

Excerpt from:
TreeGirl: Intimate Encounters with Wild Nature

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Introduction

This book is an invitation for you to recover your ancient bond with wild Nature—to rediscover trees as a source of intimate comfort, sensorial pleasure, and unexpected companionship, as a sanctuary from the madness of our modern, civilized world. It is an invitation to rewild your body and consciousness, to reforest your soul.

Trees are my secret love. I can gaze endlessly at their beautiful complexity, marvel at their simplicity of being, and envy their tenacious rootedness in one place. Every day, I long to be with trees, to sit under them, climb high up in them, collect their abundant gifts, learn about them, and listen to their ethereal songs in collaboration with the wind.

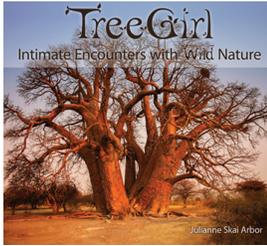
Instead, I spend too many days sitting in front of a screen, zooming behind a wheel, accumulating manufactured objects, and interacting with other two-leggeds and their noisy, handheld gadgets. But when I can, I steal away from the scheduled, maintained world to be alone with the trees, whose strong arms exalt the blue sky, whose gnarled roots kiss the rich earth, and whose generous, cascading foliage grants me peaceful shelter and companionship. When I am not able to be alone with trees, I dream of how one day I can disappear into the woods and simply become one of them.

Affinity for trees is undoubtedly embedded in the human psyche. The folklore, mythology, and symbology of trees are rooted in human cultures all over the world. For tens of thousands of years, people took refuge under trees, held council under trees, and depended upon trees for survival. People talked to trees, sang to them, danced under them. They tended, maintained, and harvested them for the gifts they provided, year after year, generations after generations. Trees were honored, revered, and worshipped; we lived in kinship with them.

However, we have lost our intimate bond with trees, and both they and we suffer for it. While our modern, industrial world still depends upon certain species of trees, most trees have been demoted from sacred to the status of a cash crop harvested in rows like wheat¹, or a disposable urban landscape element planted for decoration, with a percentage allowed refuge within the borders of designated parks and wilderness areas. Otherwise, they appear to be there for the taking. Trees are undoubtedly one of the most vital parts of our interconnected global living system. There are currently an estimated 60,000–100,000 species of trees on the planet², the majority of which are in tropical forests. We don't know how many there are because, like many species, we simply can't count them all. We may never identify many of them before they are lost to deforestation. Carelessly, we allow most species to diminish in the name of human progress. Their regional deforestation has led to cultural collapse more than once in history. Today, trees are being lost not only due to over-harvesting and habitat loss, but also to the spread of invasive insect pests and diseases from imbalances caused by climate change.

Trees and forest products contribute an estimated \$250 billion to the economies of the developing world alone³. But trees provide us, and the rest of the planet, with much more than just measurable products and ecological services; the psychological and spiritual gifts they provide are ineffable. Why is it that we feel more relaxed, open, and at peace in the presence of trees than we do surrounded by a sea of concrete? Our sensorial bodies, our scientific minds, our feeling hearts, and our energetic spirits *know* the answer, and we hunger for it.

We modern industrialized humans live in a tamed world that has been mechanized, gadgetized, and sterilized; wildness has almost entirely been bulldozed, desacralized, and forgotten. Yet there are remnants of wild Nature all around us. Even in the most desolate, paved-over urban area, resident critters scavenge what they can; tenacious



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"weeds" bust up sidewalks; and ill-fated landscape trees with roots entombed in concrete support tiny microcosms of life invisible to us. But without continual human intervention, the built world submits to Nature's swift and willful

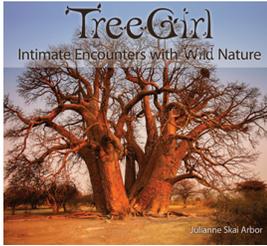
reforestation of its ecological self⁴. Simply watch an abandoned urban lot re-vegetate over time: an act of ecologic integrity. In most climates, such a mini-ecosystem would eventually become a forest.

Ironically, because of humans' exploitation and, in some places, obliteration of forest ecosystems, trees now rely on us for their survival. In the case of some species, due to a lack of natural regeneration, humans are the only hope for tree propagation and restoration. But what about the restoration of our own ecological selves and the reforestation of our souls? As mammals, we are a part of Nature, even though we may feel apart from it. As modern, industrialized mammals, we have slowly dissociated ourselves psychologically from the kinship of all life⁵. But unconsciously and consciously, we are restless for balance, reunion, and healing, as are all the living systems of the planet that are currently in decline. We humans have a deep need for personal reconnection to the wild, not only because everything, including us, depends on it biologically, but because we depend on it psychologically and spiritually as well. We need the wild much more than we need the automated machines, petrochemicals, and economic systems we have manufactured to run our lives. We need to free the wild from the bondage of slavery and abuse we have imposed on it for thousands of years, and set it free in ourselves as well.

Therefore, in the context of this book, *the wild*, *wildness*, and *wild Nature* refer not to a Nature devoid of all human culture, but rather a Nature absent of an industrialized civilization that values exploitation, domination, and control over "the other" instead of coexistence within the family of things. Nature is wildness; wildness is Nature; Nature is the life force. *The wild*, in this sense, refers to lands, waters, and beings who have their own freedom, will⁶, and integrity—those that have not been subjugated by humans. This wildness is the same mysterious life-force energy and matter that is continually creating life on Earth and infinite solar systems; we humans can neither fully scientifically define nor tame it all. In fact, we must return to a relationship of alliance—a conscious dialogue with Nature of asking questions and appreciating the mystery. At the same time, we must not romanticize the wild; for this same wildness holds the power of creation as well as destruction. The Earth has its own set of "rules"; we must come into accord with them, for the Earth with all of its abundance and power demands a participation of reciprocity.

As allies with the wild, there are a myriad of actions we must engage in order to preserve and restore the integrity of the planet: ecological restoration, environmental education, political advocacy and activism, policy reform, reducing our voracious appetite for natural resources, and powering down our energy consumption and our industrial growth society's false promise of infinite economic growth⁷. We must do this all with humility, integrity, ingenuity, creativity, soulfulness, and even daring. Along with these, we also must cultivate our personal relationship of love, reverence, and awe with the wild.

To reunite and belong once again to wild Nature is to choose to leave behind the artificial and managed world humans have blindly constructed, consisting of automated buttons, touch screens, personal identification numbers, manipulated images, and decimal points. It means finding refuge from the built environment's light and noise pollution, chemical offgassing, and electromagnetic buzzing. By re-immersing ourselves in wild Nature, we desert the domesticated mind and return gracefully to the soul's vocabulary. Here we find sanctuary, freedom from the deadness of human construction, and relief from the insanity of our technology-addicted lives and the control we are constantly attempting to maintain. Our modern brains do not understand it cognitively, but our souls recognize the language of the Earth: the natural patterns, cycles, seasons, growth and decay, rhythms, systems—the relationships, the deep intertwinings. Our modern cultural consciousness is starved for and fascinated by the mysterious, complex



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beauty of the thriving, sometimes seemingly chaotic creative life force that is beyond our control. We hunger for a deep, rich engagement and interaction with that which is ancient to our mind, heart, body, and spirit.

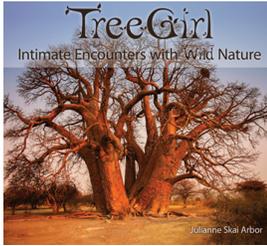
Our mammalian bodies also remember and recognize the untamed world of wild Nature as our primal home. We yearn to experience all of our senses safely and feel fully comfortable in our bodies, interacting with the body of the landscape. We have cravings to walk barefoot, touch fur and feathers, climb trees and mountains, pick and gather, get wet in rain or bodies of water, dig in the moist earth or sand, explore cavernous holes, create beauty from found natural objects with our hands, to even take adventurous risks. These patterns are deeply ingrained in us. There are textures in Nature that are engaging and pleasurable to touch, colors and patterns beautiful to the eyes, fragrances intoxicating to the nose, edibles delicious to taste, sounds harmonious to our ears, and physical comforts in which we feel safe and held. These sensations may come in the delicate softness of pussy willow buds held between our fingertips; being blinded by a fruit tree exploding in spring's pink, blooming fullness; the intoxicating smell of sweet orange blossoms on the air; the taste and texture of a freshly picked fig; the rustling sound of dried leaves gently chased by the autumn wind; the physical sturdiness of a trunk or flexibility of a limb while our bodies come into tandem with a tree while climbing it. Interacting with wild Nature also engages our psychic-intuitive-spiritual senses, warming our hearts and bringing inspiration, awe, and connection.

Such unexpected stimulation can affect us so deeply that we are able, for a few moments, to abandon our minds, release our isolation, and embrace the pleasures of shared aliveness as devoted companions, as lovers with the rest of the animate world. This is a kind of intimacy with wild Nature, a romance of the senses that can at times be physically sensual, passionate, and even erotic.⁸ When we allow ourselves to be seduced by the sensuality of wild Nature, these raw experiences can nurture and enliven the body and reawaken the soul. This experience of surrender is akin to falling into the arms of our beloved. There we can recalibrate our attention to a state of enthralled reawakening and engage in secret conversation with the living Earth—until we once again feel we belong at home. This is a sacred and dynamic conversation with Nature as mutual subject, not object. It is the true act of intimacy as an intentional collaborative act of admiration, adoration, respect, humility, vulnerability, caretaking, and reciprocity. To be alive on the planet is to surrender to being her partner. To be in service of the Earth is to be enraptured by her.

Imagine if we truly open our hearts to Nature in all its wildness and fall in love over and over again with the sacredness of this life force? I invite us modern humans to become re-enchanted with Nature, to experience intimacy and soulful engagement with trees and our more-than-human companions on this Earth. I invite us to live life embodied in our animal forms, and in our animal psyches, in a affectionate alliance with the animate land, soil, rocks, water, plants, fungi, lichen, animals, and invisible, microscopic world—the *Kin-dom* of Life.⁹

I have found my secret love in the plant kin-dom of trees. I encourage you to find your secret love in Nature as well— to find your wild within. As inspiration, I am offering you an anthology of my own private encounters with trees around the world, captured in intimate self-portrait photographs and photographs of others. Each photograph is accompanied by a short story of my encounter and relationship with the tree.

I have organized the tree photos in alphabetical order by their common name, but I also include the Latin, or scientific, name. Each of the fifty species is accompanied by a natural history to fulfill your curiosity, including other known names for the tree, distribution of the species, ecosystem type, maximum recorded age and size, distinctive characteristics, animal community, traditional and modern uses (including uses for medicine, food, fiber,



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tools and objects, art and ceremony, shelter), and threats to the species' survival. The better we understand our wild neighbors— friends, ancient elders, relations—the better we can appreciate, value, and be of service to these trees.

The tree species bookend five essays that each tell a different story about the human-tree relationship. "Lovers" tells of my own sensual and transmutational encounter with a tree; "Tree Affinity" explains the biology and psychology of why we are attracted to trees; "Touch Trees" examines a holistic view of arboriculture— the science of taking care of trees; and "The Goddess and the Green Man" tells the story of my own spiritual encounters with trees as

these female and male Nature archetypes. The last chapter, "Rewilding," offers some accessible ways in which you can connect with Nature to rewild yourself.

Ecopsychology, in essence, is the discipline of understanding our modern disconnection from the Earth. The conscious and unconscious knowing that our home, planet Earth, is being destroyed, is causing massive psychological grief, anxiety, denial, trauma, dysfunction, as well as physical illness. Ecotherapy is the therapeutic practice: Nature is healing because we *are* Nature, and essentially, ecotherapy is coming Home. I hope this collection of images and essays will inspire you to connect with trees, to fall in love with the wild, and to explore your own intimate encounters with Nature. As a photographer, I place myself in the landscape to show that Nature, in its inherent wildness, is where we belong— sometimes naked, sometimes vulnerable, in humility, with our shoes off and the wind blowing against our skin, ears open, listening to our lover, with all our heart and soul.

1 Andreas Feininger, *Trees* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1991) p.10.

2 Colin Tudge, *The Tree: A Natural History of What Trees Are, How They Live, and Why They Matter* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005) p.16.

3 Economic Contributions of Forests: Background Paper 1. United Nations Forum on Forests, Tenth Session, prepared March 2013.

4 Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Thomas Dunne Books, 2007).

5 Jerome Bernstein, *Living in the Borderland: The Evolution of Consciousness and the Challenge of Healing of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

6 The definition of the wild as having its own will is found in Dave Foreman, "Five Feathers for the Cannot Club" in *The Rediscovery of the Wild* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

7 Richard Heinberg, *Power Down: Options and Actions for a Post Carbon World* (Gabriola Island, New Society Publishers, 2004).

8 The concept of eros, while it may initially take the form of passionate desire and love, it is more truly a desire for "psychic relatedness"—for interconnection and interaction with other sentient beings. Ultimately, it is the desire for wholeness.

9 *From Kingdom to Kindom: Acting as if We Have Relatives*. Lecture recording from Bioneers Conference of Brock Dolman, Brian Swimme and Paul Stamets, 2011.