This is a book about Asad's work *Root sequence. Mother tongue.* I've been thinking about it since 2017 when he called me one afternoon in May.

The summer I edited this book was kind of lonely. It's hard to explain why. Sometimes you know the reasons but you can't yet say them out loud, even if you're saying them to yourself over and over again.

ROOT SEQUENCE
MOTHER TONGUE

ASAD RAZA

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A forest has no door. You can enter it from any direction. Once you're in, you encounter the trees as your walking dictates, and if the trees are finite in number, the possible walks are not. The freedom to assemble a forest in an order of your own is what impressed the ancient rhetoricians, who referred to the store of knowledge possessed by an orator—the timber for talking about anything and talking with anyone—as a *silva*. "Primum silva rerum comparanda est," wrote Cicero in his *De oratore*: one has to begin by assembling a forest of material. But the material only takes shape in the act of speech: "haec formanda filo ipso et genere orationis." The forest is what you know, or even what it is possible for you to know before it is put to any particular use.

Root sequence. Mother tongue affords the visitor that freedom. Maybe a little less, since you could enter only from the west or the east sides of the gallery, at least when it was installed at the Whitney museum; but maybe a little more, since the trees are bedded in rolling boxes, and can move with the sun and the whims of the caretakers. The space the piece makes is a *silva* of conversational occasions: the twenty-six trees, the memory-objects set at their bases, and the voluble caretakers who do the watering and talk to visitors. A distant descendant of Cicero, Ferdinand de Saussure might describe it as a leisurely, shaded *langue*, through which a visitor can plot an infinite number of *parole*s. The space is poetical. But what actual poem could capture or inhabit its open and emergent, benignly adventitious organization?

The "Fourteen-Person Poem," which took place among the trees on a Sunday afternoon in June 2017, was an attempt to address that question. It worked like this: over two hours, eight poems were in the room, one at a time; each had fourteen lines, but each line was known to only one of fourteen readers. For a quarter hour, it was each reader's job to find a visitor and recite just that line—to get it across, as a friendly, or vatic, or impish, or urgently mysterious speech act, to everyone she met.

You planted a tree in my mind and rooted the tree in the ear.

As a visitor, you could discover the poem loose this way in fragments across the room, each fragment an interpersonal occasion, a live encounter.

all night in when down when joy down oh when

The sum was a *silva* of lines that sounded like they belonged together but wanted a determining direction.

Find a furrow in your sleep

Depending on where and when you entered, and on the disposition of the readers and the trees and the way you made among them, you might encounter three or four lines or, if you were persistent and gregarious, all fourteen.

The trees and all things break into virginity, then out of it: and all is well.

Sometime before, in all likelihood, you were done—

Dawn is a rouged irrelevance to the east.

—a bell rang, and all the readers came together in the center of the room to speak the poem through three times. First, in order, but with pauses between the lines, granting each a certain self-possession. Next, as a fluent, rhetorical utterance, line after line, the sense passing from reader to reader as though together they were a single speaker. Finally, all at once, in a simultaneous palimpsest, a sonnet on top of itself.

Were Cicero to appear, as a guest, he might say it was not just a wander through the *silva* of invention, but that the timber had been cut and the oration, the poem, built; from *inventio* to *dispositio*, in his language, and all the way to *pronunciatio*. As soon as the poem was read end to end, however, a new one replaced it, scattered anew among the fourteen readers.

My mind is the last panther in the hills

What was it like, to hear it this way? Perhaps like being part of the poem's construction, in on the beginning of it, rummaging among its possible parts, proposing arrangements by peripatetic accidents of the imagination. Or perhaps more like remembering it, the way it might come back to you, in disconnected fragments, if you had heard it once or twice, but not quite memorized it. All learning is remembering, as Socrates said—wandering through the forest of the poem's lines means that you keep hearing things you've heard before, or that sound like something you've heard before. And hearing them, of course, from other people. Maybe it is not so much a mind remembering as it is a village that knows the poem, a village

or a culture, and the silva is the landscape of a shared identity, full of things everyone might recall, or imagine we recall, or recall imagining, even if we haven't exactly heard them before.

Consider how different the experience is from a poetry reading, where you hear the poem, mostly for the first time, beginning to end and only once, and where there is no confusion about who wrote it. Certainly it wasn't *you*: that is why you are in the audience, and the author is up front. Such readings are a fine way to get your poetry, but they are not the only way. The space of *Root sequence. Mother tongue* must have been built or must have grown to host another kind of reading or thinking or talking, a kind that includes what happens before the poem and after the poem, the making-it-up before and the remembering (and forgetting) it after. Though not necessarily in that order, or any order. Over the weeks the trees were there in the Whitney, there were countless poems made ad hoc by the wanderers through the space. Perhaps what the "Fourteen-Person Poem" did was to formalize a habitus native to the place, to let its eight particular poems begin without having to have a beginning, end without having to have an ending, and still, from time to time, sound in an order of their own design. Unlike a forest, every poem has a door. That door is its first line. The reader almost always enters there, at least the first time. But the maker—and the rememberer, too—they do not necessarily use the door, and their paths, from wherever they start, are unpredictable. Down among the roots or up in the branches and among the trunks, there so many sequences.

The lines above are excerpted from poems by Maureen McLane, Sal Randolph, Dorothea von Moltke, Geoffrey Nutter, Monica Youn, and Rowan Ricardo Phillips.