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LISTEN TO THE TREES

By Linda Tatelbaum

It's late March, the week before Spring Break. I lead my class of English majors out of the stale air swarming with coughs, away from the corridor where chalk taps on blackboards behind numbered doors. We turn our backs on the orderly bricks, the rows of bare trees. Up over snowbanks, we make a colorful parade toward the arboretum.

They follow me single-file into an unkempt tangle of trees. My lesson plan is to widen the context of literary theory to include what we know without words. "Critical theory" argues that words build culture and identity. But at this point in the semester, we're worn down by words. I'd penciled "arboretum" in the syllabus for this week, though I can't quite remember why. I turn to look at my trusting students. I don't really know what I'm doing, but unpredictable nature always provides a teachable moment.

The sound of feet shushing through wet snow rises above our chatter. We come to the bridge and, one at a time, cross the double plank with shrieks and laughter. The brook below us is a silent film, black and white. Reconvened in silence on the other side, we hear the water raise its voice in a deafening roar. "Did that just start?" Lindsay exclaims. "How could we have missed it?"

I smile, thanking the brook for that moment I knew it held in store. When words fall away, contrary to what critical theorists propose, there is a presence, not merely an absence. While we read, sleep, eat and get older, a brook's life goes on. All of us together are the living presence that is the natural world. We don't have to say a thing to make it happen.

We proceed along a rocky path under the interlaced roof of the hemlock cathedral. Roots spread their fingers like a hundred hands, which give me the next idea in my lesson plan.

"Form a circle," I say, "and hold hands." We laugh at how awkward the guys are, holding hands with guys. A pulse travels around our chain. We all feel it.

"Is that coming from the trees?" Abigail whispers.

I ask them to lean way back, and we point our eyes straight up at the bleak sky.

"This is how a tree sees," says Erin.

The wind ruffles the hemlock boughs, a sound we know without words. By now we're quiet enough to hear it the first time.

The next day, in a circle of one-armed chairs, we're back to literary theory. No way will we hold hands today. Raise hands, maybe. Mine are white with chalk as I introduce phenomenology, the theory of how we mold our perceptions into knowledge—how we make sense of what we read. "You're not just a passive reader," I say. "You're the creator, because description in a novel doesn't show you a physical object. The words are just a blueprint."

Blank faces. I write "phenomenology" on the board. They copy it in their notebooks. "Take yesterday. The mention of a rushing brook in literature

requires your experience of real brooks in nature, how they swirl and throw mist in your face. We can only animate the novelist's rushing brook if we're alive to the world around us."

"Brooks are easy. But how are we supposed to imagine the lives of these characters?" asks Andrew, waving his copy of Russell Banks's *Affliction* over his head. "I was never a poor, unemployed, divorced guy in a stinking trailer with a leaky roof. Isn't it up to Banks to tell me everything I need to know?"

"He can't give you everything," says Jared. "You have to leap from what you know to what you don't know."

I write "hermeneutic circle" on the board. I turn around to see only the top of each head as they bow to copy it down. "What we usually call knowledge is an exchange of words," I say. "Hermeneutics is how we place new knowledge into the context of what we already know. That's how description works in literature."

But as I peck the words "hermeneutic circle" with the chalk, I wonder about the other kind of knowledge. Things we "just know," like fear, intuition, compassion, love. I don't like omitting these, even if phenomenologists do.

"But I've never been inside a trailer," insists Andrew. "Here we are, in this well-maintained college where everything works. We have every expectation that our lives . . ."

Suddenly, overhead, water gurgles violently in the pipes. Pipes I had never noticed before, with a pressure valve right over my head. Andrew's voice stops and we raise our eyes to the ceiling. When streams talk, we listen. That much we learned yesterday. The noisy brook took only one sliver of silence to break through to us.

. . . whoosh, glink, clang, pffffff . . . Slowly, the valve leaks a drop on the carpet by my foot. Another drop hits Ryan's notebook. He pushes his chair back. Melisse's pack receives the next drop . . . glurk, FFFFFF, ssshhhhHHHHHH . . .

Without a word, the circle is disrupted and we flee down the hall past classrooms where the word exchange continues unabated. The unpredictable is a good teacher. What we can't imagine springs us from what we think we know.

Linda Tatelbaum, professor of English, teaches that being "green" isn't just about saving the environment but actually learning from it. She is the author of two non-fiction books, Carrying Water as a Way of Life: A Homesteader's History and Writer on the Rocks—Moving the Impossible. Her new book is a novel, Yes & No—recipe for a young woman's coming of age.