

71 Leaves

Mark Cunningham



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by Mark Cunningham

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Alice Blue: Caper Bush, Flowering Dogwood, Palm, Papaya, Red Raspberry, Staghorn Sumac.

Cranky: Witch Hazel.

Dusie: Black Bamboo, Cajeput, Common Fig, Elderberry, Grape Vine, Persimmon, Sassafras, Virginia Creeper.

E:ratio: Indigo, Norway Spruce, Tamarisk, Tea.

Foam:e: Chaste Tree, Wax Myrtle, White Mulberry.

Haggard and Halloo: Strangler Fig, Sourwood Tree.

Listenlight: Eastern White Pine.

Otoliths: American Chestnut, Arizona Cypress, Catalpa, Cecropia Tree, Sea Grape.

Pequin: American Elm, Dutchman's Pipe.

Right Hand Pointing: Nightshade I, Nightshade II, Nightshade III.

Segue: English Ivy, Weeping White Birch.

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71 Leaves

Dutchman's Pipe

If I took a photograph of my thumb smudge on a window and called it "Comet," I would still be accurate. *Burning, burning.* I do not believe in inspiration or in the idea that some mysterious power needs to borrow my throat for a megaphone. If, though, the very first moment felt as ache-sweet as a blister on the roof of my mouth giving way, then I can understand the Creation.

Flowering Dogwood

No system of divination includes a lucky number of chigger bites. Recipes for catastrophe rarely give exact details. This is probably why they work so well. Some stars are seen clearly by peripheral vision, but disappear when I look right at where I think they are. When my father and I played catch with a superball, it was the second bounce that sent the hard rubber shooting twice as far and twice as fast and always right at my throat.

Weeping White Birch

This sentence demonstrates life, which means it's alive or a model of life or protests against life. Pool water shows what quantum theory tells: between the diver's entering the water and her climbing up the metal ladder, her body scatters, reforms, scatters, reforms.

Black Bamboo

The shade is right here. I am in the shade. I do not know where I am. Where others see heavenly palaces, I see rusty jellyfish. Whichever, they can still sting, probably. I had a piece of camouflage, but now I can't find it. Get lost enough and any place is your place.

Persimmon

The realization that water is not all that wet changes permanently the way some people understand the world. When two people say “mailbox” at the same time, it’s funny-strange and funny-ha-ha. When two people say “my body” at the same time, it’s just disconcerting. Getting lost on the way to the mapmaker’s is never a good sign.

White Willow

If I think it's an apple and it's an apple, I like the taste. If I think it's an apple and it's a banana, I spit it out and look at it. There is no such thing as a false maze. As David Antin notes, glass is a solution of sand, chalk, and ashes fused by fire. It's a desert. I drink from it. Timothy is standing in the grass, which is also named Timothy.

American Elm

“Penumbra” is a word whose meaning I can never quite put my finger on. Fortunately, this turns out to be the meaning of the word. You’re right: I apologize too much. Sorry about that. People who say “to say the least” usually go on to say a lot more. The odd thing about the feeling that I’m falling just before I go to sleep is that I’m already stretched out flat.

Catalpa

I wonder who was the last person to “make merry?” The comparison that someone is or does something “like a jazz musician” is always specious. That’s my riff on it, anyway. When he said “intervention,” he meant “something to add to my resume.” Cratylus corrected Heraclitus: you can’t step into the same river even once. “It’s out” does not mean the same thing as “it’s not burning.”

Tea

All focus is connected: I forgot why I took off my glasses. The small hole pin-pricked into the top of the plastic cup lid: you never know when there might be an eclipse.

Cecropia Tree

Neo-baroque: eating a pancake straight through from one side to the other just doesn't seem the proper way. Rubber cement does not bounce and, rather than a noun, "cement" can be a verb describing its action, though its action is to make sure nothing else moves. This sentence not only represents but actually *is* an advance from the previous sentence. Space has no limits; my ashtray is made of space; my ashtray is five inches square.

Sassafras

My elbows are particularly happy on gusty March days when the bare branches knock against each other. The elbow is a hinge joint, but the door it wants to open is in the body next to it. That man was standing so that his shoulder lined up with the charred furrow, and I thought he was waving.

Red Maple

I was told to count my mistakes and to consider them carefully. I get a different number each time.

Paper Birch

Origins are not recoverable—sorry, I don't know where that yawn came from. She's the kind of person who looks down on you if you eat pizza with a knife and fork. Reciting the alphabet backwards: something only a drunk could do. Chachi didn't even try to look like he was from the late '50s and early '60s. Not the snake with its tail in its jaws, but the snake kissing its own ass. My distrust of narrative started one day when...

Indigo

The meaning of “no no” does not depend on the words themselves or even on the tone with which you say them, but on the nature of the pause between the words. The Tamil Tigers eat Tony the Tiger for breakfast. There is a type of tree named “ash.” Walking through a room in absolute dark is still not the same as walking through a room in absolute dark with your eyes closed. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy. It couldn’t happen.

Sea Grape

Researchers have found that if I just sit and imagine I'm exercising, my body reacts and I get some physical benefit. The leaves in the sun turn even greener against the slate of the overcast horizon. Usually it's the lowest-paid employee who tends to the flag. An amnesia victim will still recognize his reflection in a mirror.

Papaya

A circle is defined not by what is inside it or outside it, but by a border that doesn't exist until crossed. Our new guideline: do not take seriously anyone with whom Gertrude Stein would not wanted to have had sex. "Leave and learn," he said, but we had no idea what he was talking about. We climbed all the way to the top and then sat on the marked bench. Putting a razor in a pyramid as the moon waxes to full may not hone the blade, but it makes the pyramid sharper. His pretend yawn made me yawn for real.

California Laurel

I have bad phone reception, but sometimes I need to call someone just to hear a little static. Words get tangled up in what I want to say until they *are* what I want to say. I volunteered for a new form of experimental sleep, and now I'm not sure that I'm awake. We put orange safety vests on the ceramic deer.

Norway Spruce

It took me 27 years to get the hair/hare pun in having Bugs Bunny perform *The Barber of Seville*. I do not represent myself. This letter represents me. This letter cannot speak. I have to say it. The theory of relativity backs my claim that I'm not lying when I say this is too the world's largest fireworks store.

Palm

I'm almost certain the label read "distracter beam." If I could send one video clip into space, it would be Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers tap dancing. Any aliens that would respond to that would probably be worth knowing. The rain stopped, but I had to keep the windshield wipers on because of the road spray. Another way of looking at it is with your eyes closed. He said we should all be quiet. I said speak for yourself.

Thyme

I drank from the melted edge of the milkshake first. The dog put its snout on my zipper, snorted, and walked away. I like the orange-brown iris the best: it looks already wilted. In *The Last Man on Earth*, Vincent Price, the last man, still wears a pencil mustache.

New Jersey Tea

I might be a racist: when I watch a porn movie, I can't identify with a black guy. It's not a monologue unless one of my voices says it. My scraped knee is weeping, but I feel fine.

Tree of Heaven

Cary Grant said, “Everyone wishes to be Cary Grant. Even I wish to be Cary Grant.” Only in the dubbed version of *Alphaville* does Eddie Constantine get to read his lines in his native language. We hit one of those end-of-the-day silences, as though everything were settling down to watch *The Wonderful World of Disney*. A beginning lesson: Q: What is that? A: It is this.

Slash Pine

When I was ten or eleven, I thought women's lungs were in their breasts. I read the phrase "At the rebound of the mouth, a rain of pebbles patters" and I thought of Frankenstein. The monster. The shadow of all rulers are gray. I mean those that have metal edges and measure feet. Few people would wrinkle their noses at the sentence, "We are still learning to listen, see?" My shoe size is 8 ½ or 9, depending on the shoe, not my foot.

White Oak

“Rabbit” also means “mouth,” which is absurd, since a rabbit is always trying not to be noticed. Eye witness testimony is remarkably unreliable, and still I talk to myself. I’ve never been interested in floating in empty space, in zero gravity: you can’t even get disoriented. Light acts as a particle and a wave at the same time, but only when it bumps into some machine. Wind never inhales.

Weeping White Birch II

It's probably not that polite to be freaked out by the metallic voices of people who talk through holes in their throats, but I'm still freaked out by it. The alarm went off so often people stopped paying attention. Usually you don't get sick until the stress has passed. Then the adrenaline withdrawal makes your body crash.

Nightshade III

Things I see with my glasses off have greater impact in my subconscious mind than things I see with my glasses on. A person's face expresses more when it thinks you are not watching. And even more when the person it is the face of is not paying attention.

Common Fig

I would like to have been the first person to read without moving his lips. If my lips were sewn shut, would I have been illiterate? Why worry about Greece or Rome? At least one Buster Keaton short exists only as a fragment, and where is Edison's *Frankenstein*? (Something was supposed to come next, but I can't read my handwriting on the note.)

Silk Tree

A polyomino puzzle unsolved for decades was finally figured out by a blind man who touched all the pieces and then worked on an imaginary board. A negative number is still greater than zero: absence is not nothing. I enjoy Gary Snyder's anecdote about Jessie in *Earth House Hold*: “‘Put it in,’ she said. ‘It’s already in,’ I said. ‘Ooh, it hurts.’” The fallacy of the excluded middle: what I thought was shadow was rain.

Red Raspberry

Just because you don't remember who you are doesn't mean you're invisible. I used to think that Hans Arp and Jean Arp were different people. I still bet I'm right. That dust smell after someone slips. Persistence of vision is best noticed with the eyes closed. We started to argue about what the argument was about.

Staghorn Sumac

A German scientist has determined that over eighty percent of navel lint is blue. Will designers of new clothing keep this in mind? I have other questions about outer space. To deal with the thinner atmospheres and stronger light, will I still put zinc on my nose? If I can't hear myself scream in space, how will I know when I've lost my voice from screaming? I just remembered: I don't put zinc on my nose now. I wonder if in zero gravity I'll still jerk awake just before going to sleep because I felt that I was falling.

Strangler Fig

When the spell check suggested “nonfat” for “Nosferatu,” I realized several types of revision were going on. Changing the spelling or pronunciation of a name when you turn it from a noun to an adjective—Shaw to Shavian, Chaucer to Chaucerian—is an act of authority. Taki 183, Moussey 89: the first graffiti tags have evolved into email addresses.

Poison Sumac

Poetry is not news: people die for the news everyday. Video at 11. Image creep. Those raised with analog clocks did the twist; those raised with digital did the pogo. When I went to the locked door for the second time in a row, I said, "I always do that." The body is 65% water, and most of the lint you pull from your belly button is blue.

Sweetleaf

The blurb about the book being a gift appeared right above the bar-coded price tag. When he said life itself was a luxury, we knew we couldn't trust him. I looked at my hand to make sure I wasn't dreaming; to do so, I placed it on her thigh.

Quaking Aspen

The pulse in my ear against the pillow: the sound of footsteps walking away. Since I can say, “before the invention of the clock,” I know *now* is too late. She had been addicted to breath mints, too, so she could understand.

Wax Myrtle

Even if it's my own intestines absorbing spinach while I sleep, both my body and the spinach are changing physically, *moving*. If communion were sweet tea, Catholicism would be over-run by converts named Kenny. I told Willi there was no point in climbing Mont Blanc if he was going to wear a tie. She didn't see any difference between "yeah" and "yea."

Partridgeberry

Western thought has turned from a consideration of the living body and being-in-place to the idea of a static body and infinite space. I thought someone was walking down the sidewalk, but it turned out to be a mailbox. Re: *the corpse is a new personality*: another thing I get just when I don't need it. I used to speak to others to find out where I stood. Now I leave my phone on and let the global tracking system come to me.

Sweet Gum

The point of mouthwash and chewing gum is that I don't have to swallow but they still make me more acceptable to others. Seeing is not believing: I can see my hand but the way I'm leaning on it has made it numb. Feeling is not believing: I feel that I have no hand. Light takes off from the sun and the whole solar system is lit up; light takes off from the earth and you don't even see what it did, because it's already too dark. The tree stops being itself and becomes evidence.

Cherry Laurel

The late afternoon winter light hits the upstairs windows so that it looks like the lights are on inside, though the house has been empty for a year. The police car pulls up next to me at the stop light and acting normally becomes a performance.

Sequoia

I keep searching for the pen I misplaced this morning, so I can find the sock I lost yesterday. It's 9 p.m.: time for the Magic 8 Ball of my skull to turn up Veronica Lake, which I needed four hours ago. Love is no miracle. It's a warm static. All laws continue. Houdini could wrap himself in chains, have himself locked in a trunk and submerged in water, and still break out to breathe again. But even he couldn't sneeze and pee a steady stream at the same time.

Oleander

The fortune cookie's fortune said, "The truth you are seeking is right in front of you," which sounded a bit braggy to me. The 3-tiered overpass makes this officially the middle of nowhere. As she turned on the fan on the 12-foot high ceiling, she said, "Don't let it hit you in the head." I come from the part of the country where the Georgetowns give way to the Boonvilles. That you should always print the myth is a myth, and I just printed it.

Juniper

The belief that academic studies of pornography can be written only by women is a form of sexism that makes me giggle. Supply and command. We were told to respect life, so we had to airbrush any kind of genitals out of the photograph. Hand-eye, ear-tongue: you have to physically force your voice into other people's minds.

Tamarisk

The voice in my head that disagrees with what the voice in my head just said. An internal surgeon is looking at Anselm Kiefer. This sentence isn't clear about the momentary power structure (yes it is). Morning is permanent, but its location changes instant by instant. I have to drive somewhere to take a walk.

Hardhack

Back to nature? The seashell doesn't answer, either, when I shout, "Can you hear me now?" Lao Tzu said it: the muscle-bound soon fall, while those who accept flexible scheduling drive around too much even to vote. Or was that Arnold? The pig, yes. No matter: every trilobite I've seen in a museum has had a six-pack.

Italian Cypress

Due to inflation, 3 a.m. is now “midnight.” “What do you mean, *it's not bad?* It's not bad.” The wise men found the manger due to the star shining over it; I found my parents' house because of the neighbor's blazing Christmas lights. Tell the season by how tall the dead grass is.

Nightshade II

An environmentalist waits until his third beer before he throws the bottle out the window. No one says the moon is half-empty.

Sourwood Tree

I didn't want to hand my friend the Whitman book, because my hands were dirty. She looked good in her Self Esteem baby doll top. It's hard to trust an air conditioner repair man who drives around in July with his windows down. My calling out, "I can't see you, fat ass," was presented as evidence that really I had seen him. A leaf doesn't reveal its grid until it's being devoured. The woman at the picnic table with the tortures on leave got upset because there was egg in the potato salad.

Catawba Rhododendron

Soon any human activity—enjoying musicals, dipping your french fries in your chocolate shake—will be unacceptable unless endorsed by a celebrity. I always think of a corpse as the wrong end of a successful predation, but predation by something else, not me. Creepy thought, yes. But more than that, who wants to be around a loser?

Arbor Vitae II

Objectivity is a form of self-hate: you stifle your immediate consciousness and rationalize yourself into an object in a series of events. Maybe I better sleep on this. Before I go to bed, I get a drink of water. But before I get a drink of water, I brush my teeth. I make myself sick, which would be counter-revolutionary, except it means I don't have to go to work in the morning.

Poinsettia

Connect the dots: the car had two bumper stickers, one reading *I'd Rather Hunt With Dick Cheney Than Drive With Ted Kennedy* and the other reading *I Had A Life But My Job Ate It*. [Crickets chirping. We'll have to find this in the sound bank.] "I actually have saliva now," he said into his cell phone.

Hickory

Patience earns a cold sore.

Sedge

Intelligence genes are proving hard to find. Researchers say they can't figure out where to look. His glasses magnified his eyes until I could see their every detail. Being beside myself is one thing, but I can never figure out if I should stand on my left or my right side. People are people, I said, but everyone thought this was too optimistic.

Choke Cherry

Boats get larger as history goes on. Boats get smaller as the day goes on.

Common Plum

X-rays are invisible, so they are everywhere. I never think group emails are *to me*. I asked if she believed in the future and she said she needed time to think about it. The joy of using my voice to imitate static. If you are neutral long enough, people consider you hostile.

Nightshade I

Even the phrase “dental trauma” has made me laugh.

English Ivy

Or simply “searchlight distributes sky.” The hidden assumption was that there was an overt assumption. You can’t stop time by looking at a field of cows: *after a moment*, one of them will move.

Henna

“You’re not as smart as you think you are,” I said, and then realized that was a stupid thing to say. As unsexy as an NFL cheerleader. Moon shadow vs. day shadow. But the only reason you have a moon shadow is that you’re standing in the shadow of somewhere else’s day. When it started to run out of roads to build, the Department of Transportation went back and put in more stoplights.

White Mulberry

If someone laughs when you say that empty rooms give off their own tones, do you really need to speak to him again? Guy Davenport said that if you ignore a problem long enough, it will go away. It's a Rorschach test whether you think this applies to the man or the silence of an empty room.

American Cherry

How was I to know he'd find the term *umbilical turd* too pessimistic? It was harder to get around the metal fence after it had been knocked down than when it was still standing. At my school, if you don't have a documented learning disability so you can have more time on tests, something's wrong with you. The license plate read 1SOONER. But identity is always later.

Balsam Fir

I keep feeling the moment of immanence will be here any moment. He didn't drive because he didn't want to add to air pollution, so we always had to go miles out of the way to give him rides. The eagerly-awaited book arrived, and I thought *now I have to read this*. No, really, it was the tree that was foggy. Someone has cut his hand: this still doesn't tell whether one or two people are involved.

Witch Hazel

A black eye changed my idea of borders. No point in playing hide-the-phallus, since the phallus is always elsewhere anyway. Even when I traced the pen over the word, I couldn't read my handwriting. Later, I saw at once that it was *mine*, with the second hump of the *m* titled out and jagged, the *i* flattened, the *n* with three humps, and the loop of the *e* deflated. I hear the faucet dripping after being unaware of it for hours.

Caper Bush

John and Philip woke up in a field one hundred yards off the interstate, still driving. We laughed until we could not make a sound, could not breathe, at the sentence, “They met for some crazy summer fun at a collective farm on the Baltic.” I do not consciously collect carbon; however, after my death, its loss will be carefully measured. Dean knocked over the chocolate shake, picked the cup back up, then went to get a lid.

Arizona Cypress

I got a haircut so I would look good when they took a picture of my hand. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with my arm, and then I realized *static electricity*. I may start this sentence and be the acting force grammatically, but I know better than to wear yellow during the new moon. I switched to granola for breakfast to be healthier: a nut stuck in my throat and I was still coughing at lunch. Space is expanding: I sit still and stretch marks appear in my flesh. I squint to make sure I heard right.

Red Mangrove

The belief that death is “a rite of passage, not an end.” The cold sweat that it is a passage to another dead end. Sweat is not a rite of passage. It is evaporation. The belief that death is “a dangerous journey in which all past mistakes will count against you.” The knowledge that death itself is usually the result of some mistake.

American Chestnut

He flushes the urinal before he starts to pee. When I asked her if she recognized me now, she said, “No.” I always feel uneasy the first evening after we set the clocks back and it stays light an hour longer, but I feel really fine, as if a balance has corrected itself the first evening it gets dark an hour sooner. Thank heaven for censors. If not for their records, some intertitles in silent films, even Fritz Lang’s, would have been lost forever.

Japanese Maple

I can sing along with any song on the oldies' station—the Mamas and the Papas, the Shirelles—but I can't tell you the words if the song isn't playing. Subtitles were included, but so low on the screen they couldn't be read. Every sign system has a sign for *entropy* and then succumbs to it: the mute woman gets arthritis in her fingers.

Grape Vine

What I particularly like about the television show *Dallas* is that the characters will arrange to meet for lunch at an expensive restaurant, then they'll get into an argument before the waiter can bring water, and one will stomp out. I don't think a single lunch ever got eaten. Once I saw a photograph of a man who looked enough like me to fool eyewitnesses, but he had a different name. I've met a man with the same name as mine, but he didn't look like me. My death sentence has not yet been spoken. My death sentence fragment, maybe.

Chaste Tree

I think the music of heaven is actually white noise, excellent for thinking and acting, but there will be no problem left to solve, no need to do anything. The last photograph I'd like to see on my deathbed is one of my ninth birthday party, crew-cut kids around a cake on a picnic table. Everyone is happy. I can't pick out which kid is me. The difference between inside my house and outside is that outside the fungus is too beautiful to sit on.

Virginia Creeper

She said the picture of the man lying on his back looking up at the stars made her think of a man lying on his back looking up at the stars. He must be tired, she said. I told her if when she first woke up, she rolled onto her stomach and used all her energy to stare through the earth, she would see only more stars.

Poison Oak

If I lie down on my back to rest for a moment, I'll wake up a couple of hours later. Much more efficient to lie down on my back to go to sleep: I'm awake instantly. When I lost the fingernail clippers I bought just the day before, I was distressed. When I lost my voice, I felt comforted.

Cajepu

I hear wind whistling until I push the door open and step out into stillness. I sit in the subway and look out at the train going in the opposite direction and its windows start to slide and for a few seconds I can't tell which train is actually moving. I'm standing over the water table; I'm surfing.

Elderberry

The room was empty. Still, I swear I heard someone humming.
That we all stand under our own dome of heaven means that we have left
the womb, but we are still inside the breast.