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# SWC



Rooted: Poetics of Place







# Becoming More Cottonwood

*words and illustrations by Erin Elder*

A few days ago, a cottonwood seed drifted into my open mouth and I have been thinking about cottonwoods ever since. I have coughed both unwillingly and on purpose, trying to dislodge the seed from my throat. No amount of water or wine, lunch or gummy worms will move the sensation from my throat. I collected it from the edge of an unnamed trickle; now it is days later with many miles between. A seed has hitched a ride on my inner tissues, alerting me to its quiet earthly power.

The day I was seeded was nearly hot and so, as any desert traveler does when encountering a cottonwood grove, I veered into its shade and rested. This particular stand of cottonwoods was small, perhaps three mature trees and some fledgling youth. Their trunks were gnarled and twisted, the bark broken into something more like topography than skin. A few large limbs lay fractured on the ground with brown leaves still attached. As any desert traveler comes to know, cottonwoods grow where there is or has been water. They survive in gullies, arroyos, and creek beds, places where water runs off of rocks, carving through soft earth before disappearing underground. Cottonwoods love seasonal streams and river banks, the places that flux between flood and drought. They like sunlight and moist silt, sand, gravel, shifting earth, and migrating edges. They eke out their precious existence between extremes and amidst seasonal shifts, quickly asserting themselves in a fleeting moment of perfect balance.

I'm not sure whether the seed is still in me or if the wound of its passing has simply scarred my esophagus for the time being. I feel swollen and sore with each swallow. By now, the seed has likely left my body because twice I have shat into holes that I dug in the ground and then neatly covered over with dirt and rock; it's quite possible that a tree is planted in my excrement some

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seventy-five miles from where it originated. Though this would be unusual, cottonwoods are designed for diaspora.

Like most plants, a cottonwood tree is either male or female. Unlike most trees, their flowers look like dangling strings of feathers and beads. They bloom without blossoming just before leaves bud out so that the wind can carry pollen, unhindered, from the blatant male anthers to the exposed and feathery female stigma. No insects are required for pollination, therefore this reproduction has no scent or nectar or bright colors—it happens in subtle shades of pre-spring green, it happens on the wind. When the female has caught enough pollen in her feathery beaded stigma, she releases up to 25 million seeds over the course of two weeks. Her tiny hopeful babies fluff and puff and poof and meander on the breeze.

When cotton is released it looks like snow or a shower of stars. Many Native American stories tell how the cottonwood seeded the cosmos with stars. Some stories tell the opposite, how stars have come to live inside these trees. I see why both are true because as they float gravityless in the midsummer air, the seeds shine and sparkle like wishes waiting to happen. And indeed, they carry a wish within each small tuft—to procreate, to further their species. The cottonwood seed that floated into my open mouth was doing exactly what it meant to do, which is to seek out wetness and then melt into it. Because these trees exist in places where water may be intermittent or sporadic or mostly underground, the cotton floats and tumbles and soars until a wetness catches it up. Wetness doesn't dissolve the cotton fibers; rather, the cotton spreads out like a spiderweb, helping the seed attach to any available root, leaf, bramble, or twig. You see, the cottonwood seed is very particular—it must do more than find water, it must also stabilize its location long enough to sink its shallow roots into the silty wet earth. I read somewhere that cottonwood seeds are viable for up to three days and wither if the conditions are not right. If the conditions are right, though, a sapling's roots grow five feet deep into its first summer. Tomorrow will be my third day with seed and I imagine that if enough sunlight can shine through my mouth and bounce off my epiglottis, a star may yet take root.

I live near a river where many cottonwoods grow. There are so many cottonwoods along that river that we call it "the bosque" which means forest in Spanish. The cottonwoods are my daily companions and neighbors; I spend so much time among cottonwoods that it would not surprise me to be taken over by them, to become one of them. I have always admired them for their bold twisty trunks and their mighty canopies of shade that, in fall, color the earth in patches of gold wonder that cry out *eureka!* at every single sighting. I have always felt

the tenacious hope of cottonwoods and I've delighted in their bright signal of water. I'm taken with their ability to survive and surprise in such seemingly desert places. I recently learned that during a flood, when a cottonwood's roots are underwater, they can breathe through their skin. And for quite a long time, they can live without air. To become more cottonwood is to be adaptable with determination. But lately I have been wary of becoming more cottonwood because the ones in my neighborhood are dying. The water table has dropped out from beneath them and the river is no longer allowed to flood; therefore, their tricky breathing is no longer of benefit and so they fall over and break in woeful dramas of self-sustaining expulsion.

As I write, I realize that this, too, is what cottonwoods are designed to do. They were made to grow quick and tall but without great structural strength. They were made to slough off up to half their body mass in order to save the rest. This self-amputating process is called cladoptosis, or branch sacrifice, and happens



when parts of a tree are diseased or suffering from drought. A tree knows when it is hurting and takes action. It makes me uncomfortable to imagine a human version of this type of survival mechanism where people walk around without arms and legs or heads but still function. And for some reason it makes me sad to think of a tree being surrounded with discarded parts of itself. But I do not think enough like a tree. Trees do not feel shame. They don't judge failure. They only want to survive and while we gasp at another fallen limb, they are cunningly outsmarting death. They are so cunning that they even know how to grow new plants from their broken-off fragments and leftover stumps. If the wind doesn't bring them a mate, they can do it asexually by lopping off parts of themselves. If there is enough moisture in the ground where the fractured bits fall, a sprout will form. Survival and reproduction, loss and procreation—the forest floor is littered with hope and sacrifice.

Earlier this year, I heard a thundering crack and then a shattering crash and ran out into the street to see my neighbor's car beneath a giant cottonwood's sacrificed limb. After pictures were taken for the insurance company, neighbors came with their gloves and chainsaws and tree pruners and neatly disposed of the

fallen behemoth. A week later, a new car appeared in the driveway across the street. In the season that followed, many branches fell into the street and across the river trail and into people's yards and even onto their houses. Tree trimmers came to bring down the aging beasts before their shedding could damage anything worse. Shade disappeared. So did some birds. And while the neighborhood skyline changed, the bosque did too. Each walk down the riverside trail seemed to announce a new instance of the cottonwoods' self-pruning. The sloughing can be massive—branches the length of school buses, trunks as big around as my kitchen. They succumb to gravity with absurdity and violence; some smashing into the others, knocking them over like skyhigh dominoes. Some fall into the crooked arms of another, where they swoon and swoop together until the force becomes too much for either of the trees to bear. More than once, I have gasped at the sight of a familiar fallen tree. More than once, I have cried. They all fall down. We all fall down. Falling down is an eventuality.

I recently read about a very old cottonwood tree in Delta, Colorado. It was at least two centuries old and was an important landmark for the Ute. Even as the Ute were forced to live elsewhere—on reservations and in cities—the tree was a place to return to, it was familiar, they called it Grandfather. The old cottonwood was a place for meetings and even powwows and so it was also called the Council Tree. When a large limb recently fell from the tree, the town folks became afraid and considered the risk unacceptable. Without adequately conferring with the tribes, the town quickly cut the tree down. Grandfather had lived an extra long life and would have eventually died—cottonwoods have an average lifespan of around 120 years—but clearly, it was disrespectful not to hold proper council with the Ute under and about their special tree. I read one account that described how clippings were taken from the Council Tree and raised into saplings. Seven small cottonwood trees, the offspring of Grandfather, were planted on site to honor the seven Ute tribes. One of the saplings died but six continue to grow. I trust that this new generation already knows how to survive, but will conditions allow them to flourish, to thrive, to even become sacred?

The experts say that our bosque is dying. They say the aquifer is dropping and all of the old cottonwoods will soon fall down. Without the water's flux and flood,



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wind-blown seeds and lopped off limbs will not take root and our native trees will be replaced by the more aggressive invaders: the tamarisk, the Russian olive, the poorly named tree of heaven. The riverscape will become something else—a brushland, maybe, with grassy banks. There is the question, too, of whether the river will continue to flow. For decades now, our mighty Rio Grande has ceased to reach the ocean. And now, its summer trickle has barely enough mass to flow. It is a mud bog, but it is still beautiful. I hope I live long enough to see what happens; I hope my heart can endure the change. Will I tell the young people, *there was a famous river here once? Once upon a time, here grew a mighty forest!* How long will it take the bosque to become something else and how will I adapt to the changes? Sometimes the thought is so sad that I want to lop off a part of myself. I want something in me to crack open and thud to the earth. Maybe something will grow from my fallen stump, or else my broken skin will become a home for someone else. I don't know how we will survive the loss of such finely dappled shade. In fact, we may not survive. I hope there will be splinters to mark where the sacrifice was made and constellations of cottonwood stars to guide the way. x

Erin Elder is an artist, writer, and curator based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her research-driven projects take highly participatory forms, working with a broad definition of art to bring audiences into a direct experience of particular places. Her third non-fiction book, *Into the Folding Swell*, will be released in 2023.

