

2002

## A Field Guide to the Trees as a Defense of Liberal Education

Patricia Clark

*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Clark, Patricia (2002) "A Field Guide to the Trees as a Defense of Liberal Education," *Grand Valley Review*. Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol25/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## A Field Guide to the Trees as a Defense of Liberal Education

All summer the trees have been packing to go.  
See how they unfold and fold their fat leaves  
as though they were sweaters. Because they are free  
of ownership, trees can tell us a thing or two.  
The great stillness they endure, night into day,  
gives them access to mystery. Praise to the eastern  
cottonwood, despite messy catkins—it can grow  
five feet in a year. Praise to the yellow poplar, whose  
leaves resemble stars, charging us to look skyward.  
And let's not forget the black willow, sage-green  
beside the river. How, like its cousin, it shivers  
in the sun, but, independent, it refuses to weep.

Praise now the work of botanists and arborists—  
who have ordered the trees in their field guides—  
from tree-shapes and leaves, to flowers, fruit,  
and bark. Relish their words for cones or fruit: a pod  
or acorn, nut, samara, berry, pome, or drupe.  
Also aggregates—capsules, nutlets, and more.  
Your guide takes you by the hand and leads you  
through a reasoned sequence—start with the leaf key  
and see what door it unlocks. “In a wooded  
area, you will find a spiny tree.” Here is the stage  
following—called the autumn leaf key. “After  
the leaves have fallen, look for the brown pods.”

Leafstalk or petiole, a spine left across the palmate  
outline—this multi-pointed shape marks a red maple.  
I pick it up from the ground, a leaf becoming lace  
becoming dust. Stitch-by-stitch doily work  
weaving holes together, latticed into brown.  
The rest is gone. The trees signal what's to come.  
You can't know ahead of time—the leaves clap  
and shudder in the wind—what you'll need to know.  
Consider the turtles and mallards together. Some days,  
delighted, I count them—four turtles and twenty-  
three mallards, evenly spaced, basking in sun, each for each,  
sharing the same watery log, half sinking, at Riverside.

*Patricia Clark's* work appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* (April 2002) and another poem is forthcoming there; other recent work has appeared in *Poetry Magazine* and in *Slate*. She recently received a Creative Artist Grant from ArtServe Michigan for a project involving poems about the Grand River for which she will also conduct some community workshops.