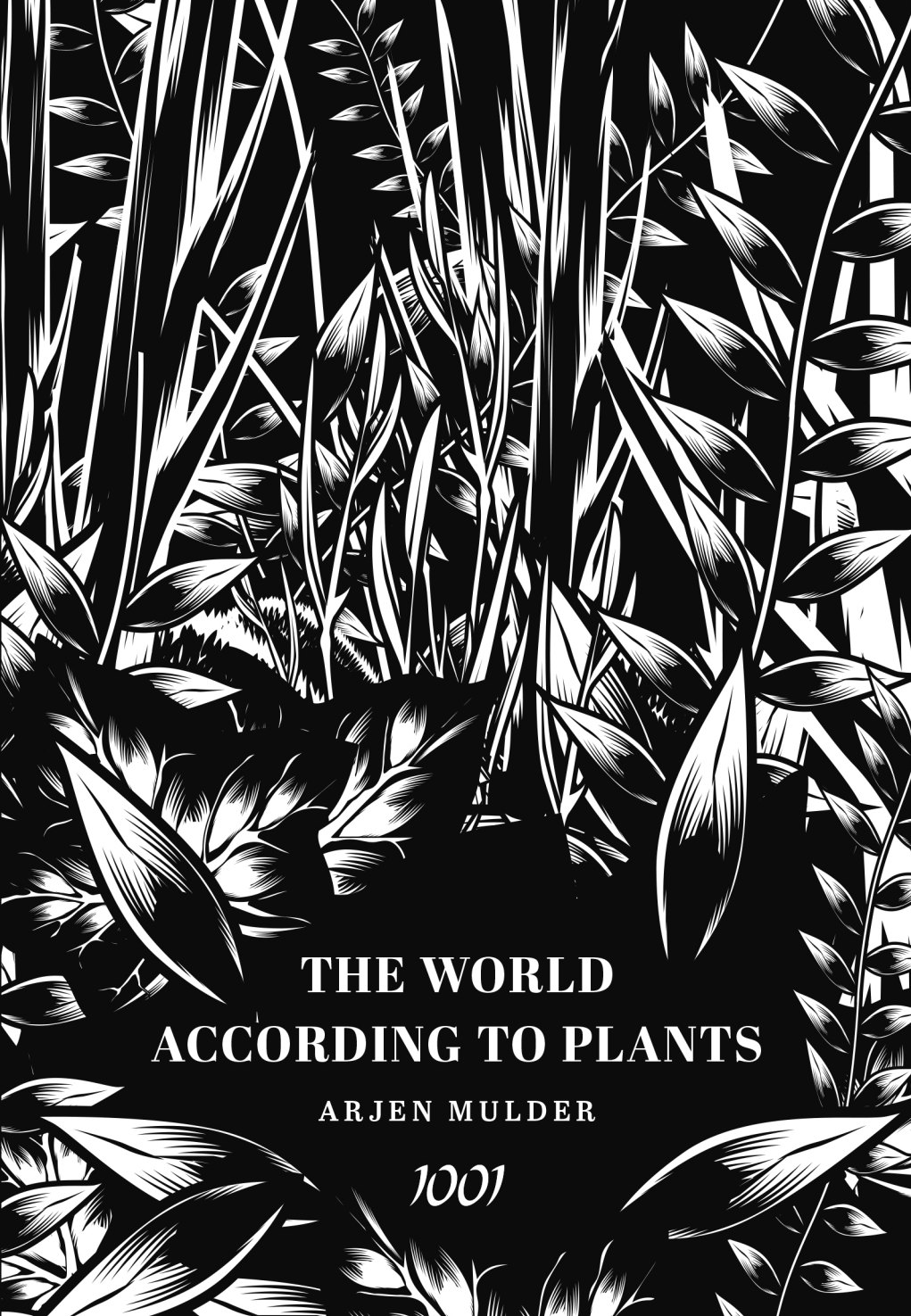

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO PLANTS

ARJEN MULDER

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TRANSLATED BY PAUL VINCENT

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Hard times, dear reader. All Western systems of thought are bankrupt and the only thing that keeps them alive is the criticism of them. The beauty of science burnt its face through its complicity in the fossil-fuel economy and the poisoning of the earth. A mixture of fear, rage, resignation and mourning gnaws at every idea that we have, every plan, everything that requires a future. The superpowers of tomorrow will inherit a few burnt-out continents and billions of refugees. People will look back at our times as the Age of Blindness, when everyone knew what they were doing to the living earth, but effective reaction proved too difficult, demanded too much effort. How does one retain one's common sense?

Learn to think like a plant. For half a billion years mosses, ferns, trees and flowers have kept the most beautiful ecosystems working on our planet. On the occasions when the latter were razed to the ground by the violence of super-volcanoes, comets or ice ages, the plants soon shot up again out of the ashes, to embark enthusiastically on a new round of vegetative inventiveness. Plants provide oxygen and food, retain water, offer shelter to animals and human beings, extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and in so doing moderate fluctuations in climate. All they ask for in return is an intact living space.

Plants can save the earth and its inhabitants. If we want to learn to think in a new way, cyclically instead of fixated on the end point, The School of the Plant will open its doors for readers anxious to learn. Switch to the side of the plants. That is the task I have set myself in this booklet.

We live on the most important planet in the universe. Most important, because only here do conditions exist in which we can live. The only suitable conditions in fact, since life appeared on earth and from day one was eminently well tailored to the state of things here. And now comes the nice part: because life was fully geared to conditions on earth, it was able to completely reorganise the mother planet and from a simple inauspicious beginning to derive a splendid and richly varied spectrum of life forms and landscapes. Variation: all that matters to us living beings.

We are the result of 4.3 billion years of evolution. Not a single molecule in us has not passed through many, countless other bodies. In the course of three billion years most of our living substance has been knocked together by brilliant bacteria and never changed since, while kept in continuous operation. Plants construct stalks, roots and leaves and flowers with them, animals bones, nerves, muscles and senses. Moulds weld their threads into underground networks from which they put forth their colourful toadstools in autumn. But the living matter in the cells of all those moulds, animals and plants is the same. We have carried this with us from our ancestors the bacteria into our own realms. However far apart humans and plants may seem to be, we share our living substance. We have the same needs and desires, although we satisfy them in almost diametrically opposite ways.

Life never ceased to exist for a few million years and then started up again. The lines of evolution run unbroken from the primaeval bacterium with which it all began to the green plants in the sea, the spore-producing plants on land and finally the seed-bearing plants as a provisional destination. Humans and plants are both part of phase 6 in the evolutionary history of plants. The bacteria constitute phase 1, the algae 2, the mosses 3, the ferns

4, the conifers 5 and the flowering plants phase 6. The structure of the flowering plant is the result of 150 million years of trying out on conifers and taking their chance whenever there was an opportunity. When 65 million years ago the dinosaurs and most angiosperms are wiped out by a meteor strike, flowering plants derive from a few thoroughly tested prototypes 250 thousand different kinds of flowers, 250 thousand different experiences of how life feels and how one can make contact with something other than oneself.

It is striking that humans hardly eat fern leaves and pine cones, like the dinosaurs, the dominant plant-eaters of the previous geological season. Dinosaurs had no teeth, but tore the leaves and branches wholesale from the trees. In their stomachs they kept swallowed stones with which they ground up the greenery, like birds today, the last dinosaurs. Man's body is adapted to flowering plants, to the digestion of fruit, vegetables and grains, and of the milk and meat that cattle make from grass and herbs. The human body is constructed for walking through grassland and woodland. In a fern wood of 350 million years ago humans would not have lasted long.

Let's stop criticising or extolling the old value systems. Instead, let's anticipate the value systems of the future, exploring, expressing, developing and living them here and now. There's no need for science fiction, the thought of the future is active at this moment right under your nose. Take the side of the plant and a whole new vista opens up.

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