

THE READER



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He was good at reading leaves. Not tea leaves – those oriental mysteries had no charm for him. He liked reading ordinary leaves, one leaf at a time, locust or linden, maple or oak. *Our own trees!* he cried once when asked what kinds of trees the leaves came from he liked to read. He never said what ‘our’ or ‘own’ really meant, but we could guess; he never went far away from where he lived, so we knew it meant larch and linden, oak and elm.

One at a time he would read them, slowly, sometimes only one leaf would take him a whole afternoon. He read the veins and the chambers between them, lines and enclosures, slow-twist of length-lines, ancient tomb-work of the gaps between,

so many signs, so many things to read.

Autumn is a feast of reading. Just as children then go back to school and to the flimsy scraps of paper they have to spend their sweet time studying, he in the same weeks would be in a heaven of decipherment.

But what do leaves say, we'd ask him, what are you reading when you read?

He held up a brown wrinkled maple leaf, last year's, and waved it gently in front of us.

This leaf is a page from a diary, it tells about a fox cub practicing its pouncing beneath the tree, and about a strange truck that rattled by on the highway, the leaf guessed it was a war thing, an army vehicle from the color it spilled.

He held up another leaf, a maple again, but very different, more wrinkled, older. And this, he said, ah, this, this is a page of what we would call philosophy I guess, though I don't really know what that means. This leaf is

wondering about all the different ways of being in the world. It writes about how wonderful but scary it must be to move around, like the animals and birds around it, and wonders too what it's like to be the tree itself, stiff and unmoving. Then the leaf rejoices in its own nature, always in one place on the branch of the tree, but always fluttering and moving about in the wind and the light, the tree is rejoicing, it has the best of both worlds. You know, he said, thanks to its leaves, a tree is halfway to being a bird.

I asked him once if he could teach me the grammar of the leaves, how to read them as he does. He looked at me as if I were crazy, or maybe just stupid. Just pick it up and start to read, he said. It's all right there, just hold it, gently, gently, in your hand, let your eyes play in its weaving, listen gently inside your mind, and let the leaf do all the rest.

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