earring on the outside of her new garden gate. A beacon. A promise. A welcome of sorts, for whatever Edwina might stumble or flutter or germinate her way back. Edwinae were perennial too, with a bit of help. They just had stranger growing habits.

A low rumble vibrated through the earth. She turned toward the valley. Far below, along the winding route she and Edwina had fled, the thunderous grinding of great machines echoed upward: harsh, metallic, relentless. The sound gnawed at the edges of her thoughts.

She'd worry about that in another century or two.

For now, she had a home to settle. She climbed onto the porch of her newly framed cottage and eased herself into a rocking chair. It was colder here than lower down the valley, but she'd get used to it; she always found a way. The autumn light faded in gentle golds and russets, painting the forest in a warm hush. The mountain, like a giant guardian, overlooking all.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a tuber, dirt still clinging to its skin. She munched on it contentedly, slow as always.

The little jewel hanging from her gate caught a late sunbeam and sparkled, a bright point of joy in the cooling air, promising that even the most fleeting things had a way of returning.

A short story by

Talon Graves

Commentary

Episode 1:

“Doris ate tubers, etc.”

I imagine it was I, on handing Graves a suitably formed tuber with perfectly positioned propagules reminiscent of an aged matriarch of the soil, an earth-clad earth-mother, who first conjured this character, this Perennial Doris. He held her up to the camera on 2nd March 2023, go and see for yourself. She was a Jerusalem Artichoke, if I recall correctly. Then, soup.

The choice of tuber here is not incidental. Graves understood storage, patience, and the virtue of staying put. Tubers do not perform. They endure. Doris is a refusal of spectacle. She eats what lasts.

“Not like that frump Edwina next door: bursting out of the ground every spring like a confetti cannon...”

The image in these opening lines evidently refers to Graves' own mother. The image is cruel, though intentionally so. Graves had a habit of displacing tenderness through caricature. Edwina is annual excess, glamour without memory. I note, however, that he cannot help but love her. No one writes this brightly about what they despise.

“Everything became part of everything else in time, if you let them.”

This line is doing more work than it admits. Graves had become increasingly preoccupied with circulation: soil into food into body into waste into soil again; image into post into comment into someone else’s imagination. The garden here is already more than a garden. It is an archive. A network. A feed.

Episode 2

“I’ve been here since before you were born, you cheeky shit!”

A perennial confronted by security. How modern. Doris’ rage is justified. She is excluded from a space she helped make viable. This episode, I suspect, was drafted shortly after Graves began to speak about “gates,” “filters,” and “who gets in.” He pretended it was about soil nutrients. It was not.

This line has been much remarked upon by readers who mistake it for humour. It is not humour. It is chronology. Doris speaks here with the authority of sediment. Graves was precise about such things, despite his public pretence otherwise.

It is worth noting that this outburst appears nowhere in the earliest draft of Episode Two. In version three (timestamped 03:41, 23rd March), Doris instead says nothing at all. The silence was later replaced with this phrase after an incident involving a delivery van, a locked gate, and a man in a high-visibility jacket who “smelled wrong,” to quote Graves’ own marginal comment. You may find reference to this elsewhere, if you know what words to search.

“The pollinators were barred too.”

An exaggeration, surely. Graves had a habit of dramatising inconvenience. I reminded him more than once that bees do not require invitations. He did not laugh.

The cellar scene that follows has been criticised as implausible. I disagree. Basements are liminal spaces. Graves understood this intuitively, if not

academically. Nutrients stored below ground. Parties above. Fumes descend; rot rises. Anyone who has lived in a semi-detached house long enough will recognise the danger of shared walls.

“That security guard of yours smelled anaerobic.”

I smiled at this. Anaerobic rot is silent, efficient, and catastrophic. Graves had learned this the hard way. There are forms of decay that wear suits and badges, you can watch him shed his somewhere or other.

“Ripening was a sacred journey; it wasn’t meant to be rushed unnaturally.”

This is the thesis sentence, though he would never have admitted it. Synthetic ripening appears again and again in his later comments elsewhere, often disguised as jokes. Beware anything that glows too quickly.

The fog here deserves attention. It is not merely gas. It is obscurity, obfuscation, perhaps even the aestheticisation of harm. I have seen similar language used in places far removed from gardens.

“It appears we have pests to fumigate.”

Readers often assume this voice belongs to a villain. This is naïve. It is the voice of management. Graves had a complicated relationship with management. I will not elaborate here, though there is a spreadsheet.

Episode 3

“Her skin glowed faintly, almost bioluminescent.”

Edwina survives, of course. She always does. But survival here comes at a cost. She is radiant and hollowed out, preserved but unrooted.

“Oh, it seems rather too cold there.”

This is a key line, structurally. Edwina begins to drift at precisely the moment Graves himself began discussing relocation in earnest. I have the messages. Some of them are voice notes. One should be careful listening to them late at night.

“There’s always help if you ask the right person.”

This sentiment appears repeatedly in Graves’ correspondence, though never attributed to Edwina. He believed, wrongly, that systems would eventually reward visibility. That if you glittered brightly enough, someone would lift you out. Sad, really.

“Oh! There’s my ride.”

The first true dispersal. Note that Edwina does not walk away. She is carried. She does not choose the destination, only the departure. Graves was fascinated by birds toward the end. He spoke of flocks as algorithms. Of wings as permission.

The Starling has attracted undue attention. Ornithologists have written to me. I have not replied. It is neither a metaphor nor a symbol. It is a vector. Graves was very clear about this. Birds carry things. Seeds. Stories. Sometimes worse.

“See you in a year.”

He wrote this line three times, deleting it twice. In one version it read, “See you in a cycle.” In another, simply, “See you.”

I advised him to keep the year. He trusted me then.

Episode 4

“Under the wide, sheltering canopy of a kind willow tree...”

Willow again. Always willow. Graves could not leave that tree alone, even when he pretended he had. Here it becomes witness rather than battlefield.

The willow appears here not by accident. He liked willows because they look fragile but are not. They bend. They root again when broken. Doris recognises this. Graves did too, eventually.

“Edwinae were perennial too, with a bit of help.”

This line is dangerous. I warned him. He insisted. Some things return. Some only appear to.

“A perfect golden teardrop earring, shaped like a tiny strawberry seed.”

This image recurs. I have seen it elsewhere. Once in moving water. Once against mist. Once refracted through a screen. Graves did not invent it. He followed it.

The earring has been misunderstood. It is not a keepsake. It is a marker. A ping. Those familiar with Graves' other work will know what I mean. Those unfamiliar should perhaps remain so.

“She munched on it contentedly, slow as always.”

And so the work ends where it began: eating what endures.

This is not resignation. It is strategy. Doris endures because she does not hurry. Graves never learned this lesson. He admired it from a distance, the way one admires mountains while planning an escape route through them.

“The little jewel hanging from her gate caught a late sunbeam and sparkled, etc.”

The final line, how dare he! It is not finished here, you see. Ever obsessed and obsessed with the skies, stars, clouds, couldn't wait to get away. Go one further that Doris and into the mountain's proper.

The final image has been called sentimental. This accusation wounds me personally. It is not sentiment. It is signal.

Graves did not intend this work to end. He intended it to thin out, to disperse, to leak into adjacent systems. If you are reading this and feel that something is missing, good. That is working as designed.

Tal Graves has not, as some have cruelly suggested, “vanished.” He is merely elsewhere. Somewhere with better light. Somewhere rented, of course. Everything is.

If you wish to follow him, the clues are present. I have preserved them faithfully.

Do not expect me to hold your hand.

Anon.

The image is a vertical painting of a wheat field. The lower two-thirds of the image are filled with tall, golden-brown wheat stalks, rendered with visible brushstrokes that create a sense of depth and texture. The colors range from dark, almost blackish-brown at the base to bright, sunlit gold at the top. In the upper third, the background is a pale, hazy yellow, suggesting a bright sky. A single, detailed seed head of wheat is shown in mid-air, floating in the upper right quadrant, as if it has just been released from a stalk. The word "Dispersal" is written in a classic, brown, serif font, centered horizontally in the upper middle section of the painting, overlapping the transition between the field and the sky.

Dispersal

The seeds pressed into the pages of your copy of this book are unique.

They have never fallen in this way before and never will do again.

They are dispersed across the page by the chance motions of the perpetual unfolding of the universe.

The infinite random dice roll.

Join the universe in its dance and see what the seed dispersal reveals for you.

On each page, observe which seeds catch your eye, and note their proximity to certain words in the story.

Write these words in the space provided. This is the basis for your own story prompt.

The story disperses as you join the universe in it's dance of chance.

What will you create? What inspiration will you share? What stories will you plant?

Example

Notice the seed pressed here is pointing at a word

There hadn't been gales like this for decades.

It felt **good**.

It felt, **needed**.

There are particularly large seeds pressed next to these words.

The tightly packed social claustrophobia of the wheat field had choked Una, root and stem, from the day her green shoot broke the **soil crust**.

Now, finally, this **night** the wind bounded across the vast **moonlit** expanse of swaying wheat like a wild hound, buffeting and bending every plant in its wake.

Una revelled in it madly.

Eager, **grateful**, for **the** chance to cast her seeds in hope of something better.

The way the seeds have fallen on this page drew my eye to certain words. Large, unusually shaped, or otherwise prominent seeds are touching or pointing to the circled words:

There, good, needed, crust, night, moonlit, grateful, the.

These words go to my "prompt bank" to create a story prompt sentence:

***There**, under the **moonlit** sky, he broke the **crust** of the earth with his shovel, **grateful** for the **good** soil he **needed** to bury **the** past and plant something new by the end of the **night**.*

There hadn't been gales like this for decades.

It felt good.

It felt, needed.

From the day her first green shoot broke the soil crust, the packed social claustrophobia of the wheat field had choked Una, from stem to root.

Now, finally, the wind bounded across the vast moonlit expanse of swaying wheat like a wild hound, buffeting and bending every plant in its wake. Una

revelled in it madly. Eager to seize this chance. One chance. To cast her seeds afar. To give them something better.

Those around her clung fearfully to the dead soil,
moaning and creaking as the wind battered their husks and bent their stems.
They had no appetite for anything more.
To them, there simply was nothing more.
They knew nothing else.

They loyally awaited their dousing of synthetic nitrogen
From gods who, in their greed,
to control the motions of the universe,
would destroy and pervert undeterred.

But Una knew what lay beyond the hedge line.

**She was an altogether different strain of wheat.
A wild strain. There was a better way to live.**

She carried the knowledge of it in every cell.

**She'd arrived in the wheat field on a night just like
this one.**

**A small seed carried by the wind's ferocity for what felt like miles,
before landing on the bare freshly ploughed earth, alongside
millions of others who seemed, at first, to be just like her.**

**The hope
and excitement
at the life
she might build here
was
short lived.**

Unpacking her first root and plugging in to the mycellial network had been problematic. The hyphae threads were too fine, their reach sparse and broken throughout the soil.

The soil itself was not the life-giving substrate that had nourished her mother-plant and generations going back millennia before Una's own dispersal.

This soil in which she'd arrived felt empty.

A singular flattened expanse of dense matter, lifeless and inert.

Once her shoot was above ground, she understood why.

Here, giant machines doused the field with noxious chemicals that snuffed out the life of anything but wheat.

In the distance, yet more great metal creatures chewed up the soil of empty fields, destroying billions of nascent microbial communities.

In the soils of her mother plant, vibrant and varied ancient microbial communities ferried knowledge and fuel for life to thrive.

In this place, the powers that had usurped the roles of communities were driven by desires that Una could not begin to understand.

They lived on

scraps of nitrogen

and whatever

other macronutrients

arrived on

the infrequent

rain showers.

It barely kept her and her neighbours alive.

**After a week in this soil,
she was starving.**

Even food from the rains wouldn't be enough come summer's height.

Una had resigned herself to a short life in which she would never cast seeds to the wind...

...then those great machines changed the world once more.

They passed by with a noise to drown out thunder, and with that she was doused in waves of the sweetest synthetic nutrition.

Condensed and sickly, the intense barrage of everything she had craved for a lifetime threatened to burst her parched root cells.

She could no more slow their painfully grateful uptake than she could prevent her stem reaching ever higher alongside the other plants in her neighbourhood, her ears waving in the breeze and craving sunlight just like the rest.

The field quickly became an immense flock of devoted followers, bowing in reluctant worship of those thunderous steel gods of life and death.

Except, she noticed, those around her bore no reluctance in their worship.

Nor did they seem to sicken with the intensity of synthetic nutrition.

In a matter of days, their husks quickly appeared swollen and uncomfortable. Their awns that should catch the wind and carry their seeds, were too stunted and withered for natural dispersal.

Una lived alone among millions of wheat plants that could never survive in the wild meadows from which she had blown.

Her immediate neighbours thought her odd and disfigured. They said her seeds were too small, her awns too long. They would not hear her talk of a world beyond the hedge line, one in which they need not live and die at the whims of deaf gods.

She had often watched the birds crossing the hedge line; envied their wings and their mastery of the wind, with whom she could only gamble.

Yet, on this day, to her glee, the wind raged with a ferocity that wings would never master. Those crows and gulls who dared to try were ragged about as if in the jaws of an invisible beast, before being forced to land in the shelter of the hedge line lest they be dashed against the hard-packed ground.

This was the tempest she had been waiting for.

To gamble with this beast was the chance she needed.

Perhaps her children need not share her fate in the wheat field.

Night fell, the moon rose, the tempest roared ever greater.

Una worried her stem might snap before she could release her seeds; some of those around her suffered such a fate. Bred over centuries for the weight of their seeds, not the strength of their stems, many plants were unbalanced and easily snapped.

Una saw what she'd always felt; the differences for which she had been mocked by her monoculture community were now her strengths.

Her thicker stem and smaller seeds were not a cruel mutation but a dormant ancient trait that would once have helped wild wheat to thrive in harsh conditions.

The seeds on her ear spread their awns wide, reaching into the night.

Her top-most awn grabbed the wind and held the current tight.

It was whipped into the dark star-freckled sky, soaring beyond sight.

Seed after seed followed; Una launched them higher with all her might.

Swirling out into the universe with freedom and grace, her children, her light.

In the days and weeks that followed the storm, the sun blazed again. The air hummed. Some days, the heat hum was almost too loud, becoming a constant background noise.

The great metal machines dispensed their regular synthetic downpours; one flavour to rush life's growth, another to arrest it.

Amidst nausea and mourning, Una tried intently to hear the murmurs of the mycelial network. Fractured and faint as it was, it carried neither news nor nutrient.

Perhaps a good sign; were her seeds unpacking their roots nearby, she'd surely hear of it. Even with the network's fragmented state, there would be some trace of them.

They must be further afield, they must.

In late summer, there came a day when the giant metal machines were at their loudest. A haze hung in the air; tiny particles of matter dancing on the air currents.

Una felt one machine coming nearer, its great weight shaking the soil around her. She braced herself to receive its unwelcome gift, whatever it might be – she had long since lost track of their delivery cycle.

None arrived.

This machine was not like those she'd encountered before; it strayed too close.

It was chewing.

She shuddered at the snap of thousands of stems with every bite.

The noise was overwhelming, it shook the very air around her.

Unnatural teeth, more solid than bone or beak, crawled inexorably forward, gnashing and spinning, tearing stem from root and swallowing plants whole, dragging them deeper into its whirring mechanical organs.

The monoculture plants in her neighbourhood bowed in panic, but with her seeds already cast to the gale, Una could only smile; her journey was complete, her labour coming to an end, a timely end.

She danced in frantic ecstatic apprehension.

When the cut finally came it was sudden, sharp and sweet; a release from the pressure to live well in this dead earth.

Una let go.

The remnants of what she once was were spat out from an elevated position on the rear of the metal machine.

As the parts of her dissipated to become part of everything, the indescribable freedom of tumbling as pieces in fresh summer air.

The sunlight felt like the embrace of an old friend, reunited after a lifetime, and in that loving embrace, she glimpsed again the wild places beyond the wheat field.

Out there, past hedge line. Out there was the world her seeds would grow in.

How varied and beautiful their lives might be.

They had crossed the hedge line and were thriving in their own way, in their own place.

She knew it now.

She felt it, now.

END

Prompt Bank



Closing Thoughts

The *Plant Stories* project has functioned throughout this research not as an illustrative appendix, but as a method of inquiry in its own right.

By embedding stories within ecological cycles, material processes, and participatory systems, the project has made visible the ways in which stories exceed textual boundaries.

Whether encountered through a game mechanic, a planted page, a digital trace, or a dispersed fragment, story immersion unfolds over time and across contexts, leaving ontological imprints that cannot be contained within a single artefact or interpretive frame.

In attending to story immersion as an ontological condition, this thesis also gestures toward an ethical and practical implication. If stories participate in world-making, then engagement with stories is never neutral.

The story assemblages we inhabit, reproduce, and design carry consequences for how relations are formed, sustained, or foreclosed.

Creative practice, as attentive situated inquiry, offers one way of responding to this responsibility. It supports forms of knowing responsive to complexity, contingency, and more-than-human participation without reducing these to abstract models or instrumental outcomes.

This book offers an ecological framework for thinking with stories as ontologically consequential practices, and for recognising story immersion as already at work in lived experience. It invites further experimentation into how stories shape the conditions of being, and how creative practices might intervene thoughtfully within the entangled story assemblage webs we are always already becoming-with.

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