

Rust Belt Arcana 2021

Correspondences and Reflections on the Minor Arcana

Introduction

David Wilson and I worked on the concepts behind the art and species choices for Rust Belt Arcana from 2016-2018. During that time, I was researching the divinatory meanings and matching them to the species that fit the themes of the cards, leaning heavily on Tarot writers Rachel Pollack, Benebell Wen and Sallie Nichols, but also reading widely from others. Belt published our book of essays about the experience of the themes of the Major Arcana in the landscape of Northern Ohio in the fall of 2018.

At the time, I'd just finished moving my family from the Cuyahoga River Valley to the Piedmont of North Carolina. David and I always intended to go back and write some explanatory text for the Minor Arcana, but nothing took hold until now.

I've spent the intervening four years leaning even further into patterning how more-than-human characters and divination systems can be in conversation with each other in a reciprocal way. This document gives you some explanation around the species we chose and how to interpret the meaning suggestions that are printed on the cards, and context for creating your own interpretations.

Belt and the Book

For those of you who are new to this, David and I created a book about the Major Arcana in this deck, and it is available from Belt Publishing. Belt is a worker-owned, independent press founded in 2013 in Cleveland. The books are available through them directly, or you can request it be ordered by your favorite independent bookstore. Don't you dare buy this shit on Amazon.

The book features 22 essays about the landscape and the themes of the Major Arcana. It features a hell of a lot more biology than cartomancy. The book was listed as one of The Nature Conservancy's favorite books of 2018 and was widely praised by folks at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Audubon, and my Tarot inspiration Rachel Pollack among others.

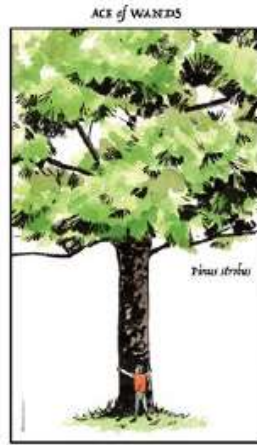
Who are we?

- David is an illustrator and Creative Director at Belt. He's an adjunct illustration instructor at Kent State. He's got a forthcoming Graphic Novel being published by Harper Collins' Balzer & Bray imprint in 2022, and has had illustrations featured in the Boston Globe, Atlantic, and a bunch of other places. He's directed some award-winning short films: <https://www.workdavidwork.com/information>
- I am a recovering fly-fishing addict. I write about the intersection of natural history and mythic narratives. I have three kids and have moved all over the United States for about two decades <https://matthewstansberry.com/home/>

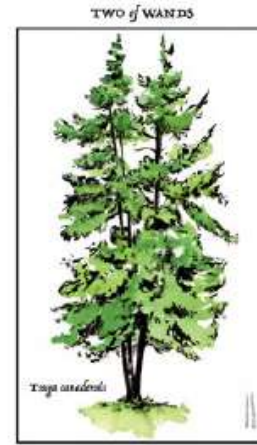
Addressing the Minor Arcana

- This deck is largely based on the fixed meanings associated with Ride-Waite-Smith. We decided to print meanings directly on the cards, taking cues from Thoth and Haindl, two decks I've used extensively.
- Fixed meanings written on the cards may not be helpful for experienced readers. But I have spent much of my career writing about, and for, wildlife biologists and I felt like needed to leave some guideposts for them. I think the divinatory notes help more than hurt, but your mileage with the meanings printed on the cards will vary. This project is to help understand why the species selected were chosen and provide context for interpreting your own meanings.
- Each of the suits of the Minor Arcana are based on a specific type of life:
 - Wands = trees
 - Cups = wildflowers
 - Swords = birds
 - Pentacles = insects/arthropods.

The Wands provide a structure to look at our mental states, our beliefs, our conscious minds



CREATION



CHOICE



DIVINE JOURNEY



COMPLETION



CONFUSION



SUCCESS, MOMENTUM



COURAGE



PURPOSE



PERSEVERANCE



DESpondENCE

Ace of Wands

White Pine, *Pinus strobus*

The Longfellow Pine is a 181-foot Eastern White Pine standing along a trail in the Cook Forest in Pennsylvania. It's the tallest tree in the northeastern U.S. and the largest living white pine specimen.

This image was inspired by my son hugging this giant tree on one of several trips to this place.

If you are anywhere within driving distance, I cannot recommend the Cook Forest enough. It is full of gorgeous old trees.

There are some very impressive white pine in the Cleveland Metroparks North Chagrin property along the White Pine Loop trail.



Ace of Wands

- The text on the card says creation.
- This aspect of creation doesn't think about logistics or morality.
- It becomes manifest by being named; its image called forth.
- It's not the why. It's not the how. It's THE WHAT. The first act of calling something into being.
- The white pine is a symbol of empire. The mast of British ships. There's a fool's pride in that moment of triumph. There is majesty too. It's part of it.
- Pictured: one of the big remnant white pines in North Carolina at the White Pine Preserve



Two of Wands

Eastern Hemlock

The card reads “Choice” but that's not quite it. It's the moment of perception (all of the wands in this deck are like this).

You realize something you thought was a single whole entity is at least two separate things. This card represents that moment of awareness.

It can refer to something granular and specific, so feel free to read it that way.

But I also like the idea articulated in Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*, a realization of separateness from the world.

“Children ten years old wake up and find themselves here, discover themselves to have been here all along; is this sad? They wake like sleepwalkers, in full stride; they wake like people brought back from cardiac arrest or from drowning: *in medias res*, surrounded by familiar people and objects, equipped with a hundred skills. They know the neighborhood, they can read and write English, they are old hands at the commonplace mysteries, and yet they feel themselves to have just stepped off the boat, just converged with their bodies, just flown down from a trance, to lodge in an eerily familiar life already well under way. I woke in bits, like all children, piecemeal over the years. I discovered myself and the world, and forgot them, and discovered them again. I woke at intervals until, by that September when Father went down the river, the intervals of waking tipped the scales, and I was more often awake than not. I noticed this process of waking, and predicted with terrifying logic that one of these years not far away I would be awake continuously and never slip back, and never be free of myself again.”



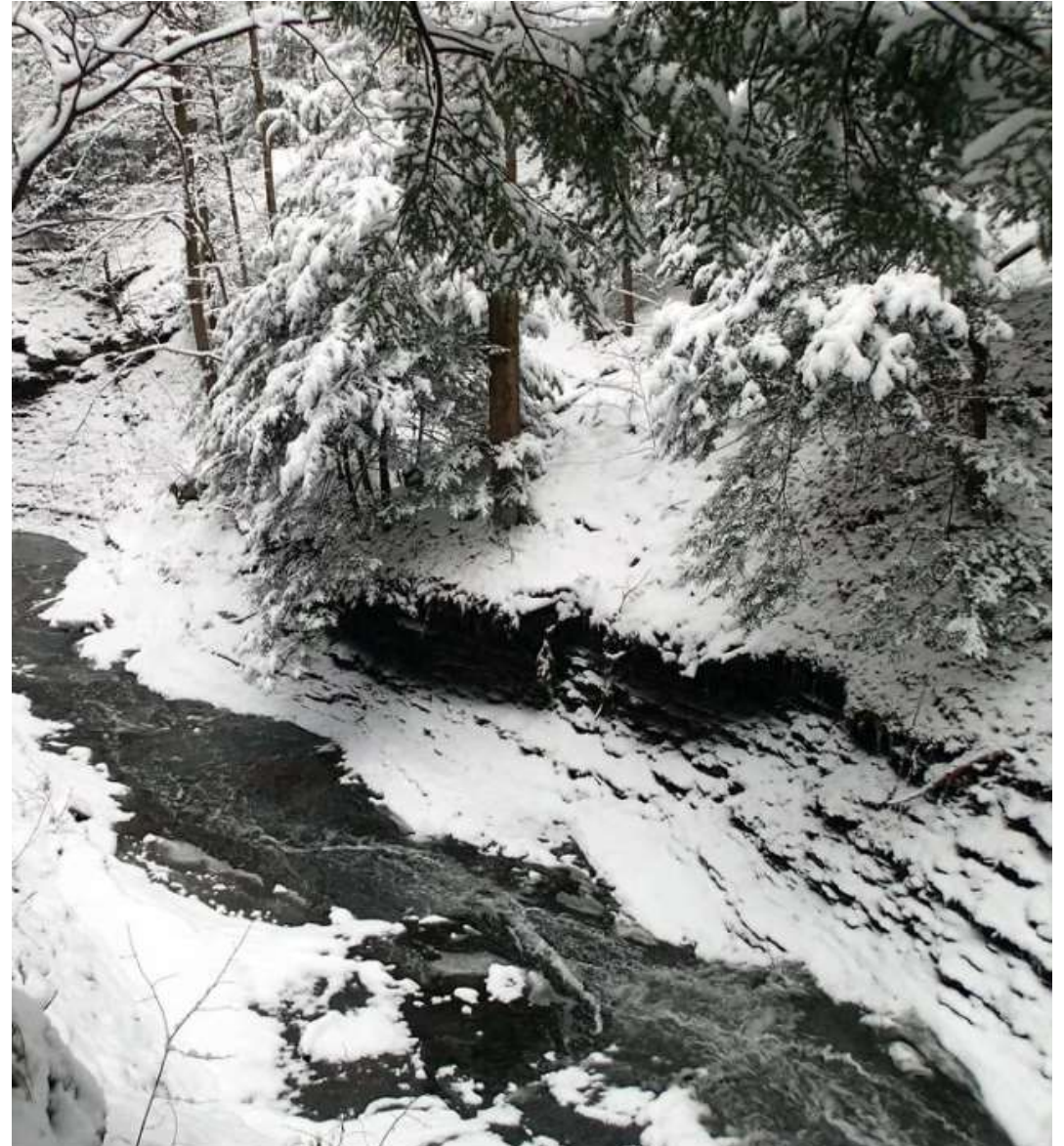
Two of Wands

If the moment of creation, of uttering something into existence, is the Ace of Wands – the Two of Wands represents the moment of realizing you have a perspective that is separate from creation, that creation is ongoing, and you are viewer of it.

I think about how the eastern hemlock was left behind by retreating glaciers. The world moves on. I think about the cold places where they persist. I think about the dark gorges where they grow slowly. That separation and isolation is there in the card.

There is a kind of horrible moment realizing you are alone and separate. But it is your choice on how to act in context of that knowledge.

“The hemlock whistles softly to itself. It raises its long, limber boughs and lets them drop again with a sigh, not sorrowful, but letting fall tranquility upon us.” Donald Culross Peattie, *Natural History of North American Trees*



Three of Wands

Our species for this card is the Sugar Maple that image burned into my mind from a single moment in the early fall. I was walking up a steep hillside in the Cuyahoga Valley, I had the impression I was staring up into the face of a bearded sun/fire sky god as I looked at a red maple canopy.

At the time, I was very into Rachel Pollack, who was so gracious with a blurb for the book. She offers some of the best correspondences. Her take on this card as a fiery creative force spoke to me.

That moment in the woods felt like something was risked, to see and be seen, to be responsible for the life you are given.



Three of Wands

I think the anecdote about me, a chunky middle-aged dude having an exertion-based vision of a fiery red maple god, helps put the deck in proper context as an artifact of a mystic's rambling through the woods.

It's not a codex, but a record of an interaction with trees, birds, bugs, place.

Here's an action shot of my man David Wilson, looking at windthrown trees around the time we were writing the book and creating the deck.

The point of this is not to say that this doesn't work as a divinatory system. It does. But Rider-Waite-Smith or the Marseille have enough distance to be purer systems for that. This deck's function is to show how meaning can be discovered or layered into a landscape, and how you can interact with it



Four of Wands

The Tulip Poplar was the first tree species I learned as a kid. We had one growing in my backyard. They remind me of my parents' home.

Rachel Pollack's divinatory notes reference the stability of fours. The art of her Shining Tribe deck features a tree-lined happy home. That's the interpretation that grabs me. But others are of celebration and transition – like graduation or initiation to adulthood.



Five of Wands

Tamarack or Eastern Larch. This is a northern tree, more comfortable near the boreal forests of Canada. Glacial kettlebogs in Ohio are some of the southernmost range for these trees. This photo is Kent Bog by Jim McCormac, a naturalist who is one of my inspirations in Ohio. You can read about Tamarack here:

<http://jimmccormac.blogspot.com/2014/10/a-pictorial-stroll-through-kent-bog.html>

A lot like the Hemlock in the Two of Wands, these trees exist in a world that is changing around them. They're part of the change, but also subject to it. The glaciers are gone and they're still here, clinging to an old way in a new world.



Five of Wands

The fives across all the suits are supposed to be about struggle. A common interpretation of five of wands is competition or conflict. But I took a different approach with "Confusion" referring to an internal struggle between competing aspects of ourselves.

Embodying the confusion theme, the Tamarack is a deciduous conifer. They have needles like a pine or a spruce, but they turn yellow and shed in the fall. All winter, they are as bare as any tree in the landscape. The image in the deck is of the turn from green to gold.



Six of Wands

Real talk: I think the selection of the Ohio Buckeye, *Aesculus glabra* and the choice of “Success, Momentum” is some kind of college football thing? I'm not even a fan. But no data are irrelevant. The interpretations of this card are positive and successful.

That said, I don't relate to this card. Some unresolved Gen-X grunge, Kurt Cobain tormented-by-success thing going on here.

When we were creating this analysis as a thread on Twitter, my pal [Michelle](#) pointed out that the buckeyes are crazy poisonous, so if you're struggling with the overwhelmingly positive interpretation, you can think about “toxic success” (which also feels like a good descriptor of the Ohio State football thing).



Seven of Wands

Our Seven is the Sassafras Tree. It's blooming, like a single match lit in the wind.

The term courage has a Midwestern-ethos here, that chip we carry on our collective shoulders (Just a Kid from Akron, Ohio Against the World, etc).

Weirdly, courage for me is connected to scent. Sassafras smell amazing. Aromatic trees and plants give me energy and happiness. Look up the Athelas flower from the Lord of the Rings.



Eight of Wands

Sycamore. Annie Dillard mentions it may be one of the most intrinsically beautiful words in the English language. I spent dark days of my life, from a mental health standpoint, on the Cuyahoga River, looking at the bright white sycamore trunks shining against a dark northeast Ohio winter sky. Awe at that beauty helped. Talking about that beauty I find in the world is my purpose.

The image is the silhouette of the Bath Road Heronry, a spot on the Cuyahoga where the Great Blue Herons would gather each spring to mate and raise chicks. It was such a good place to watch birds. I'm also attracted and repulsed by the idea that mating and producing offspring is our "purpose".



Nine of Wands

The Eight and the Nine of Wands – Sycamore and Beech, have this relationship that I'm noticing echoes in areas of my divination, and the patterning I notice in my life (we can dive into whatever the hell that is later). It's a structure of near-echoes, they'd call them near rhymes in poetry. There's a sort of synch that's slightly off. A way that the orbits overlap just off-center. They're close to each other, mimicking. Dancing next to each other and then moving away. The trees (Sycamores and Beeches) are like that for me, and so are the card meanings of purpose and perseverance. They're linked together.



Nine of Wands

The Nine of Wands shows this struggle toward success. Clashing Wands, climbing toward the light. The Wild Unknown image really nails this theme. Our card is based off the image of my son climbing the root wad of a giant beech tree. The tree in the card image is holding the banks on a river, persevering. The day I wrote these interpretations, I visited some beech trees in North Carolina and noticed excellent visual matches to the crossed staves rising towards flames. Also reminders of acts of perseverance, like marcescence (holding leaves through winter) and the beech's role in anchoring the soil to the ground.

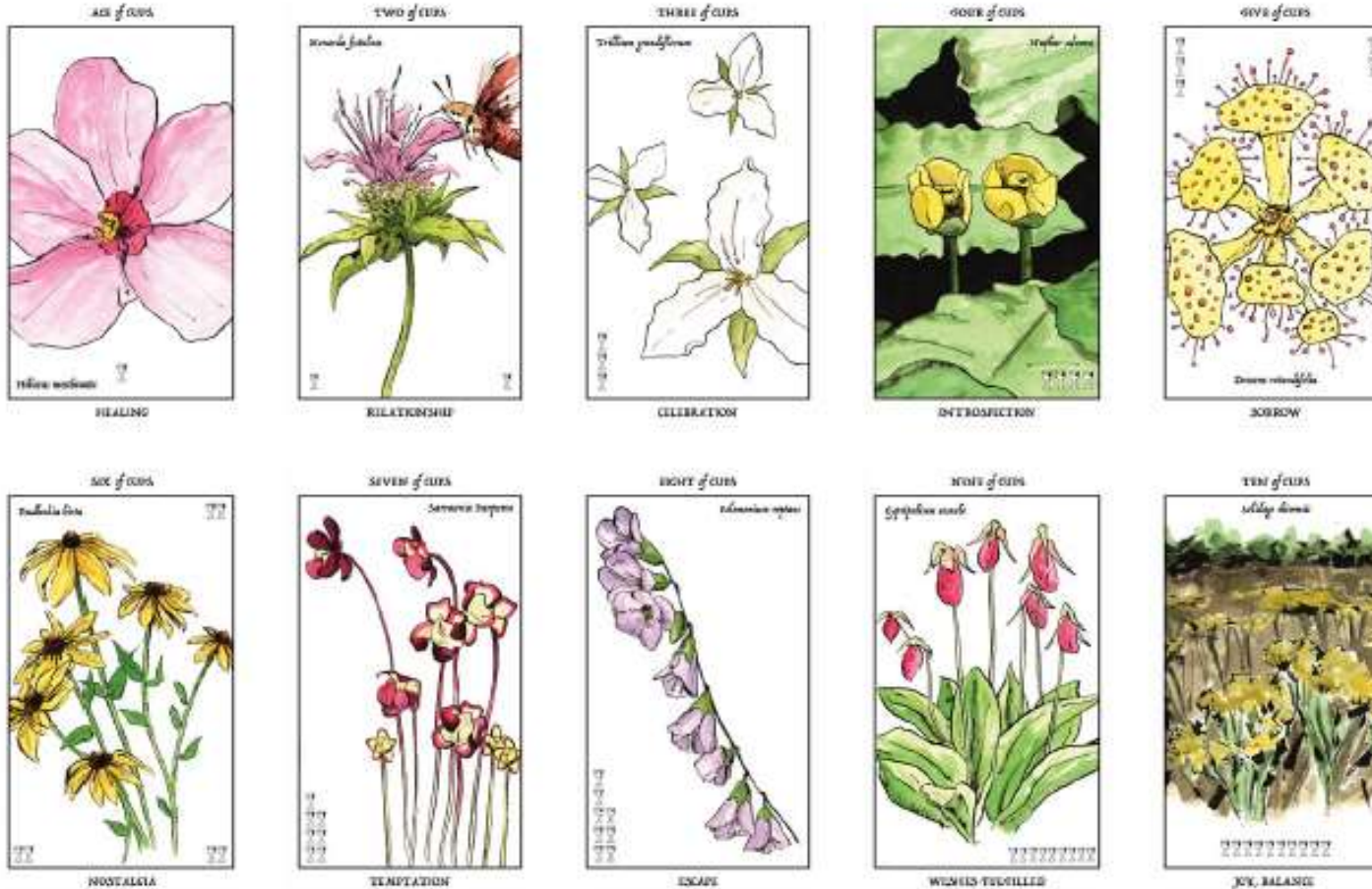


Ten of Wands

The Ten of Wands is a difficult card. David's art nails it though. It's this conflicted, tangled darkness. The oak in this picture is almost cringing into itself in pain. The image is based on a 600-yr old white oak in New Jersey that was dying. The message is sorrow, not necessarily tragedy.

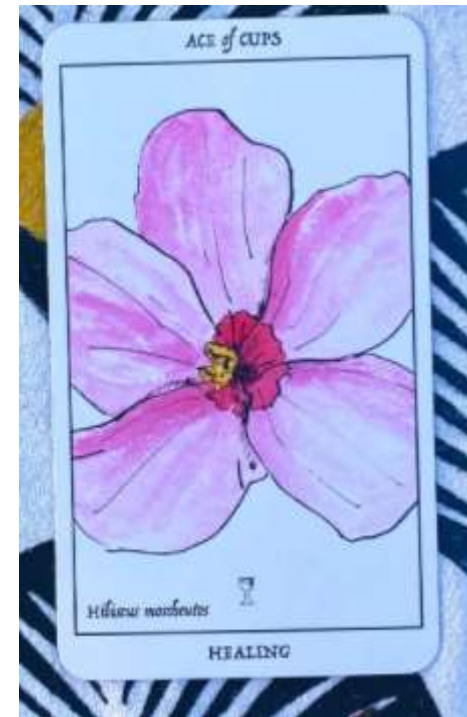


Cups reference the emotional landscape. If Wands are thinking, these are feeling; subconscious



Ace of Cups

Swamp Mallow. Our Ace of Cups is thematically similar to other decks. A single open vessel. David's image feels exposed, puckered. The phrase is healing and the first step in healing is to flush the wound. Swamp Mallow lives along the rivers in the eastern half of the U.S. and really fit the big cup Ace vibes. I draw this card for myself often and to be honest, it's a little bit of a blind spot. Like, I'm sure I need to heal, to open up. But how?



Two of Cups

Our Two of Cups features wild bergamot or bee balm and a clear-wing hummingbird moth, seeking nectar deep with its proboscis. The card is a depiction of the pollination and feeding; sex and food mixing together in a multi-species relationship, a very horny card. It's a summer card, sun and warm skin. I love these insects and grow these flowers for tea and have a lot of love for this pairing.



Three of Cups

The Great Trillium celebrates spring, release from winter. The trillium grows in moist woods usually older beech and maple forest areas. They spread their seeds through a process called myrmecochory, which is Greek for Ant Dance! The flowers produce seeds with rich fatty rinds that the ants carry away and eat, leaving the seeds to germinate. They don't carry them very far. Botanists are trying to piece together how these plants spread so far after the last ice age.



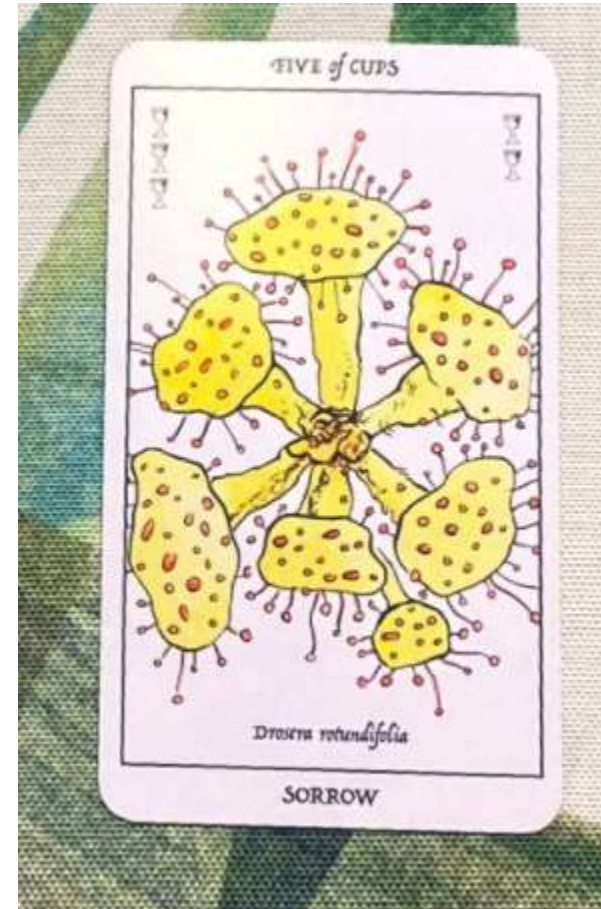
Four of Cups

This is one of the dark cards in the deck, from a color standpoint. That doesn't mean scary, or bad. It's a generative darkness. Look at the other dark cards to see how that works. There is something unknown, but important. The species is Spatterdock. In the Cuyahoga Valley, spatterdock dominates wetland areas and the canal along the river. It provides a lot of beauty, but also covers the water, blocks out light. The card notes the need or the co-presence of darkness to gain insight. This is one of the cards we revised in the latest version. So many other four of cups feature very specifically "FOUR" images, so we created a mirror of the spatterdock flowers in the water. I love that symbolism.



Five of Cups

Roundleaf Sundew is a carnivorous plant that lives in wetlands in Ohio and its strategy for acquiring prey is brutal, elegant. It attracts insects to its sweet sticky arms, traps them, and eventually dissolves the insect's proteins and nutrients. That feels like sorrow for me, something I need to carefully avoid. Because if one sticking tentacle touched me, I'd be trapped and miserable.



Six of Cups

Black eyed Susan is one of my mother's favorite flowers and it blooms just as summer almost imperceptibly turns toward fall. Some people can get trapped in nostalgia, but I think it's a way to bring something beautiful from your past into the future. I started analyzing this card after I flipped through old fishing photos; I like feeling these syncs. Nostalgia is beautiful and seductive. It reminds me of people I love, places, past versions of myself. I don't think it's especially dangerous. I think it's a way to build your memory into a shape that is beneficial, remediating and validating your past versions of yourself. There are obviously traps here too, but I think it can be healing. Obviously, there is a dark side. I am a rich, middle-age CIS white dude defending nostalgia. There are obviously lots of cruel shitty folks wishing for an imaginary past. But we should try to look at nostalgia also as an act of imagination, an act of love.



Seven of Cups

This is one of the quirks of this deck. I think we're on the third or fourth printing. When it first came out, we noticed that the Latin names of these two species were paired with the wrong image. We fixed it once, maybe twice. But somehow this error crept back in during production. While these plants don't look alike, the meanings swirl in a way that is significant. There is a trick, a trap laid in with the wish fulfillment. When I was reviewing the minor arcana for the 2021 re-release, we figured out why the error kept creeping back in. The names weren't transposed. The images were. The Seven of Cups should have been the pitcher plant flowers. The pitcher plant is this tempting trap for insects. The pink lady's slipper this stunning orchid. But look again! There are seven blossoms on the orchid, nine flowers from the pitcher! I've grown to love this mistake. We've swapped the images where they were "supposed" to be. So for this version, Seven of Cups is the Pitcher Plant. Also, this would not qualify as a metaphysical text without me claiming my fuckups are in fact spiritually significant experiences.



Eight of Cups

This card feels appropriate as we hit the 1-year mark on the pandemic. All of the eights in our deck feel like they call to it: The confinement, seeing beyond the mundane to our greater purpose, turmoil turning to stability as emergency conditions drag on. The 8 of Cups from other decks depict sorrow in leaving behind something you worked so hard to build. There is a lot of regret in other decks' depictions. But it's not a disaster to realize what you thought was so important was not. It's incredibly freeing. Our card features a spring wildflower called Jacob's Ladder. The name comes from the shape of the leaves, resembling a ladder to heaven that Jacob saw in a dream. Our card refers to escape of the physical realm toward something sacred.



Nine of Cups

This card refers to wishes fulfilled. Something in the wish fulfillment in this card comes from taking what you want. There's a little violence to it, a shadow. All of the Nines in this deck have this aspect. I mentioned previously that there is a trapdoor to the Seven. In some versions of this deck you see the flowers of the pitcher plant, rising up above the vase-shaped vessel that they plant uses to trap insects to live. The current iteration features these gorgeous Lady Slippers. Here they are in the Cedar Bog in central Ohio (Photo by A.L. Gibson

<http://floraofohio.blogspot.com/2012/06/s/howy-ladys-slippers-of-cedar-bog.html>)



Ten of Cups

It's wild to see our seasonal affective disorder on display in the 10 of Cups. There's a finality to all that personal growth and joy. You're heading towards winter when you see goldenrod. Look how drab our idea of joy is compared to the other Tens of Cups. There's a grimness to the region. The species in our card is Ohio Goldenrod. They're prolific at the end of summer. The meaning of the card is joy. But an ending is present with all of the 10s. There's a sweetness in fleeting time. But a sorrow in what is to come. These opening lines from Cleveland Poet Dave Lucas' "Lines for Winter" from his collection *Weather* speaks to me:

Poor muse, north wind, or any god
who blusters dusk-bleak across the lake
and sows the earth earth-deep with ice.



Swords shift from introspection to action, moving to animal experiences of the landscape



Ace of Swords

The Great Horned Owl; Perceiving.
I've had the dead-on stare of an owl tattooed on my back since I turned 18. It's a terrible tattoo, but the image of the owl looking through you is embedded in my psyche. There's something frightening about the directness of that stare. I'm terrified of being perceived. All of the owls watch the threshold of knowing and unknowing in this deck. Poet Mary Oliver writes of the Great Horned Owl "If one of those should touch me, it would touch the center of my life and I must fall."



Two of Swords

We chose the Common Loon for the Two of Swords. If you've been anywhere near the business end of one of these birds, you know why we chose it. The Thoth and Haindl decks associate this card with Peace. But I much prefer Benebell Wen's take in *Holistic Tarot* that it is about choosing between bad options. When the Loons come through Cleveland, to the Lake Erie in late fall feeding on the abundant baitfish, they too are choosing between difficult conditions. I can't imagine the difficulty deciding if Erie is going to freeze up, if you'll be able to find food or open water if you wait. Loons are heavier than most birds, and the decision to move to another body of water can't be taken lightly.



Three of Swords

Sometimes the cards can be loud. I pulled this card the week after the Capitol riots. Sometimes the species carries a lot of baggage. We chose the Bald Eagle because they're assholes, snatching food from each other, from other birds. Raptors can get their talons tangled in aerial battles and fall out of the sky. Strife comes from the same root as strive – I like to think it relates here, trying to get ahead while also contributing to one's own misery and downfall.



Four of Swords

All of the Fours in this deck are related to the idea of “home”. Considering that nighthawks travel such huge distances for migration, I wonder how the concept of home feels for them. Maybe it feels like home wherever they get to rest on the ground. I asked you to imagine what it feels like to be a nighthawk. The point of this deck and book is to encourage you to embody aspects of your landscape, to feel what its like to be them. Even people who don't have an esoteric/divinatory practice might meditate on a tarot card a day. They ponder it, embody that card's meaning or existence. That's journeying, but with Rust Belt Arcana you get to do it also with the landscape. So let's rest together. Let's imagine lying in soft grass, feeling still, a belly full of insects holding us down to the warm, quiet ground.



Five of Swords

The pair of pileated woodpecker adults fight off the rat snake attempting to eat their fledglings. There must be some ancestral trauma in my past with snakes. One third of all humans have ophidiophobia. Maybe I read too much *Rikki Tikki Tavi* at a young age. When I look at the other decks Five of Swords I see defeat, competition, mistakes of overreach. I have adversary written in our card, and think it refers not to a specific opponent, but also an error made when facing an opponent. I wonder what choices the woodpecker parents made that allowed the snake in their midst. In our card the woodpeckers have made a harmful mistake, but the situation is still unfolding. They still have options. This image was inspired by a grim video of a pair of pileateds driving a large snake from a nest with hammering beaks. In all of the 5s in our deck. I see confusion, entrapment. I see confusion as a way to avoid being accountable. The confusion in the fives is genuine, but maybe self-generated. The risks are obvious. Acting confused about the outcomes isn't helping.



Six of Swords

These wood ducks glide away in a temporarily flooded woodland. It's a quiet place, and they are seeking to get even further away from the noise and commotion. There is a tinge of something dark in this card. It doesn't look like a happy silence. It may be the darker companion to the Lovers from the Major Arcana. The silence seems to be in the wake of an act of violence.



Seven of Swords

Our card features the Black Crowned Night Heron. Its scientific name means “night raven” and if you’ve heard one calling you understand. This one is stalking a sand dune on the Lake Erie shore for something to eat. There are a couple very different interpretation themes; we’ve chosen the careful predator sneaking. The other interpretation is futility; and it feels like the other side of the same relationship. You’ve created defenses that don’t work. I am happy our deck asks you to identify with the opportunistic hunter creatively navigating the world, not the one trying to holding the world for themselves. It’s more fun. All of our sevens are predatory. When you look at the cards as ecological relationships, it lets you see the outcomes and meanings from multiple angles.



Eight of Swords

We chose the Chimney Swift for our Eight of Swords. There's a confinement and repetition, if you have watched these birds night after night funnel into their roosts in city chimneys, it's fascinating. Like us, they've found themselves increasingly trapped in cities. There aren't enough big hollow trees in the woods to support the big roosts now. But the birds can leave any time they like.



Nine of Swords

This may be my favorite art in the Minor Arcana, a northern shrike with an impaled prey item. Some folks suggest Shrike's impale their prey so it is easier for them to manipulate with their beaks. Others think it serves as a larder for busier breeding times.

Ornithologists recently split the North American shrike population into its own species, so for the new edition we're updating the Binomial Latin name. The Nine of Swords is about loss, but also the experience of being tormented by that loss. The experience of pain and cruelty displayed

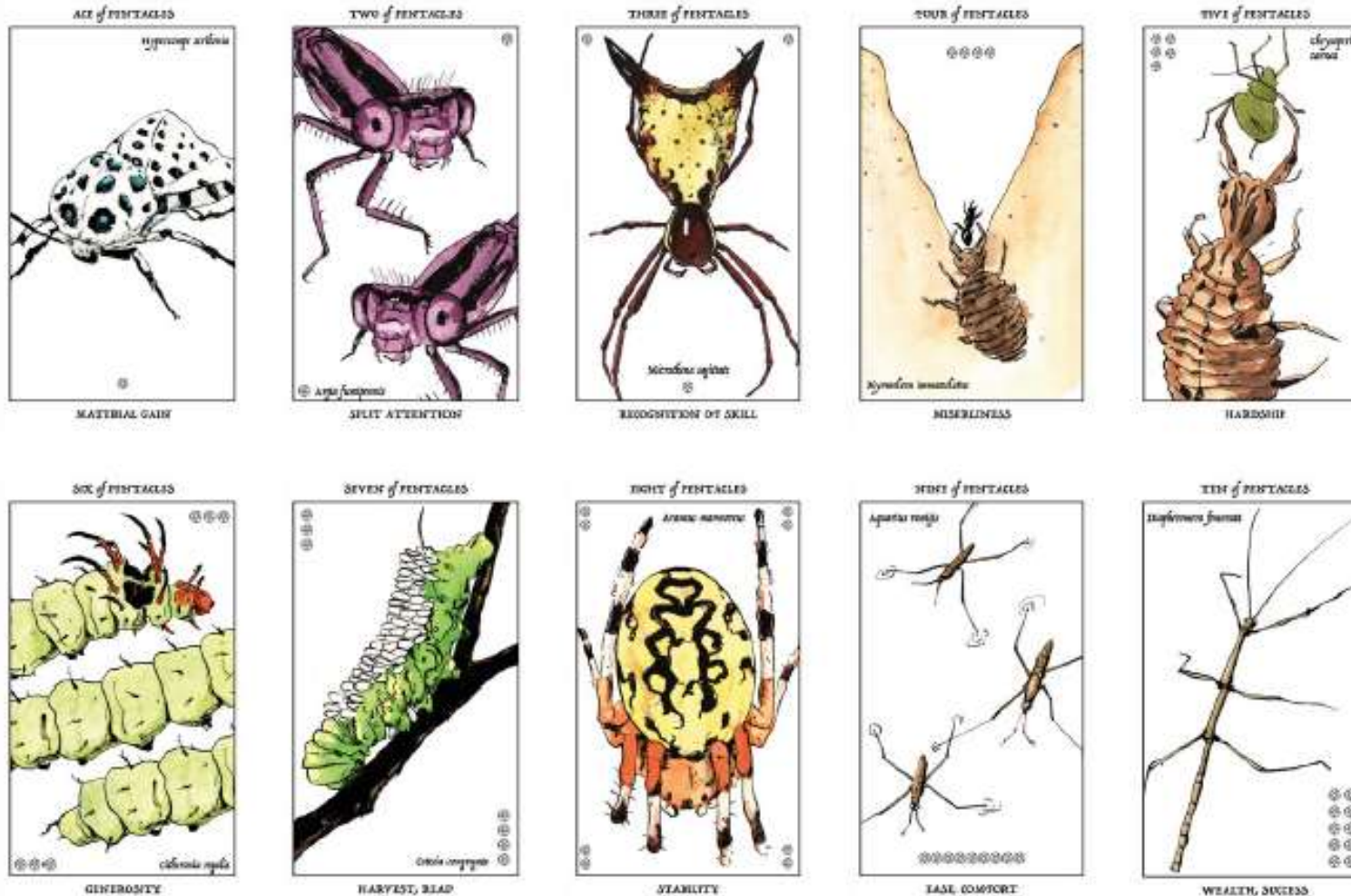


Ten of Swords

In *Holistic Tarot*, Benebell Wen described this card as sudden misfortune and defeat, and in reversal it can mean renewal, healing. I wanted to show they were both right there all the time, two sides of the same coin. For the turkey vultures, misfortune of the deer is a windfall. I keep coming back to the idea that the deck shows relationships that allow you to view the reversals and upright meanings as perspectives on scenarios, not fixed outcomes.



Wands = thought, Cups emotion, and Swords action; Pentacles represent material conditions



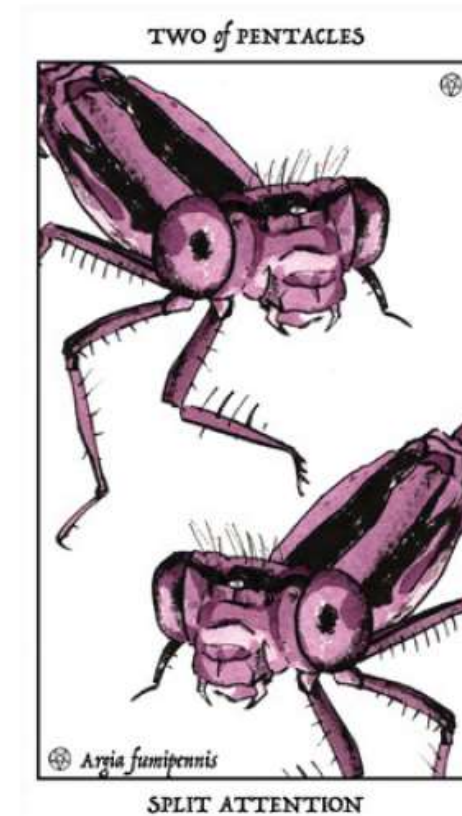
Ace of Pentacles

I found a giant leopard moth once just hanging out on the vinyl siding of my house in Ohio looking like this. Very striking animals. The interpretations are an inheritance, business success, material gain. I imagined a rich bug and this leopard moth came to mind. We picked arthropods (basically anything with an exoskeleton so I could include spiders) for this suit and it feels like a good fit because there seems to be a lack of emotion in the insect's demeanor, or at least its connection to us, vs a mammal or a bird.



Two of Pentacles

Our deck features a pair of violet dancer damselflies. It's an odd crop, zooming in on their heads, but I love the hairs popping out the top. The focus on the faces signals watchfulness. You're juggling, balancing with this card. Damselflies ALWAYS have their head on a swivel. They're paying attention to being both prey and predator, they are also thinking about finding a mate. They juggle that interface of air, land and water. Multitasking, doing it all. We know the upsides and the downsides here all too well.



Three of Pentacles

The Arrow-shaped micrathena spiders members of a group of wildly shaped orb weavers. This card matches up well with another “three” in the deck, The Empress. The Three of Pentacles is a generative card. I’m constantly walking into their micrathena webs in the woods. They seem to span huge distances between trees, building their home and hunting territories. I draw this card for myself in relation to fishing, tying flies.



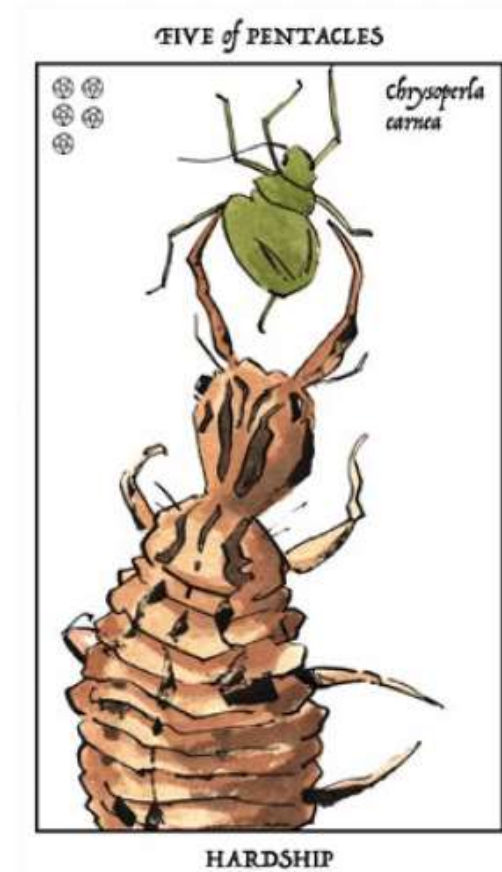
Four of Pentacles

All of the Fours in Rust Belt Arcana have strong dad energy. The Antlion in ours has created a pit trap for its prey. The antlion demonstrates a power differential you see in a lot of the other Four of Pentacles, and I like how it's buried in the earth. This card can be a warning about someone who is controlling. Or it could show our own possessive desire to hold onto our gains. Success and fear of loss linked. We're all rooting for the ant to get away in this image.



Five of Pentacles

Hardship indeed. This card has given me trouble. We feature here a green lacewing larvae feeding on an aphid. But the art looks too much like the antlion on the previous card; the tan bug, the pinching mandibles. So without re-doing the painting, how do we fix it? For the new edition we're flipping the image. The Lacewings hunt in 360-degrees; I've watched them often hunting on the bark of trees. I like the idea of "Hardship" descending from the top of the frame, miserliness coming from within/below. What's up with that round aphid booty? I want to pinch it myself.



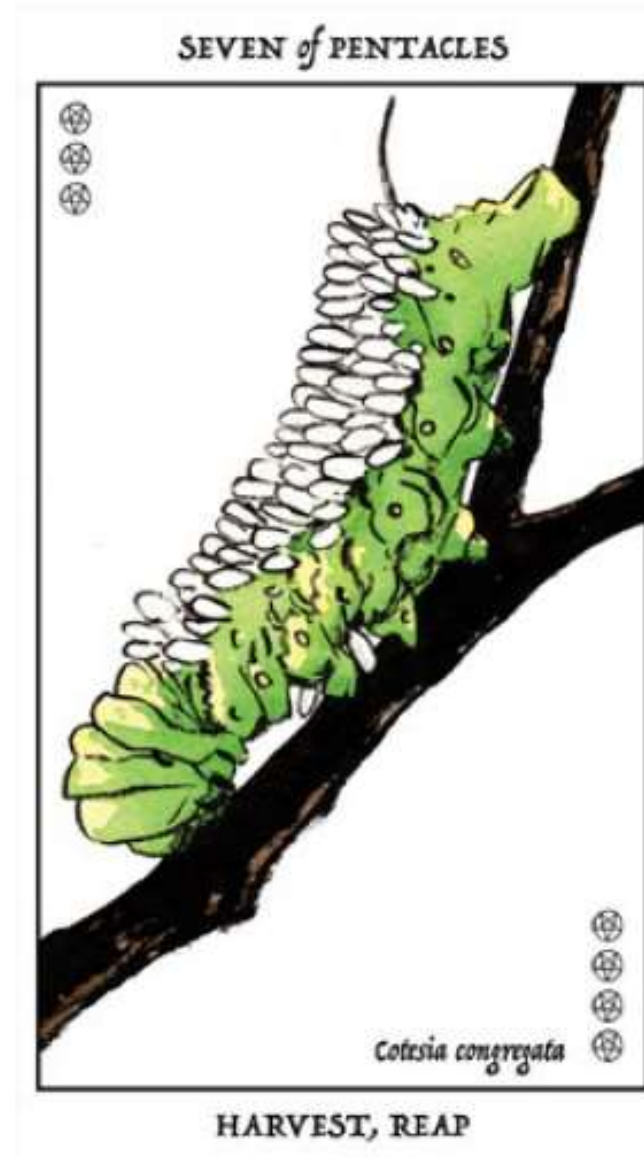
Six of Pentacles

All of the sixes in our deck have some aspect of “relationship” to them. In the Six of Pentacles case, it’s a relationship about an exchange of abundance. These horned hickory devil caterpillars exchange walnut and hickory tree leaves into insect flesh. They grow to the size of a goddamn hot dog. They will pupate and become gorgeous Regal Moths.



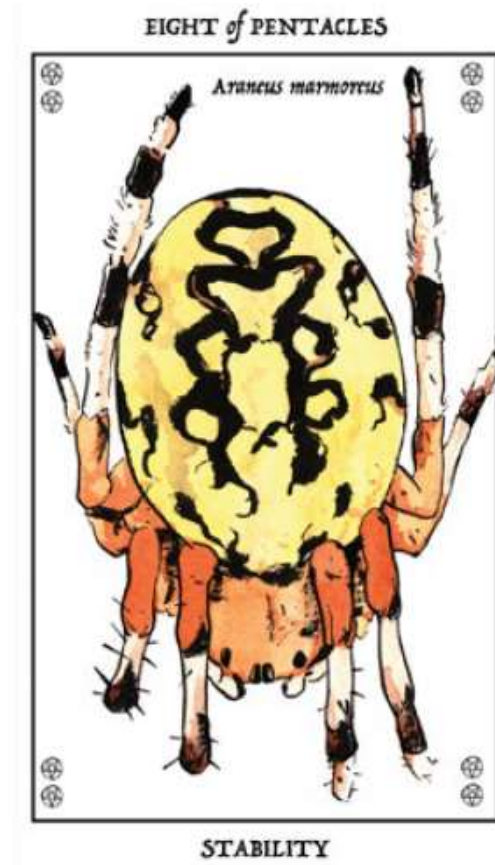
Seven of Pentacles

The follow on to the huge caterpillar in Six, the Seven features another caterpillar, this time being devoured. The card features a beleaguered tobacco hornworm caterpillar, but that's not the species referenced; rather the Latin name refers to the white parasitic wasp larvae attached to the worm's back. The wasps have invested effort into and planting offspring into its body. The subversion of the parasite narrative suggests and uneasy harvest.



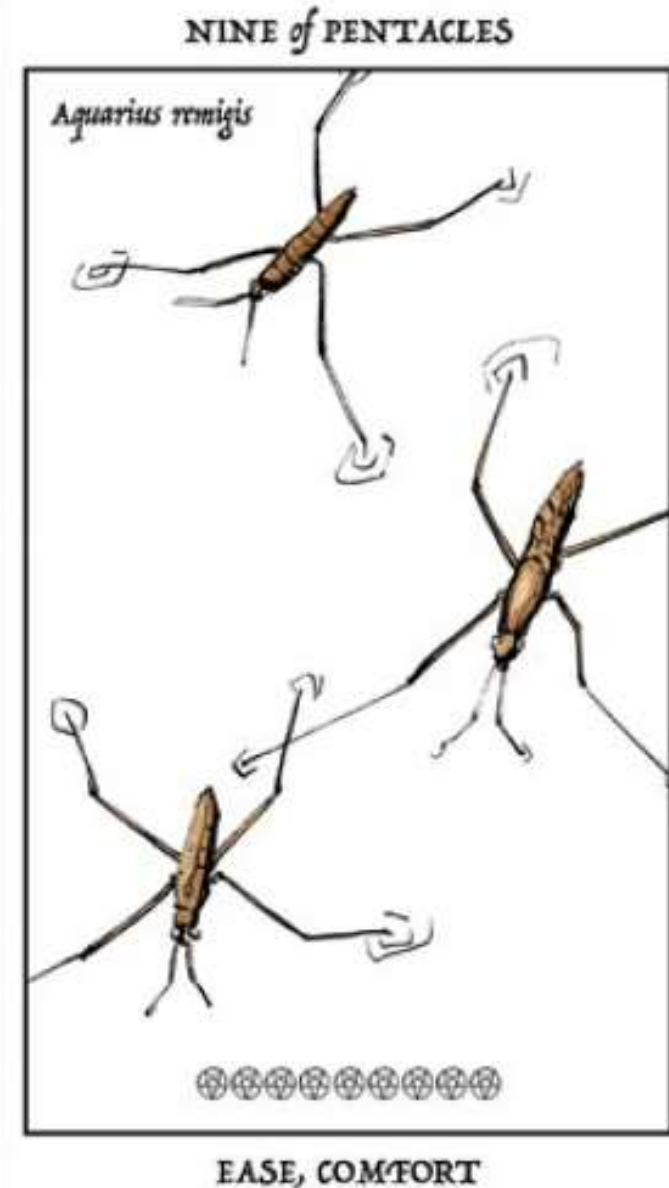
Eight of Pentacles

Our Eight of Pentacles is the Marbled Orb Weaver, a big late-season spider you might see at your house. There's a link to our other spider in 3 of Pentacles; they're both about skill, but the 8 feels more stable. I've seen the opposite take in *Holistic Tarot*, but I disagree on this point. Look at the other decks, you'll see structure and stacked disks. Also these spiders mean you're getting to the end of the year, they're mature, solid.



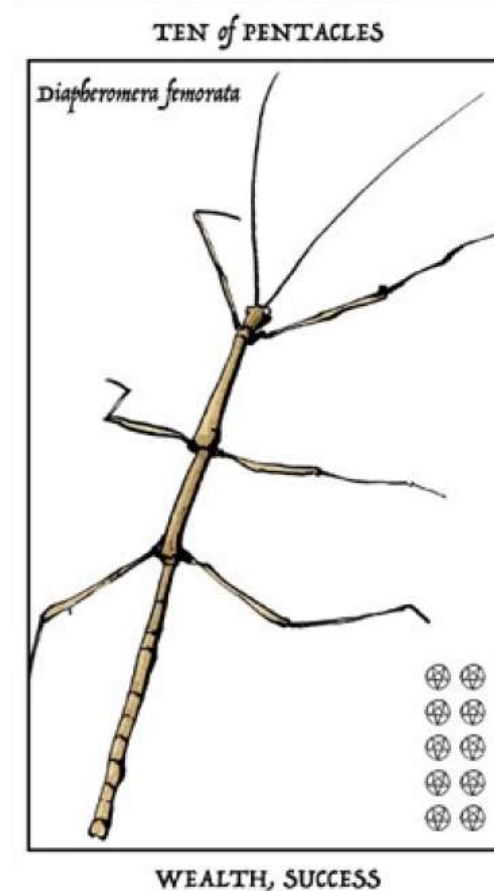
Nine of Pentacles

Nine of Pentacles is a water strider, a common predatory insect on lakes and rivers around the Midwest. They feed on mosquito larvae and any insect trapped on the water's surface. This has the abundance of summer, living the good life. It's not just gain, but also not having to work that hard for it. Water stridin', picking more tomatoes than you'll know what to do with. It's a confident card.



Ten of Pentacles

Our card features the Northern Walking Stick. Despite my tendency to be outside looking for weird animals, I've only seen one once and it was amazing. They're most active late at night and spend most of their time high in the canopy so it's not surprising we don't see many of them. If you look at other decks' idea of wealth and success for this card, I feel that they are too busy, too much. I tried to find something more stripped down, something scaled to my idea of riches and success.



Rust Belt Arcana Court

We are dealing with the court cards separately from the pips. They're the most "human" cards in the deck. They often represent a person in the querent's life, or an aspect of yourself you need to see from a different angle. I chose people whose ideas were important to me during the time I was writing the book, selected quotes from them that matched the theme of the card, and species as well. Something about the term "page" felt off to me, so we replaced that term with Seer.

With four years hindsight, the deck and court are glaringly white. BIPOC folks are making homes in the natural sciences and literary communities, and I regret they aren't better represented here.



Court of Wands



A poet, a conservationist, an essayist and a comparative mythologist walk into a bar...

Seer of Wands

Are there trees near you, and does your own soul need comforting? Quick then - open the door and fly on your own heavy feet; the song may already be drifting away.

From "Such Singing in the Wild Branches"

Fire. Sexuality (young Mary Oliver could absolutely get it). This is someone growing and full of impetuous energy. The tree species behind her is a red oak, fast growing and long lived. I think the quote captures the sense of this character well.

SEER of WANDS



*Are there trees near you, and does your own soul
need comforting? Quick then - open the door and
fly on your heavy feet; the song may already be
drifting away.*

~ Mary Oliver



Knight of Wands

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

-Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac

We picked Aldo Leopold because the Knight of Wands is associated with an energetic character. I imagine Leopold moving around the country, hunting up and down hillsides. The quote is something I've been able to use to ground myself; a mantra to help prioritize and center myself in the world of seemingly difficult choices. The quote is less about the card, and more a balm for the knight. He bounds into the frame full of energy, desire for change. He needs grounding; the landscape is what grounds him. The tree species is black cherry



Queen of Wands

I like Jen Altman's Circadian Tarot description of this character: vibrant, seething with sexual energy, unwilling to compromise, a dangerous enemy.

When I was writing *Rust Belt Arcana* Annie Dillard was the dominant intellectual and spiritual influence on my life. Going through these cards has reminded me I need to go back and re-read the book that set me on the path I continue today (*A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*).

The tree is the cucumber magnolia.



King of Wands

King of Wands has positive male authority, someone who is the keeper of the archetypal stories. The close relationship with mythic time and mythic figures is what gives him authority and charisma. This is why we picked Joseph Campbell. The quote on this card is from Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, an interview with Bill Moyers turned into a documentary and book. Campbell (and similarly Carl Jung) are impenetrable for me. Their insights are only available to me in less formal reflections, sideways, interviews, introductions. The quote highlights the fact that books are one of the most important things in my life. We need to see the dark side of this card. I was in my 30s when I noticed I did not have many folks in my personal 'canon' of authors that didn't look like Campbell. That risk of racism or misogyny is embedded in the card. We have to look at that clearly. The tree species is a black walnut, which releases a chemical below its canopy that blocks out all other plants from flourishing.



Court of Cups



Look how directly they stare at the querent. See the blossoming upward shape of the plants. The background feels darker than the backgrounds in the wands. Two poets, a botanist and a sentimental fly fisherman.

Seer of Cups

In the more traditional decks, this character seems to be looking into the mystery inside the cups. Some guides describe them as a creative and fragile person. The Seer of Cups is someone with a sense of awe. A need to worship. I was happily surprised to notice how prominent poetry is in the Court of Rust Belt Arcana. It's a big part of my life and I'm excited to see so much of it here in this project. Pattiann Rogers is one of the finest nature poets on the planet (though to limit her to that theme might be doing her disservice). The quote is from her poem "The Family Is All There Is" and it speaks to fascination and interconnection between all of our more than human lives. The flower is the Rue Anemone.



Knight of Cups

There is a self-absorption to this character that I find in myself, and I am ashamed of it. It's incredibly difficult to create anything in the imaginal (at least in the way that I do it) without isolation and self-reflection. To channel art requires time alone. It's a selfish act in a lot of ways. But the outcomes can be so beautiful and so important to so many folks. *The River Why* is one of my favorite novels and David James Duncan's writing on spirituality echoed my own anger and confusion.

The flower species is Hepatica.



Queen of Cups

If the Knight of Cups is aloof, the Queen is so very much of-this-world. I chose Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, one of my heroes for this card. Here she is holding her card, photo by my friend Gavin Van Horn. Dr. Kimmerer is an indigenous botanist and author of two of my favorite books, *Gathering Moss* and *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This is someone who knows how to live in relationship with the world. I chose apple moss for her species.



King of Cups

Robert Bly has defined so much of my idea of manhood, with *Iron John* and *Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*. Much of the time, I cannot see myself clearly. There are so many things I avoid looking at, because I don't like the way they make me feel, I don't like how they reflect my own desires and fears and weaknesses. Bly asks you to look and to honor those things, and so does this character in the card. The flower is a snow trillium, a flower that reminds me of cold springs in the upper Midwest.



Court of Swords



If the Court of Cups looked at us with compassion, the Court of Swords' gaze feels expectant, challenging.

Seer of Swords

I spent my days at Kent State University studying poetry. Maggie Anderson taught there during my time, though I never had her as a professor. I came to love her poems. The Seer of Swords is a combative character in other decks.

I feel pleasant sorrow reading Maggie's poems, the kind of emotion that I can appreciate as a Midwesterner. Here is a favorite poem that was quoted on this card. <https://poets.org/poem/beyond-even>

The bird is a Canada Goose, a nod to the combative side of this card.

SEER of SWORDS

*There is such sorrow in these geese flying over,
trying to find a place to land in the miles of
parking lots that once were soft wetlands.*
~ Maggie Anderson



Knight of Swords

I heard Mitch Horowitz mention on Against Everyone with Conner Habib, one of the universal aspects of human existence is how we all assume we are “right” that we all have an inherent belief that our own perspective is correct. The Knight of Sword is an extreme version of this. I first read Derrick Jensen in Orion magazine and he stirred something in me. I wanted to fight. To throw myself into the teeth of the machine to protect the animals and places I loved. I’m no longer a Derrick Jensen fan. I would recommend listening to Conner’s 100th episode on creating an Autobiography of Ideas. He talks about Jensen in this episode. But it is also a very good exercise to look at your own “court” of people and ideas that form your inner landscape.

<https://connerhabib.com/2020/02/27/how-to-write-an-autobiography-of-ideas-on-aewch-100/>

The species is a red tailed hawk. This one inspired by an aggressive hawk that wanted to fight with me in a field one day, circling close, screeching as if it were going to plunge into my arms.

KNIGHT of SWORDS

*We must put our bodies and our lives between
the industrial system and life on this planet.
We must start to fight back.*

~ Derrick Jensen



Queen of Swords

I'm going to let [Rachel Carson's biographer Linda Lear](#) speak here:

“Perhaps the finest nature writer of the Twentieth Century, Rachel Carson (1907-1964) is remembered more today as the woman who challenged the notion that humans could obtain mastery over nature by chemicals, bombs and space travel than for her studies of ocean life. Her sensational book *Silent Spring* (1962) warned of the dangers to all natural systems from the misuse of chemical pesticides such as DDT, and questioned the scope and direction of modern science, initiated the contemporary environmental movement.”

Queen of Swords is brilliant. Tireless. The bird species is the Peregrine Falcon, one of the raptors Carson's research saved.



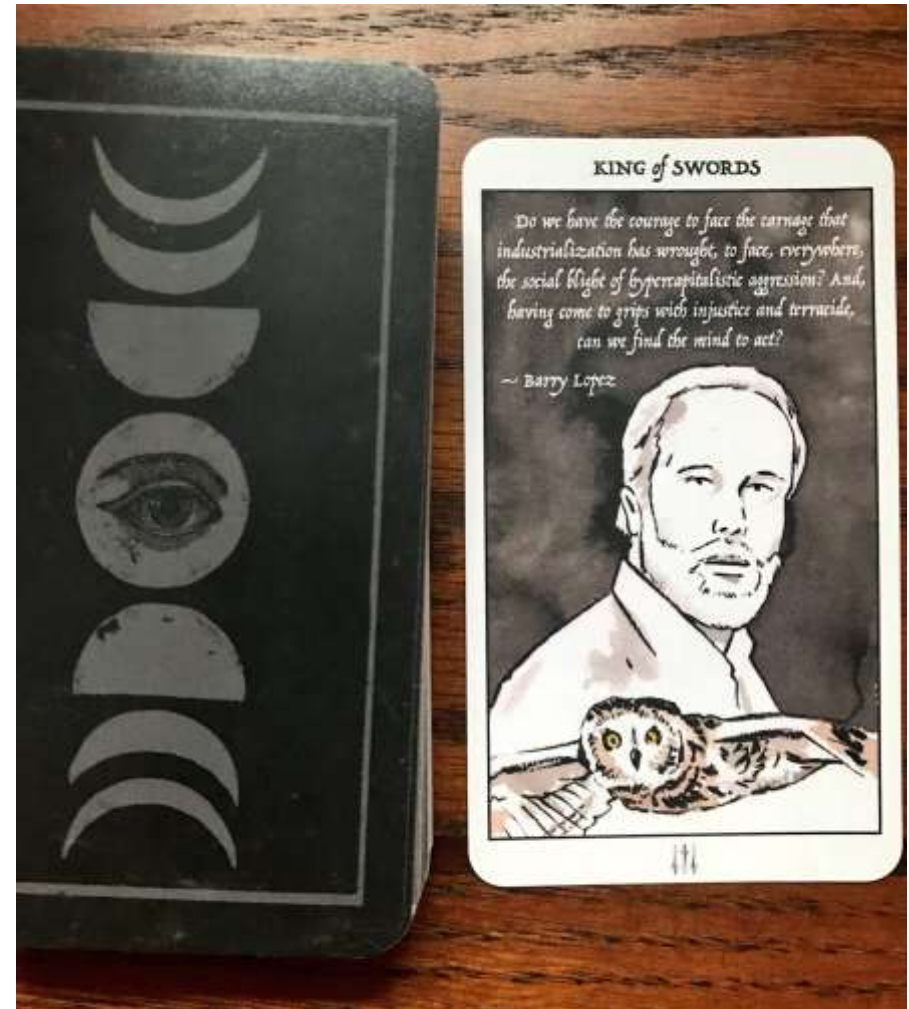
King of Swords

Barry Lopez was a personal hero of mine. I met him a decade ago and he signed books for my children. *Arctic Dreams* changed the trajectory of my life. He died in a town I love, Eugene Oregon, on Christmas day 2020.

The Knight of Swords sees the challenge ahead, sees our role in creating the problems we're struggling against.

A better future is not always something you can fight for, power-against-power. There is a call to observe, think, imagine a better way.

The species is a short-eared owl.



Court of Pentacles

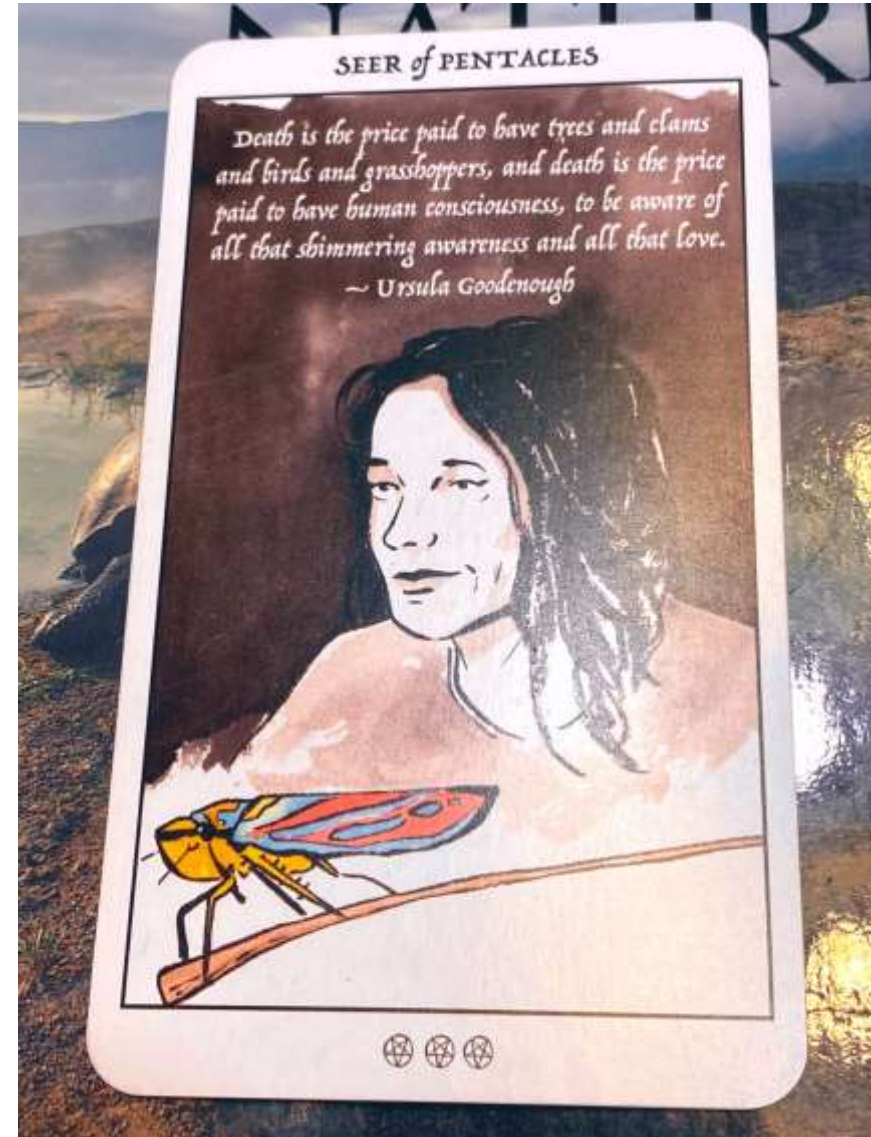


Each court seems to have a theme, something to teach us. The wands talk about how to think, the cups how to feel, the swords how to fight. These cards feel more practical, how to live well amidst chaos.

Seer of Pentacles

Seer of Pentacles has a scholarly streak. Successful. On a path to greatness. I feel like they're the kind of people who look at the world and see that Matrix code running behind it. Someone who follows wonder, sees it coming out of the ground, spinning, infinitely.

Our Seer of Pentacles is Ursula Goodenough, a cellular biologist who saw divinity in the patterns of biology. I felt like this card also deserved this amazing leafhopper. The quote describes how death creates the proliferation of life, how it functions to create more beauty.



Knight of Pentacles

Knight of Pentacles “is willing to give all his attention to his duties,” writes Rachel Pollack. This is someone who knows how to address the task at hand. The task at hand in this deck is connecting you with the more-than-human, and our inspiration for this card is Richard Louv. My 30s were shaped by Louv’s book, *The Last Child in Nature*, and the concept of the Family Nature Club. Unstructured, outdoor experiences with kids and the more-than-human may be the most blessed thing we can do. The image is a composite of Louv lecturing, but the kid with the giant moth is from Mothapalooza, an amazing event in Ohio that connects people and moths.

KNIGHT of PENTACLES

Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature.

— Richard Louv



Queen of Pentacles

I like Pollack's take that this Queen is deeply connected to others but comfortable alone. There's abundance here, opulence even. Beauty. But also death (a running thread through this suit).

Our Queen of Pentacles is Ellen Meloy, and the quote is from her book *Eating Stone*. The insects are Burying Beetles, one of the many species that were once everywhere but now fading fast. I really love this remembrance of Meloy by Annie Proulx [https://lithub.com/annie-proulx-on-freewheeling-nature-writer-ellen-meloy/...](https://lithub.com/annie-proulx-on-freewheeling-nature-writer-ellen-meloy/)

QUEEN of PENTACLES

Homo sapiens have left themselves few places and scant ways to witness other species in their own worlds, an estrangement that leaves us hungry and lonely. In this famished state, it is no wonder that when we do finally encounter wild animals, we are quite surprised by the sheer truth of them.

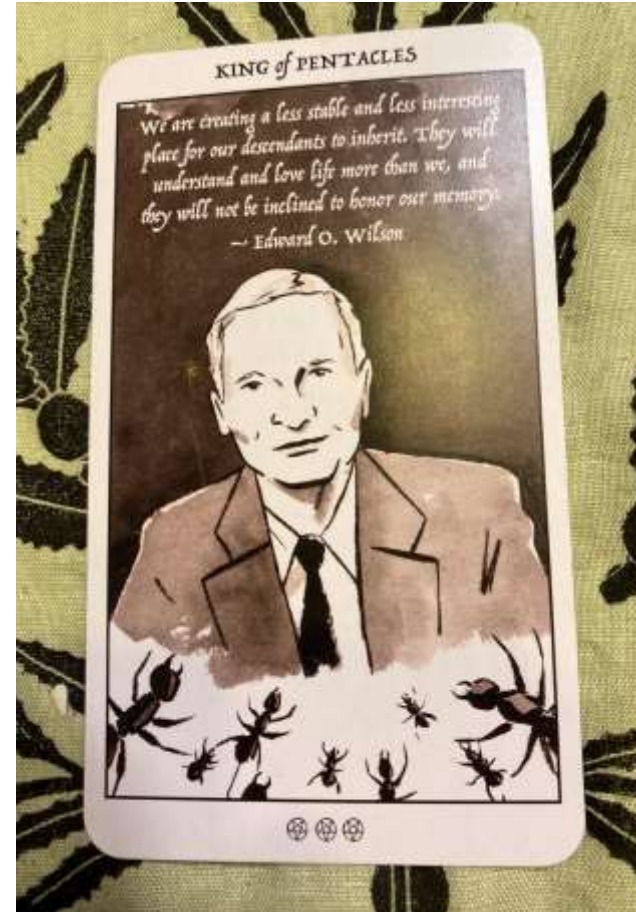
~ Ellen Meloy



King of Pentacles

The King of Pentacles is the pinnacle of worldly achievement. In our deck full of moths and poets and geese, that has a slightly different expression, so go with me here. Financially successful, stable.

Our King Edward O. Wilson is professor emeritus at Harvard, nominated for National Book Awards, blurbed by Al Gore, obsessed with ants. And yet, finds himself often asked to opine on the nature of creation and meaning, Saints, Ayahuasca and human spirituality. Truly a king!



A Spread for Rust Belt Arcana

Thank you for reading.

When we created the Rust Belt Arcana Tarot Deck, we also created a new spread -- a method to lay the cards out for a reading. There are hundreds of possible patterns and spreads for folks to choose from when doing cartomancy, but ours symbolizes our inspiration, the Great Lakes. This six-card spread works as both a self-read, and when reading for someone else.

This spread helps us look at how our identity and circumstance shape our lives and decisions.

The Great Lakes flow like a river toward the Atlantic Ocean, and this tarot spread begins by identifying the shoaling or conflicting urges that make up who we are. The shape roughly resembles Lake Superior and is two cards because we are always ensnared by our duality, and because Superior contains more water than all the other Great Lakes combined. This section asks us how our identity will shape the outcome of our query.

From our identity, the spread flows into the boundaries, the circumstances of our lives that at least partially define and constrain our choices. Lake Michigan and Lake Huron vertically straddle the mitten of Michigan.

Flowing east through the Detroit River, we find Lake Erie, the most fertile and biodiverse of all the Great Lakes, we look for our source of energy and inspiration.

Finally the spread flows over Niagara Falls and into Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River -- providing insight into the outcome.

