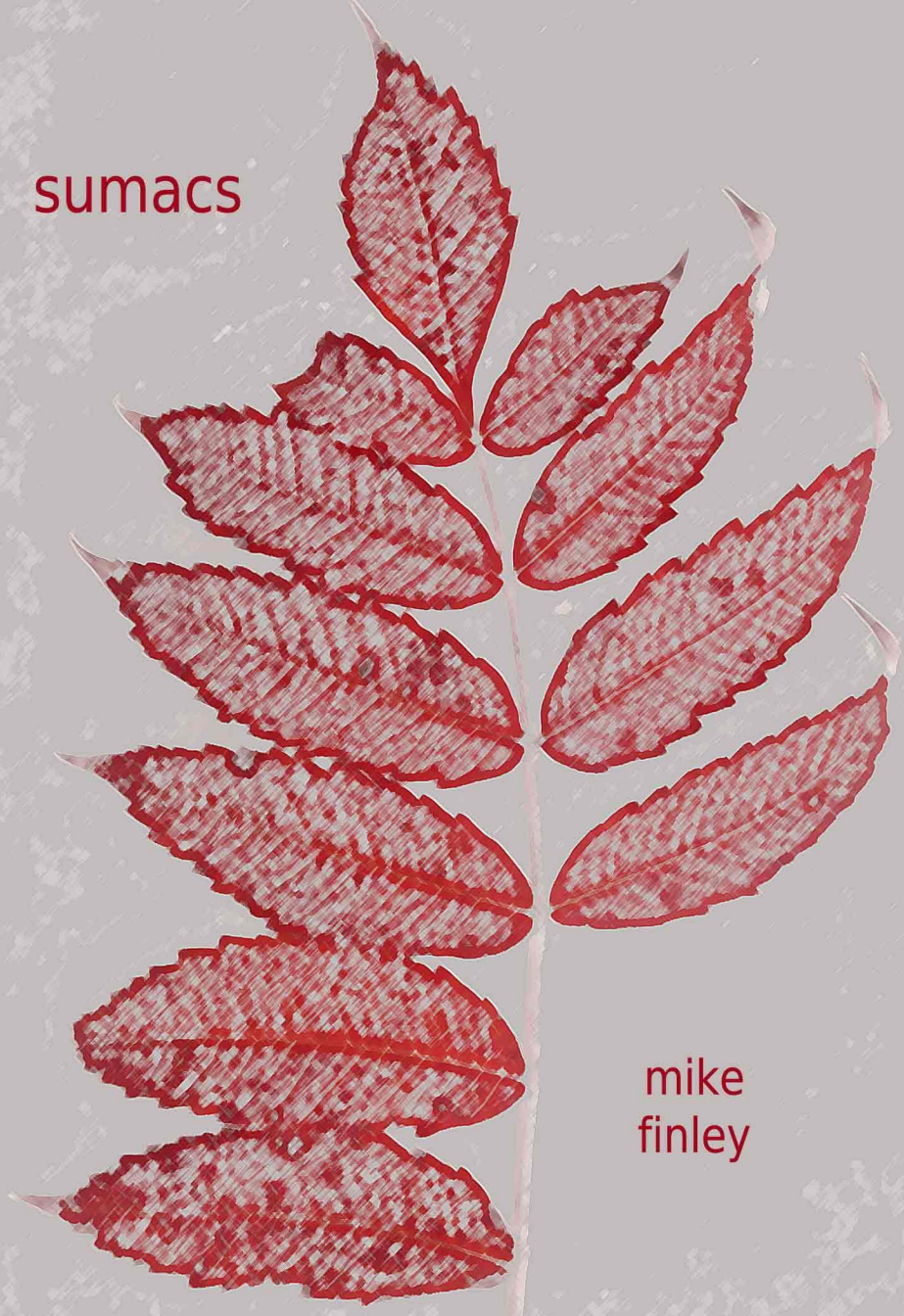


sumacs

mike
finley



I enjoy seeing the first signs of fall color around August, especially the blood-tinged red of the changing sumac bush.

Sumac is a weed, though some people plant it around their house. Its pinneate leaves are pretty year round. And the plant grows big red sumac bobs that look like flocked red Christmas trees. Some people grind them up for spice.

But if you have sumacs around your house, you notice something – they keep adding members from season to season. A single dropped berry can result in a cluster of bushes in a very short time.

They look like separate plants from the ground up. But under the ground, should you ever try to dig one out, you see the roots are all

connected. In fact, the sumac clump is really a single plant, a colony of clones.

It's not just sumacs. I read about a fungus complex in Michigan that is the world's largest and oldest living organism, sprawling across 38 acres. It is believed to be 1,500 to 10,000 years old and weigh 100 tons, if you could separate it and put it on a scale. It is bigger than an adult blue whale.

Which raises the question – are we like the sumac or the humongous fungus? Are we individuals, as we appear to be from the ground up? But are we also connected at the roots?

It's a question with scientific implications. We know from watching TV that we are (everything is) literally made of the dust of stars, dust from nebulae that came together and then dispersed

throughout the universe at the moment of the Big Bang.

We learn from magazines that atoms and molecules don't occupy space the way we think. There are no hard boundaries between microscopic things. A chair seems solid, but it is mostly air. A breath or sudden cough sends asteroids of ourselves – sputum, epithelium, and snot -- out of our immediate orbit and into the world “outside us.”

We struggle to accommodate the knowledge that the molecules of air entering into us right at this instant have occupied nearly every other lung of every person who breathed, all the way back to the first flapping pair of lungs.

It's a philosophical and theological question as

well, that goes to the root of what we know.

The Bible's idea of original sin might be a way to explain why the delusion of separateness (Me! Me!) persists. We did a bad thing on a mythological scale, in the garden, so now we are blind to the most obvious fact of existence. We don't get it because we're under a spell. We think we are ourselves, when we are not. At best, we are renting.

It affects our politics. I am pretty liberal, and liberals are more tempted by the romance of commonalty than righties. The idea of the collective – we love it. It takes a village. It takes a shrubbery.

I think of the moan that goes up when news of disaster hits. A mountainside slides onto a

village in Colombia. hundreds killed. People everywhere send donations via Red Cross.

If we are separate our lives and identities are our signal possession and death is a catastrophe. If we are together, death is not death -- the organism carries on. Others spring up to take your place.

Of course, you have to hear about the disaster to respond. You have to be in the network. Without the antennae twitching, you don't feel anything.

I used to go to an evangelical church – story too long to synopsise here. But what drew me to it was the custom some Christians have of praying for one another. People crowd round you, place a hand on your shoulder or head or back, and utter

prayers for you. If you do not get touched often, it is almost unbearably moving.

And if you are a lefty like me, with very different views about women and gays and poor people than the people who have their hands all over you, it is radical to feel these righties yearning with all their hearts for your happiness and fulfillment.

In that moment, the delusion of separateness crumbles, and you are like a blade of grass, waving in the breeze along with all the other blades.

How then can we be at war with one another? Does sumac go to war with itself? No. How can there be stealing, or vying, or fraud? We would be drawing blood from ourselves. Harming another is the worst form of cannibalism.

When we join hands it is like two planets
colliding in slow mo. Your planet crashes into my
planet. Your microbes meld with my microbes.
Kaboosh.

And when we kiss, our titanic eyes observe
one another, so close, like great cetaceans, our lips
swabbing fluid and protein, and the gases of our
last sandwich commingling.

And our bloods, even if they are different
types, they know that is a fiction. They recognize
their own and they pound through their
circulatory chambers seeking exit, seeking to pool
together, like the blades of the sumac out waving
in the field -- their blood, their wine, intoxicating
the day.

I know it's not true, and we are really alone. I

think. But I love the thought that you and I are one, and we search, day after day, through the lifetimes allotted to us -- to believe we are together.

