

A photograph of a large, moss-covered tree stump in a forest. The stump is the central focus, with vibrant green moss growing on its surface and around its base. The background shows a dense forest of tall, thin trees with sunlight filtering through the canopy. The text "A Falling Muse" is written in a white, cursive font over the right side of the stump.

*A Falling
Muse*

Salua Rivero

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Introduction

Walking inside a hemlock forest is like walking inside a Gothic cathedral; a multi-sensory journey that transcends my expectations of a forest. In here I find myself experiencing the minty, refreshing odor of the leaves and soil. As I move my sight downward, I notice the deep shades of brown with little to no plants growing in the understory. As my sight goes upward, I notice how the tall canopies hide the sky in a pleasant embrace. I hear the fallen leaves and branches crunch at every step. And as my hands glide over the flat and pointy needles, I notice the insect which has infested most of the Eastern hemlock trees; the hemlock woolly adelgid. The relationship I have with the Hemlock forest, and other forests all around the world, is but the surface in a series of human involvement. The hemlock became my muse during this project, as it falls from infestation, I observed and admired, with wonder and defeat.

The story of my bond with the forests will be at the center of this book. Between me and the forests, there is sense of communion, with giving and receiving as part of a harmonious relationship. How can I express this relationship? With photographs that aim to interpret how I feel connected to and how I experience other living beings and with a series of short writings that aim to remind me of that sense of adoration, integration and contemplation that will nourish my bond with the web of life.

In the same way that we, as people, have taken a part in the development of the forests by logging, prescribed burns, reservoirs and conservation attempts, the forest is a part of me as it is a part of us. The loss of trees in the past due to natural disasters or human interventions has and continues to inspire me to write poetry, to make art that imitates the beauty and admiration I've always had, to study ecology, conservation methods and a new environmental ethics.

There are three subjects to meditate on in this book; unity, sustainability, and metamorphosis. These will aim to encompass why we, as a species, must maintain a relationship with not just the forests, but with everything that lives and thrives. These will aim to express why it is important for us to dwell on the loss of a foundation species like the hemlock in New England. I want to share how I view and feel the forest, and how it has impacted my perspective about the world and myself.







Unity



Unity

We all come from the same source. We may trace our ancestry to the first single-celled micro-organisms, prokaryotes. Or you may trace our ancestry to the Garden of Eden. In both of these and many other source stories, we come from one essence that expanded into the amount of diversity we currently have in the universe. There is something that unites us and the forests, us and other living beings. Like the seeds of a tree, there is a beginning to all species, to all of life. We are like leaves that branch out of a tree, out of something bigger and rooted in the Earth. Reminding ourselves of where we come from and where we are will introduce us to the wisdom of interconnectedness.









Sustainability

We need to practice behaviors that aim to enhance the quality of life for all living beings, while at the same time protecting and enhancing Earth's resources. We need to create a framework in which we seek to inspire a sense of global interdependency and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole living community. We need to learn how to protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, the biological diversity and natural processes that sustain life. Because we are connected, the damage we do to ourselves, we do to others and the damage we do to others, we do to ourselves. Being mindful of what we give and receive is the second step to understanding our connection to the forests.



Sustainability

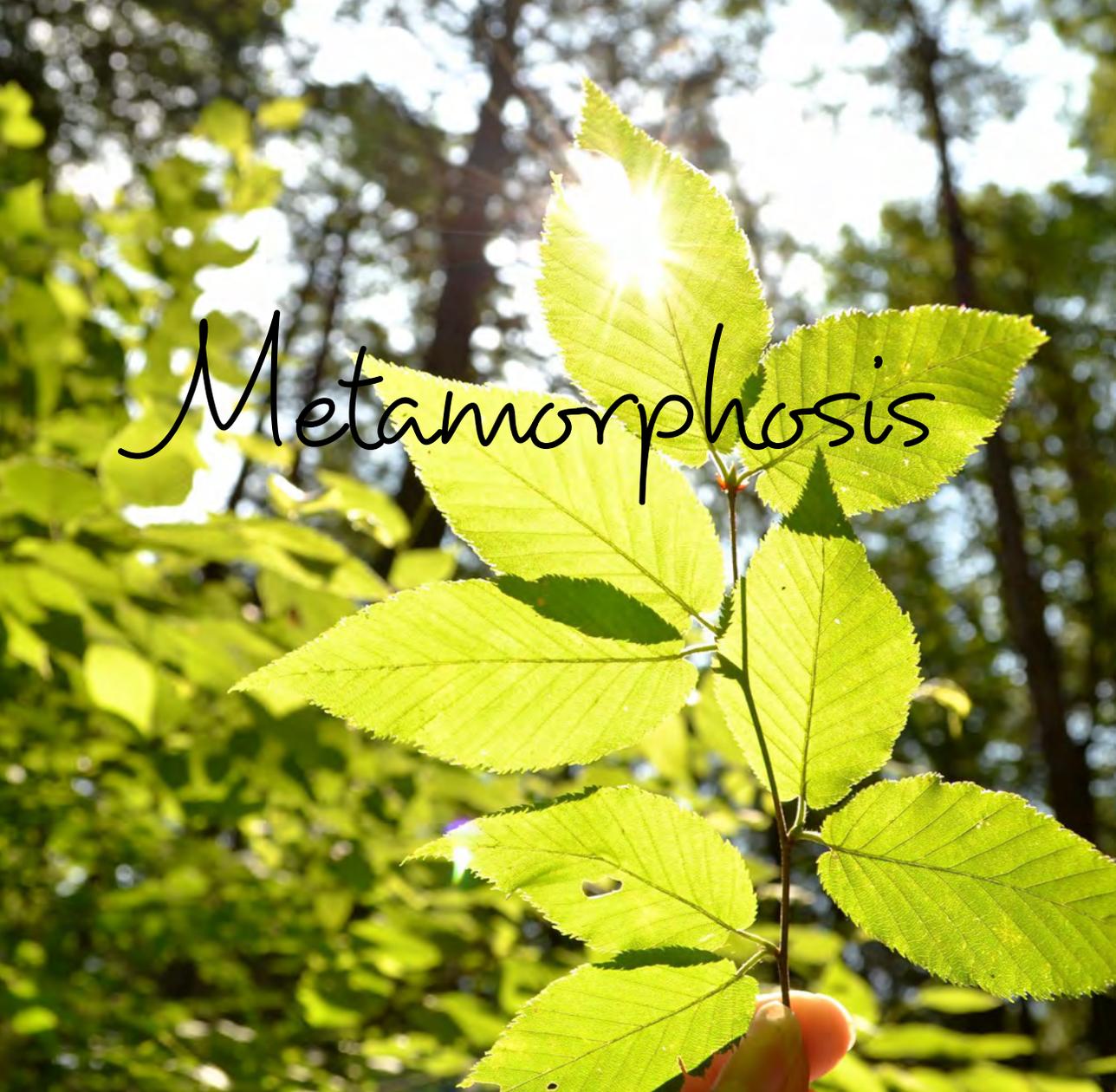


A Pause for Centering

The alternative to seeking a way to protect and react is to cease our interference. This is a time where we give ourselves permission to let go, to be with the spirit of life. This is where we stop, to admire, to observe, to do nothing. Once we learn how to balance engagement and disengagement, we can establish a healthy relationship with the forests. There are times when we need to step back and let nature explore the phases of life and death. As much as we think of the loss of hemlock tree as a tragedy, it may be more beneficial than we ever thought. Our human intervention must come to a halt as we watch the insect take the last hemlock. We have to let the forests, and ourselves, simply be.





A close-up photograph of a hand holding a branch of bright green, serrated leaves. The leaves are illuminated by sunlight, creating a strong lens flare effect. The word "Metamorphosis" is written in a black, cursive font across the center of the image. The background is a blurred forest scene with sunlight filtering through the trees.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis

During this entire process of learning about unity and sustainability, we are in a continuity of metamorphosis. We are constantly changing and renewing ourselves in the same way that forests do on a longer time frame. We learn from the past, we learn from science, from philosophies and from each other. We use the discoveries of new information to understand ourselves and our relationship with the rest of the world. We are in constant movement, with the wind, the Earth, the planets and the universe.



Final Words

Sing a nursery rhyme for the dying trees.
Their light is fading and eyes are closing,
Lure them with healing music, to sleep.

Watch them bend and fall until they're free,
From the insect that threatens their breath.
Sing a nursery rhyme for the dying trees.

Still with wounds they fight the insect spree,
Without an armor and with aching roots.
Lure them with healing music, to sleep.

Their place will soon be taken by a natural deed;
The cycle of life that awakens and weakens.
Sing a nursery rhyme for the dying trees.











The Hemlock Hospice Project

The Hemlock Hospice project was my first choice when I applied to the Harvard Forest Summer REU program for 2017 because it was the only project which fused both art and science. My experience in art, at the time, extended mostly to just photography and writing but I knew that I was capable of stepping out of my comfort zone. This project consisted of 3D installations, design, Photoshop and woodshop skills, which I had no experience in. This did not stop me from applying and having confidence that I could do anything I set my heart and mind to. I felt like this was the type of place and job that I belonged to be in. I thought it would be a good fit for my interests and passions. I was right.

I feel very connected to the idea of creating a narrative through art which focuses on the declining hemlock species because of the hemlock woolly adelgid. The idea behind the hemlock hospice project is to provide care and attention to a species that is quickly dying without attempting to prolong or to save its life. It means we try to support the species and the communities affected by its death during its last years of life. This project consists of using recycled materials from Harvard Forest that have no further use. We use items that we find in the field such as fallen logs and stumps, items that we find in the labs such as metal and glass containers and items found in the woodshop such as milled timber and buzz saws.

In order to create artwork that represents this idea, I work with designer-in-residence, David Buckley Borden and senior ecologist, Aaron Ellison to create a narrative which can express our attitudes towards this falling giant through art. At the beginning of the project we asked ourselves the following: How does this event portray the way we react to “tragic” situations? How does the decline of the hemlock affect animal, plant and human communities? How does an understanding of the way the insect spreads teach us a lesson about the environment and ourselves? When do we need to learn to step back and let nature take its course? We knew that we wanted to express the results of ecological research done at the Hemlock forests. We also wanted to ignite some sort of thought in the audience, to make them aware of the way they think and behave towards events such as a dying species.

For my independent project, I decided to combine what I had learned during this project, and what I already knew. Therefore, I decided to make small art installations, inspired by nature, using items from nature, photographing them and matching them with writing pieces.



