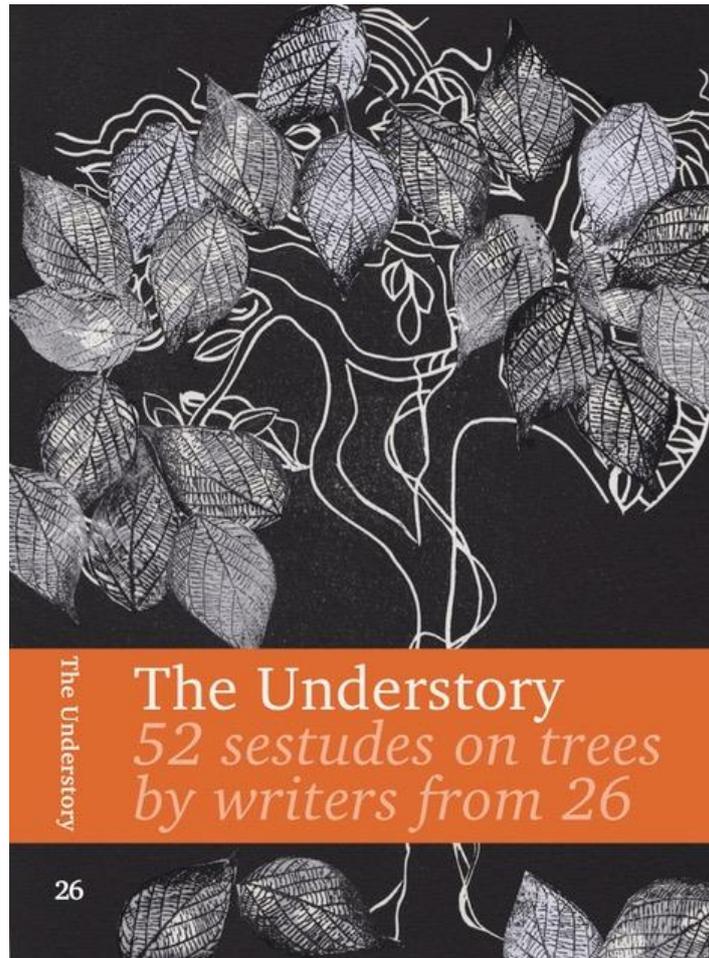


26 Trees (2019)



This project was a collaboration between the writers' collective 26 and The Woodland Trust.

The Brief: Write a sestude, a piece exactly 62 words long, about an actual, specific tree of your choice.

The accompanying piece is to be 400 words about the species of your tree. We want you to explore and answer this question: "What is the tree when it's no longer a tree?"

The centena is supported by a longer piece, up to 400 words, about your exploration.

The tree I chose was the Banana.

Visit the full **26 Trees** project at <https://26project.org.uk/26trees/> and learn more about The Woodland Trust at <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>

The book **The Understory: 52 sestudes on trees by writers from 26** is available from <https://shop.woodlandtrust.org.uk/26-trees> and <https://www.26.org.uk/shop/book/the-understory>



**Day's End and the Banana Tree, Jakarta
(Akhir Hari dan Pohon Pisang, Jakarta)**

Wearied light pushes thick air
past competing calls to prayer
and motorway roar.

Stub-tailed cats stalk the pseudo-stems,
velcro-pawed geckos sprint up spines
of new growth, lemon-green,

and older wind-frayed fronds droop
as heat stalls breath between its hands.

Dusk hands off overhead,
swifts to bats' neat flip and swerve,
to sudden black,
stars haze-hidden -

and headlights strobe
the upheld pennons.



More about the Banana Tree

“What is the tree when it’s no longer a tree?” – that was the question we were supposed to be responding to. But I need to step sideways first and ask: “When is a tree not a tree?” The answer is: “When it’s a banana.” Even though it looks like a tree – it’s tall as a tree – everybody *calls* it a tree – the banana is, instead, the largest herbaceous flowering plant in the world.

It has a strange, un-treelike anatomy. Growing out of an underground rhizome is a pseudostem, made up of the wrapped bases of those exuberant leaves. After the banana fruits have matured, the pseudostem dies, but other offshoots are already growing up to replace it. This odd way of growing and reproducing has prompted a fabulous array of names for parts of the banana plant – pups and peepers and maiden suckers, hands and fingers, cigar leaves, bells, bracts and peduncles. A sestude in waiting.

I stayed in Jakarta recently, in a new housing development. Out of the upstairs window I looked down on a little farm. The owner wouldn’t sell his land, so the new houses and the motorway cup the edge of his banana grove. (One of the scientific names for banana is *musa sapientum* – fruit of the wise man.) I struggled to breathe in the heat and was overwhelmed by the sound of five, six, seven mosques’ out-of-sync loudspeaker systems echoing around. But banana trees have thrived in this climate, letting the sounds of human religions wash over them for 10,000 years.

Domesticated for so long, what have banana trees given us?

Fritters and splits, pre-packaged lunchbox desserts, braided banana leaf fashion and traditional medicines, animal feed and mulch. Disposable plates and cutlery, place mats and food packaging. Paper and rope and cosmetics.

The world’s favourite fruit and so much more.

And asking one last sideways question: “When is your banana tree poem not your banana tree poem?” The answer to that is “When you pass it through Google Translate, back and forth between English and Bahasa Indonesia, a half dozen times or so.” Which I couldn’t resist doing. I love the surrealism of the result, with its

*pseudo-stemed cat,
Velcro's gecko claws ran spiked
new growth [...]*

and the way

*Twilight overhead gives up
from a fast to neat flip bat,
suddenly black,
hidden star -*

*and spotlights
high price.*

Bananas, right? And also magic.