Welcome to the Student Poetry Trail. Here you can find the student poems that feature on the trail (shown in green) and extra poems from students at the University and beyond. The plant profiles have been kindly supplied by Anne Thomas from the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Cambridge.

**Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Worplesdon’**

Renowned for its vivid, multicoloured autumn foliage and valuable hardwood, *Liquidambar styraciflua* has a large collection of descriptive common names, including ‘American sweetgum’, ‘hazel pine’, ‘satin-walnut’, ‘redgum’, ‘star-leaved gum’ and ‘alligator wood’. It can be identified via its star-shaped leaves and spiky, spherical pods that dry out and release minute winged seeds (popular snacks for finches and squirrels). The Botanic Garden specimen located near the lake is a cultivar called ‘Worplesdon’ with especially deep-cut leaves, positioned to reflect its autumn glory in the water.

Further information:
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/gardens-plantings/trees/liquidambar/

**Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Worplesdon’**
I know it wasn't you
But the way people look for an ex in the crowd is how I am about red trees
My parents planted one in the front and the back of our house when I was born
And I grew up with these trees, who were always just a bit taller than me
They died when I left for college—I never knew their names because my grandma didn't
Teach us what she knew
So I sit in your shade and try not to make metaphors about roots
On closer inspection, I realise you’re star-spangled, like my passport
That you’re the bright red of the drive up to New York every academic year
Now, as the Sugar Maple recedes north, I flew east, and ran into you
(Rachel Plasky)

**Two Haiku for a Sweetgum**
Green meditation
Gazing in the water still
All it sees is green
*
A wildfire rages
Flames glittering in the lake
Burn unquenchable
(Toby Lawrence)
**Vitex negundo var. heterophylla**

*Vitex negundo var. heterophylla*, or the ‘cut-leaved chaste tree’ is not really a tree, but a large shrub. Its deeply lobed leaves are aromatic, a hallmark of the Lamiaceae family, and used in traditional medicine in Southeast Asia. Although *Vitex* is a largely tropical genus, this species can survive in temperate conditions and has become a popular ornamental plant with its pollinator-attracting violet-blue flowers.

Further information:
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/plant-list/vitex-negundo-var-heterophylla/

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**Vitex negundo var. heterophylla**
A temptress with a prudish name
Vitex the vixen earns her fame
Seducing butterflies with her sweet perfume
Revealing lavender petals when she blooms
Her alluring aroma of earth and sage
Attracts the attention of a mage
Who uses her fruit to squander
The lustful desires of eyes that wander
(Phoebe McElligott)

**Vitex negundo var. heterophylla**
Vesta breathed life into her;
She was plush fruit of Greece, or Rome,
Then Monk’s Pepper; seasoned liberally,
Swept floors, gathered in the places,
Between her virtue curing, curing,
Little lies
myth’s spies.
Now she, allure, the hive,
Paper butterflies and
Dusk moth
(Iris Rogers)
**Tahina spectabilis**

*Tahina spectabilis* is a large, critically endangered fan palm endemic to a small district of Madagascar, where a flowering individual was discovered by a cashew plantation owner in 2007. Botanists at Kew Gardens assigned the newly described species to its own genus, named *Tahina*, or “blessed,” after the daughter of the discoverer. It seems that the palm only flowers once, at the end of its 30-to-50-year lifespan. The palm dedicates all its remaining resources to generating a huge inflorescence, doubling its height, before dying. To guard against the so-called “suicide palm” going extinct in its tiny, vulnerable home range, seed was sold to palm collectors and botanic gardens such as Cambridge University. Meanwhile, the funds raised went toward protection efforts in Madagascar.

**Tahina spectabilis**
do not grieve me, child,
for this is my time,
from the springing
of my roots comes
crafts for the stars
and you, I have waited
for you, the stars have waited
for you, may you prosper
beyond your sowing,
may you witness your seeds.
(Yaning Wu)

**Tahina spectabilis**
Don’t act like you don’t get the glory of it:
You’re young and you drink too much
And you drive too fast and you take stuff
Your mother would shudder to think of,
And you barely eat or sleep but clothes
Always look fantastic on your body.
Your body is clearly a breakable thing,
Clearly a dying thing, but they can’t look away.
One day it’s still and cold but oh god
The pictures in the papers look beautiful.
(Elsie Hayward)

**Flowering Itself to Death**
At a tilt, like an orbit, as it drives into the cold:
But you are heat, a miracle of strength,
Who vanish in a hail of flowers, pouring out
Your self for the flies and the worms.
Webbed and fanned like sun rays, frayed
And propped against the glasspanes,
Bending low with fingers trailing,
We have bloomed us both unto annihilation.
(Aiden Gray)
Testrastigma voinierianum

Testrastigma voinierianum, also called ‘lizard plant’ or ‘chestnut vine,’ is a tropical climbing vine from the grape family, native to Vietnam and Laos. Its leaves are distinctively large and glossy with serrated edges, and oil-rich glands called pearl bodies may be found on the veins of some mature leaves. The Garden specimen is wrapped around a tree in the tropical glasshouse.

Testrastigma voinierianum
Twisting her body she climbs
spreading her winding tendrils
her vines rope their gloss
around the glass house
rendering lush
everything she touches
(Emma Gomis)
Ceiba pentandra

**Ceiba pentandra** is a large tropical tree that produces distinctive cotton-like seed fibre (a trait of Malvaceae, the mallow family), explaining its English common name, white silk-cotton tree, and Malay name, kapok, which also refers to the cotton. This fibre can be used in insulation, upholstery and buoyancy aids and has led to the tree’s cultivation throughout the tropics. The tree has large thorns on its trunk and buttress roots, and its night-blooming flowers are mainly pollinated by bats. It is among the largest trees found in Neotropical and African rainforests, growing up to 77 meters tall. The Cambridge specimen, however, must fit in the glasshouse.

**Ceiba pentandra**
There is a safety in softness.
Take the seeds before the wind gets them
And makes off with them into the blue,
And you will have what you need.
The truth is this earth loves you and I
Can prove it. Part of it is there with you
When you are far out at sea and wondering
Is this how I die, panicked, salty, exhausted, alone,
And if a miracle is tossed down to you, part
Comes from the earth’s own soft heart.
(Elsie Hayward)

**Ceiba pentandra**
in cotton clouds you are dreaming
about your far away home
so we should leave you alone
because you have thorns like a rose
you better not stand too close
because you will sting
you’re nobody’s plaything
(Nike Dreiss)

**Ceiba pentandra**
Two weeks ago I walked into Kew Gardens
and learned that the Great Cotton Tree of Sierra Leone originates from the Americas, Mexico, to be precise.
My ancestors, freed from shackles, and on boats back home, brought a tiny seedling across the seas, planted and nourished its roots, to grow a free town -
Today, the tree fell in a storm, supposedly an omen of things to come, but in the wind rustling around the trunk, I still hear rings of freedom’s song.
(Allie Bittar)
Although *Beaucarnea recurvata* is known as the ‘ponytail palm’, it’s not a true palm, but a member of the Asparagaceae family, like agave and asparagus. Its other common name, ‘*la pata de elefante*’ (elephant’s foot), refers to the shape of its wide, grey-barked base, or caudex, which can store water. The species is native to deciduous forests in Mexico, growing on rocky cliffs in Veracruz, and is critically endangered due to habitat fragmentation and over-collecting. However, it has a thriving *ex situ* population as an ornamental plant.

*B. recurvata*

*The Ponytail Palm*
*is not a palm at all,*
*but an elephant’s foot, caked in mud*
*spraying the tendrils and tendons of its leg*

*or perhaps, if you squint,*
*a caudex conduit, fountaining life*
*through deserted times,*

*and if you can manage to imagine,*
*picture the earthen ink well, housing a thousand pens*
*scribbling out lines,*

*writing their poetry on a clear, white sky.*
*(Toby Lawrence)*

*B. recurvata*

*La elefante*
*drags her swollen feet*
*& lets down her hair*
*baila en el viento*
*tethered by grey-weathered skin*
*her ponytail sways*
*(Emma Gomis)*
**Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Dawn’**

A hybrid of two species of *Viburnum* species, *V. farreri* and *V. grandiflorum*, the garden cultivar *Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Dawn’* is a winter-flowering shrub with dense, highly fragrant pink and white blooms and cinnamon-coloured bark, making it an attractive addition to the winter garden. It also has scarlet berries that ripen to black and leaves that turn bright red in autumn. The cultivar won the prestigious Award of Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society in 1947.

Further information:
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/plant-list/viburnum-x-bodnantense-dawn/

*Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Dawn’*

In winter, the very air grows teeth-jagged shards of ice that chill the wind through a million ghastly mouths. 
The trees shiver away their leaves. The sky lapses early into despondent night—
and yet sweetly, stately, the dawn blooms, in wilful pink, born blushing.
(Bella Rew)

*Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Dawn’*

Etiolate and titillate, 
White buds left blushing, 
Faint pride and strong humility, 
Beauty and bounty strive to overcome adversity. 
It is snowing. 
A gloved hand, 
Behind a lover’s ear, at a mother’s bosom, 
Alone does not mean lonely, 
Sun is coming up and snow is melting. 
The buds are bathed in dawn.
(Madeleine Caso)

**Dawn**

when all else sleeps in hibernation 
you bloom. in delicate blossoms of pink and white. 
child of pride, who lays by the stream 
in the lands of dragons. 
you, whose scent leads a frost-bitten bug 
to your flowering bud 
sunset-dipped. 
you who remains, 
an Arrow, to face the Dawn.
(Mingwei Lu)
Acer griseum

Acer griseum is a small maple native to China, but popular as an ornamental tree thanks to its intensely cinnamon-red, paper-thin bark that flakes and peels away from the wood, as well as its spectacular autumn foliage. Its species name refers to the downy grey underside of the young tree’s leaves. In its native range, a tendency toward parthenocarpy (production of fruit without viable seeds) and logging have rendered it endangered.

Further information:
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/plant-list/acer-griseum/

Acer griseum
Poor parchment kin,
I lament you, I do.
No eulogy, no lover’s note,
Would be enough for you.

Those with poems penned,
To sling across a branch;
Are themselves condemned,
To find some other graft.

Mocking Nature your second skin does shred,
Parrying empty verse with pages blank instead.
(Mabel van Zwanenberg Rouse)

Paperbark Maple – A Love Letter to Spring
Spring, it is the season of wither again.
I stand alone once more, bleeding copper red onto solemn white.
I weep for your breaths of life.
Spring, the setting sun awakens these curling pages,
They unfurl like books, writing lovers’ fates on crimson scripts,
We all search for fate’s red touch.
Spring, while you may never to see my russet form,
I hope these sanguine whispers are carried in drifting samara,
I hope you read these carmine words in my fallen letters,
Until we meet again, gentle Spring.
(Julia Chen)

Acer griseum / The ‘paperback’ tree
You could write this story on my skin
On pages that flutter in the wind, slowly peeling back to-
Wonder how many stories have been shed
Since famous men carried me
from far-off places
now I’m perfectly positioned to catch the sun whose
licking flames leaf through my pages
by evening the fire’s out – quenched in inky blackness
left thinking of the others more and more
how we’re running out of paper. with still so much to write...
(Amelia Platt)
*Betula utilis* subsp. *albosinensis*

*Betula utilis*, or Himalayan birch, is named for its home range, where the papery white bark was traditionally used to make paper for the inscription of sacred texts and mantras in Sanskrit. This subspecies, *albosinensis*, is native to China and is known for its multi-coloured silver and pinkish bark in cultivation. Like other birches, the bark has narrow horizontal bands called lenticels, which have pores that aerate the wood.

Further information:
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/plant-list/betula-utilis-ssp-albo-sinensis/

*Betula utilis* subsp. *albosinensis*
see the pearly gates malting up
Jacob’s ladder of stripping silver
Stippling of pealing albino pink seek
Secrete saps in spring pink and
Dried brown seeping in the living winter
white skin in white winter speaks
To warm fawn and cherry rose singing
light in winter
(Iris Rogers)
**Pinus nigra subsp. pallasiana**

The Garden’s collection of *Pinus nigra*, or black pines, dates from the 1840s, lining the Main Walk as a curated exhibition of intraspecies variation. This was a subject that interested the Garden’s founder, John Henslow, who was also a mentor to young Charles Darwin. Each subspecies is morphologically distinct, with features reflecting its native environment. This specimen, subspecies *pallasiana*, is a Crimean Pine, native to Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus, with long needles, spreading branches and plated bark. The species can reach 30m in height and live for over 500 years. This specimen has a large branch forking out from the trunk which is supported by a sling.

Further information:
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/plant-list/pinus-nigra-ssp-pallasiana/
https://www.botanic.cam.ac.uk/the-garden/gardens-plantings/trees/black-pines/

**Pinus nigra subsp. pallasiana**
Spectate, stranger, furrowed bark,
Which, a sort of history having, marks
The watch-kept time of passersby.
Eternal, patient pine: a pillar of black upon
The desert earth, and crowned with spines.
Share, stranger, the high, wild rock,
And slow your pace to the crawl of sap,
Down and down, your own allotted branch.
(Aiden Gray)

**Pinus nigra subsp. pallasiana**
We sew the path together with stiff needles,
Staring down top hats, beanies and caps,
With slender limbs, variously dark
Waiting for you
From the start.
(Claire Watt)
Poems from beyond the University

For Viburnum x bodnantense ‘Dawn’
In Botanic Garden where sunlight streams,
A smile of viburnum blooms in my dreams,
With petals white as winter snow,
Their pink blush in the moonlight glow,
At midnight when scent drifts by,
Beside their bushes is where I lie,
In tranquil beauty they silently sway,
As morning birds welcome the new day,
Their fragrance lingers sweet perfume,
In Botanic Gardens where dreams find room.
(Celine Zandi, Cambridge University Primary School)

The Little Things
(in memory of Alison Murray)
Tiny letters
Latin scribed in neat, inscrutable hand. Biro over hand-made
newsprint packets
tenderly enfolding
tiny seeds –
grown and dried,
collected and cupped in your palms; poured into origami squares
of recycled paper
and taped.

I see you now,
your slim form at the table; head bent, focused.

Labelling:
Nicotiana, Echinacea Iberis sempervirens.

Tiny seedlings
we cradled together,
their spidery roots
crawling through cardboard tubes of peat-free (your insistence) –
each genus and species
committed to
tiny signs
cut from yoghurt pots
and saved.

I see you now in the garden,
wellies on, spade upright,
smile bright against dim skies.

Your slender hands split salvias,
sharing perennial enthusiasm
like tomorrow would never come.
(Angela Jameson)