The Tree Essay – A Fragmented Essay Exercise

This is a fragmented essay, where the connections between each fragment or piece of your story are clear to you as you write, but aren’t immediately clear to the reader. This leads to a more intuitive reading experience, which honours you and your story. It’s an exercise designed by Terese Marie Mailhot, author of the NYT-bestselling book of essays/memoir *Heart Berries* and member of the Seabird Island Band.

As an Indigenous woman who wrote intimately and vulnerably about her own trauma, she designed this exercise specifically to focus on honouring yourself, your life’s trajectory, your story. It’s a celebration of your accomplishments, what you’ve survived, and where you want to go. The structure of the essay is based on that of a tree, moving from the roots all the way up to the branches. It’s an example of a less direct way we can incorporate land into our stories and writing – by taking their knowledge and shapes as inspiration.

There are four prompts for this exercise, where you’ll have about 5 minutes for each section to write what comes to you. By the end, you’ll have the start of a fragmented essay that you can come back to and add to, edit, revise, etc. It’s about your origins and your trajectory.

1. Roots – What is at the root of you? What do you luxuriate in? What feeds those roots? You can talk about places, like community centers, or relationships with friends or family, food that makes you feel at home. Describe whatever feels right—the images, scents, sounds, tastes and things you can touch.
2. Trunk – What holds you up? What’s at your trunk? What skills have you acquired in spite of other people, or even because of them? Are you a good auntie? Are you a good friend? Are you kind to strangers? Tell me about one of these things. Show me in a scene. Whatever feels right. Again, try to remember the details.
3. Bark – This is about how you’ve protected yourself. Show me a scene where you used a skill that has saved you. Tell it straight, show it in a scene with dialogue. Whatever it is, it should be you are at your best. You valuing yourself and what you’re capable of. You centering yourself and your survival.
4. Branches – What do you reach for, and towards, like branches reaching for the sun? What are your hopes and dreams? I used to dream about publishing a book, and I did that. Now I dream about learning my language, and buying a car so I can more easily get to my rez. Your dreams can be as big as you dare, as personal as you wish.