

2008 William H. and Jane Torrence Harder Lecture, Cornell Plantations

“The Trees of Our Lives: Literary Renderings of Remarkable Trees”

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My focus today is on special trees that have personal meaning in our lives. These trees may not be remarkable in the sense of being singularly beautiful or enormous or famous. (If you want to read about trees remarkable for those reasons, see Thomas Pakenham’s excellent books *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* and *Remarkable Trees of the World*.) No. Today I’d like us to recall to memory trees that have been remarkable in our own lives, trees that stand out in our memory, trees that have meant something to us. I know that you have met at least one such tree on your journey of life, and, given that the annual Harder lecture is affiliated with the arboretum, I became inspired to dedicate this hour together to remembering and honoring the trees of our lives. In that spirit I’ll begin with a tree story of my own, then briefly introduce you to the field of ecocriticism, after which we’ll discuss some works of American literature that feature trees. My hope is that these examples will prompt you to recall, recount, and possibly record your own tree stories.

My Ithaca Tree Story

I arrived in Ithaca 26 years ago to pursue my Ph.D. in English. I am stunned to realize that a quarter century has elapsed since that first arrival in Ithaca! Yeow. My husband, Don, and I drove cross-country from Gunnison, Colorado, and pulled into town in his Toyota pickup truck with little money and nowhere to live. Home base for my first week of graduate school was our tent pitched in the campground of Treman State Park. We were kindly rescued by friends or relatives, who let us stay in their camper trailer for several weeks until they learned of a basement apartment for rent on Slaterville Road with a friendly landlord who went by the name of Binks. The apartment had a lovely view into a sloping backyard, where Don hung bird feeders and put out suet, and we soon became fond of the chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, brown creepers, and downy woodpeckers. So, thankfully, life stabilized on the home front.

In school, however, all was not well. I neglected to tell you that my application to pursue doctoral studies in English at Cornell had been rejected. On the application, however, there was a question that said, if you are not accepted by the department of your choice, what is your second choice? It was a bizarre question, but, feeling obliged to fill in the blank, I wrote linguistics, was accepted, and decided to give that field an honest try. But it became clear after a few weeks that linguistics wasn’t my calling.

After much difficult maneuvering, I eventually found a back-door entrance to the English department. But, of course, I knew that I had been rejected, so I was scared. Nevertheless, I showed up to my first graduate seminar in English with great eagerness, happy that my dreams were at last coming true. I came to class prepared to discuss that first novel—I wish I could remember now which one it was. I had assiduously underlined key passages and was primed to discuss the characters, themes, symbolism, and structure. A fellow student raised his hand first and commented, “Clearly, the author is foregrounding the materiality of the text.” I had no idea

what that sentence meant, and with a sense of panic I realized that I was in way over my head. I had been a biochemistry major until my senior year of college, so my preparation in English was quite weak. It was with trepidation, therefore, that I approached the Qualifying Exam at Cornell, administered at the end of the first year of graduate study. Fellow students reassured me that no one failed the Qualifying Exam. Well, I did. I broke this news that evening at College Town Pizza at a prearranged joint victory party for me and another student.

Rather than expelling me, my advisory committee devised a directed reading plan and agreed to let me retake the test again in a year. I worked so hard that year, poring over Norton anthologies of British and American literature, taking notes, learning names, memorizing poems. There was a mixed hardwood forest in Bink's backyard, and I found a secluded glade under an old hickory tree where I would spread a blanket on the ground and study. It was a wonderful, craggy, gnarled old hickory, with its shaggy trunk, solid limbs, and rich leaf litter below. The tree was so big and old and calm and reliable that it steadied my nerves. It stayed anchored in place through heat and humidity, cold and rain, wind and snow, a lesson in acceptance and endurance. All kinds of birds and animals knew of the tree and visited it—sapsuckers tapped out their Morse Code messages on its branches, a raccoon stashed things in a hole in its trunk, squirrels chased each other chattering up and around its trunk, and deer browsed on the underbrush beneath it. It seemed to me that standing there stoically in place through the eons, it existed in a world apart from my wild mood swings and struggles in graduate school. The hickory seemed to transcend them, render them trivial or extraneous. The tree had seen so much.

Under that tree I felt in my bones that if I failed the Qualifying Exam again, life would go on. I would be OK. The sun would come up. The sun would go down. In the larger scheme of things that exam was no more important—was in fact less tangible—than, say, the delicate yellow violets that graced the forest floor every spring. And so, having learned from the hickory tree to regard the exam as ultimately of little consequence, I could relax enough to focus on my studying—to actually *enjoy* my studying—and pass the exam.

Introduction to Ecocriticism

Had I not passed the exam, I would not be here today. So we are in that sense beholden to that hickory, which I'm guessing has changed little in the quarter century that has elapsed, a period that has seen notable changes in literary studies. One of the things I've been involved in during and since my time at Cornell is to promulgate an environmental approach to literary studies. This effort has coalesced around the term "ecocriticism," or environmental literary criticism, and this work is served by a professional organization that I helped to found, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) with 1,000 members and affiliate chapters in a dozen foreign countries. ASLE sponsors the academic journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, which was recently adopted by Oxford University Press and will go quarterly and become available online this year. I encourage you to Google ASLE and explore the organization's website (see handout at end).

Let me now offer a brief introduction to ecocriticism, which will till the theoretical ground for our return to tree stories. The shortest definition of ecocriticism that I know of is "reading as if nature mattered." Ecocriticism explores the interconnections between human

culture and the physical world, between literature and the planet. Ecocritics add *place* to the categories of race, class, and gender used to analyze culture.

Most ecocritics believe that the ecosystem is seriously stressed, that, indeed, environmental degradation (which includes climate change) is an urgent issue of our time. Historian Donald Worster in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* argues that the humanities have an important role to play in addressing the environmental crisis. He writes:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers . . . can help with the understanding. (27)

Literary critics specialize in questions of value, meaning, point of view, narrative, and language, and it is in these areas that they are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking.

One of the earliest examples of an ecocritical approach to literary study is Joseph Meeker's 1974 book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. Trained both in animal behavior and in literary studies, Meeker himself bridged the two-cultures gap that C. P. Snow famously described as separating the sciences and the humanities. Meeker conceives of humans in evolutionary terms as a literary animal. He writes:

Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures. . . . If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? (3–4)

Meeker's answer is both. From an evolutionary standpoint, some modes of literature (Meeker singles out tragedy) are maladaptive while others, such as comedy, embody ecological wisdom. Like Meeker, many ecocritics envision their work as a form of cultural intervention, exposing destructive attitudes and promoting better alternatives. Ecocriticism, then—like feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, and critical race studies—often has an activist dimension, advocating for cultural change via the study of language, literature, and other cultural productions.

Ecocritics asks questions such as: “How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?” “How does literacy mediate our experience of the environment?” “How has literary discourse constructed the human?” “What kinds of spaces have counted as *environment*?” “In

what ways does nature speak?” “How can we move beyond dualistic thinking about nature and culture?”

If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology that “Everything is connected to everything else,” we must conclude that literature plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact. I believe that ecocritics have a potentially valuable role to play in bringing about the heightened awareness and cultural change that will be needed to address the massive environmental problems of the twenty-first century.

Critics occupy a particular niche in the ecology of culture. I like the way literary critic William Rueckert envisions this process. Rueckert is the one who originally coined the term ecocriticism thirty years ago. He asks, “As readers, teachers, and critics of literature, how do we become responsible planet stewards? How do we ask questions about literature and the biosphere?” He writes:

A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow.

Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life.

Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination. . . .

Reading, teaching, and critical discourse all release the energy and power stored in poetry so that it may flow through the human community.

I once assumed that the role of literary critics was to *criticize* books, to feed parasitically off of the creative work of others. I now know that it is much more common for critics to *promote* and interpret books, to generate interest in them. In this role of promoter and teacher, one of the main contributions to the environment that *eco*-critics make is to introduce students and readers to books that raise their ecological consciousness. Books by environmental writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, A. R. Ammons, W. S. Merwin, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry, Linda Hogan, Gary Nabhan, Diane Ackerman, Sandra Steingraber, and so many others can change consciousness, but only *if* they are read.

We so often take nature for granted. Literary works can help us to become more mindful of the other-than-human presences in our lives. Stories can raise our awareness and jog our memories and we, in turn, can tell our own stories as a form of reciprocity and acknowledgment. Norman Maclean’s beautiful book *A River Runs Through It* was rejected many times before the University of Chicago Press agreed to publish it. One rejection slip flatly stated, “These stories have trees in them,” as if that were explanation enough. Ecocritics would like to transform the literary marketplace such that publishers of the future will advertise of their books, “*These* stories have trees in them!” YES! And that’s how I would like to spend our remaining time.

Trees

Our **language** is infused with trees. Trees as metaphors. Bear fruit. Blighted. Family tree. Tree of Life. Tree of Knowledge. Branches of science. Branching out. Roots. Being rooted. Rootless. Growing up. Seasonal cycle: new growth, flowering, falling leaves, winter. Planting a tree.

As for literary renderings of remarkable trees, my query to the ASLE listserv started an avalanche of responses. I received more than 150 suggestions!

The most frequently cited title is Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, a classic children's book, first published in 1964. It has sold more than 5-1/2 million copies and has been translated into more than thirty languages, making it quite possibly the best-selling tree story of all time. The last time I checked, there were 599 customer reviews of the book on Amazon.com, the vast majority of them five-star ratings. But, curiously, nearly all the reviews read the book allegorically, with the tree standing for a person—a mother, a selfless person. Here is a typical customer review:

This book demonstrates unconditional love, the type of love a mother shares with a child, and the way that love and giving changes over the course of one's life. I cannot say enough about this book and about how much I loved that tree when I was little and how much it taught me about the joy of giving to other people. This book truly taught me, at a young age, that there was reward and pleasure in making other people happy, especially unselfishly.

It might be an interesting ecocritical exercise for us to read the tree as a tree and to allow this book to make us aware of the many roles that trees play in our lives as we age.

One of my favorite epigrams about the human lifespan is from David Guterson's book *Easy of the Mountains*. One character in the book muses that the Hindus saw life in four progressive stages: twenty years a youth, twenty years a fighter, twenty years as head of a household, twenty years in the cultivation of the spirit.

I'd like to use this four-part scheme, along with four illustrations from Silverstein's book, to organize the following survey of the kinds of relationships we have to trees, as represented in American literature.

1. Childhood

Twenty years a youth—Trees in Childhood—Trees of Nature

- world of nature
- play, tire swings
- contact with the natural world
- climbing/perspective
- seeing without being seen
- place to observe the world
- tactile

- leisure
- child's sense of time.
- attachment to place
- growing up

Wendelin Van Draanen, *Flipped* (2001)

This juvenile fiction book is written for the eighth-grade level and is a winner of the California Young Reader Medal. Van Draanen is the author of the Sammy Keyes mysteries for young readers.

Here are the perspectives of two characters in the book. Bryce's perspective:

So this tree, this *sycamore* tree, was up the hill on a vacant lot on Collier Street, and it was massive. Massive and ugly. It was twisted and gnarled and bent, and I kept expecting the thing to blow over in the wind.

One day last year I'd finally had enough of her yakking about that stupid tree. I came right out and told her that it was not a magnificent sycamore, it was, in reality, the ugliest tree known to man. And you know what she said? She said I was visually challenged. Visually challenged! This from the girl who lives in a house that's the scourge of the neighborhood. (21)

Juli's perspective (her father is a landscape painter in his free time):

Mostly the things he talked about floated around me, but once in a while something would happen and I would understand exactly what he had meant. "A painting is more than the sum of its parts," he would tell me, and then go on to explain how the cow by itself is just a cow, and the meadow by itself is just grass and flowers, and the sun peeking through the trees is just a beam of light, but put them all together and you've got magic.

I understood what he was saying, but I never *felt* what he was saying until one day when I was up in the sycamore tree.

The sycamore tree had been at the top of the hill forever. It was on a big vacant lot, giving shade in the summer and a place for birds to nest in the spring. It had a built-in slide for us, too. Its trunk bent up and around in almost a complete spiral, and it was so much fun to ride down. My mom told me she thought the tree must have been damaged as a sapling but survived, and now, maybe a hundred years later, it was still there, the biggest tree she'd ever seen. "A testimony to endurance" is what she called it. . . . [One day Juli sees Bryce's kite stuck high in the tree and she climbs higher than she's ever climbed before in order to get it unstuck.]

The branches were strong, with just the right amount of intersections to make climbing easy. And the higher I got, the more amazed I was by the view. I'd never seen a view like that! It was like being in an airplane above all the rooftops, above the other trees. Above the world! . . .

When I had the kite free, I needed a minute to rest. To recover before starting down. So instead of looking at the ground below me, I held on tight and looked out. Out across the rooftops.

That's when the fear of being up so high began to lift, and in its place came the most amazing feeling that I was flying. Just soaring above the earth, sailing among the clouds.

Then I began to notice how wonderful the breeze smelled. It smelled like . . . sunshine. Like sunshine and wild grass and pomegranates and rain! I couldn't stop breathing it in, filling my lungs again and again with the sweetest smell I'd ever known. . . .

It wasn't long before I wasn't afraid of being up so high and found the spot that became *my* spot. I could sit there for hours, just looking out at the world. Sunsets were amazing. Some days they'd be purple and pink, some days they'd be a blazing orange, setting fire to clouds across the horizon.

It was on a day like that when my father's notion of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts moved from my head to my heart. The view from my sycamore was more than rooftops and clouds and wind and colors combined.

It was magic.

And I started marveling at how I was feeling both humble and majestic. How was that possible? How could I be so full of peace and full of wonder? How could this simple tree make me feel so complex? So *alive*. (34–38)

Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943)

Betty Smith was born in 1896 in Brooklyn. After leaving school at the age of fourteen, she worked in a factory, in retail, and in clerical jobs in New York City. Later, Smith was a reader and editor for Dramatists Play Service, an actress and playwright for the Federal Theater project, and a radio actress. While attending the University of Michigan from 1927 to 1930, she began having her one-act plays published; she also worked as a feature writer for NEA (a newspaper syndicate) and wrote columns for the *Detroit Free Press*. She was a member of the faculty of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, from 1945 to 1946.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, of which 4 million copies have been sold, has been translated into sixteen languages, and was made into a motion picture. Here's an excerpt:

The one tree in Francie's yard was neither a pine nor a hemlock. It had pointed leaves which grew along green switches which radiated from the bough and made a tree which looked like a lot of opened green umbrellas. Some people called it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky. It grew in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement. It grew lushly, but only in the tenement districts.

You took a walk on a Sunday afternoon and came to a nice neighborhood, very refined. You saw a small one of these trees through the iron gate leading to someone's yard and you knew that soon that section of Brooklyn would get to be a tenement district. The tree knew. It came there first. Afterwards, poor foreigners seeped in and the quiet old brownstone houses were hacked up into flats, feather beds were pushed out on the window sills to air and the Tree of Heaven flourished. That was the kind of tree it was. It liked poor people.

That was the kind of tree in Francie's yard. Its umbrellas curled over, around and under her third-floor fire-escape. An eleven-year-old girl sitting on this fire-escape could imagine that she was living in a tree. That's what Francie imagined every Saturday afternoon in summer. (2)

Each week Francie (age 11) is allowed to check out two books from the public library:

Francie held the books close and hurried home, resisting the temptation to sit on the first stoop she came to, to start reading.

Home at last and now it was the time she had been looking forward to all week: fire-escape-sitting time. She put a small rug on the fire-escape and got the pillow from her bed and propped it against the bars. Luckily there was ice in the icebox. She chipped off a small piece and put it in a glass of water. The pink-and-white peppermint wafers bought that morning were arranged in a little bowl, cracked, but of a pretty blue color. She arranged glass, bowl and book on the window sill and climbed out on the fire-escape. Once out there, she was living in a tree. No one upstairs, downstairs or across the way could see her. But she could look out through the leaves and see everything.

It was a sunny afternoon. A lazy warm wind carried a warm sea smell. The leaves of the tree made fugitive patterns on the white pillow-case. . . . As she read, at peace with the world and happy as only a little girl could be with a fine book and a little bowl of candy, and all alone in the house, the leaf shadows shifted and the afternoon passed. (16–17)

Francie returns to her old neighborhood:

She looked down into the yard. The tree whose leaf umbrellas had curled around, under and over her fire-escape had been cut down because the

housewives complained that wash on the lines got entangled in its branches. The landlord had sent two men and they had chopped it down.

But the tree hadn't died . . . it hadn't died.

A new tree had grown from the stump and its trunk had grown along the ground until it reached a place where there were no wash lines above it. Then it had started to grow towards the sky again.

This tree in the yard—this tree that men chopped down . . . this tree that they build a bonfire around, trying to burn up its stump—this tree lived!

It lived! And nothing could destroy it. (376)

2. Young Adulthood

Twenty years a fighter—Trees in Young Adulthood—Trees of Identity, Trees of Budding Sexuality

- adolescence
- sexuality
- budding, blossoming
- trysts
- carving initials
- seclusion
- shade

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Janie Crawford is being raised by her grandmother:

She thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate. It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink

into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. . . . Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma’s house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (10–11)

Julia Alvarez, *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2004)

“Seven Trees” is a section of the book consisting of seven poems, arranged from birth to death. This series was first published alone as a limited edition chapbook in 1998. The titles of the poems are:

“Family Tree”
 “Samán”
 “Weeping Willow”
 “Maple, Oak, or Elm?”
 “Arborvitae”
 “Locust”
 “Last Trees”

(See the handout for “Maple, Oak, or Elm?”)

3. Adult with Trees

Twenty years as head of a household—Trees of Adulthood—Trees of Usefulness

- Adulthood—not much!
- unaware of trees
- little time to spend with trees
- maybe planting trees and landscaping to make a home
- house-building supplies
- forest but not individual trees
- utilitarian relationship, shelter, food, fuel

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)

From February, “Good Oak”:

There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.

To avoid the first danger, one should plant a garden, preferably where there is no grocer to confuse the issue.

To avoid the second, he should lay a split of good oak on the andirons, preferably where there is no furnace, and let it warm his shins while a February blizzard tosses the trees outside. If one has cut, split, hauled, and piled his own good oak, and let his mind work the while, he will remember much about where the heat comes from, and with a wealth of detail denied to those who spend the week end in town astride a radiator. (6–7)

The particular oak now aglow on my andirons grew on the bank of the old emigrant road where it climbs the sandhill. The stump, which I measured upon felling the tree, has a diameter of 30 inches. It shows 80 growth rings, hence the seedling from which it originated must have laid its first ring of wood in 1865, at the end of the Civil War.

[A lightning strike killed the tree and “bequeathed to us three cords of prospective fuel wood.”]

We let the dead veteran season for a year in the sun it could no longer use, and then on a crisp winter’s day we laid a newly filed saw to its bastioned base. Fragrant little chips of history spewed from the saw cut, and accumulated on the snow before each kneeling sawyer. We sensed that these two piles of sawdust were something more than wood: that they were the integrated transect of a century; that our saw was biting its way, stroke by stroke, decade by decade, into the chronology of a lifetime, written in concentric annual rings of good oak. (9–10)

It is a warming thought that this [oak] . . . lived to garner eighty years of June sun. It is this sunlight that is now being released, through the intervention of my axe and saw, to warm my shack and my spirit through eighty gusts of blizzard. And with each gust a wisp of smoke from my chimney bears witness, to whomsoever it may concern, that the sun did not shine in vain. (8)

4. Trees in Old Age

Twenty years in the cultivation of the spirit—Trees of Old Age—Trees of Memory

- contemplation
- memory
- endurance,
- senescence
- obsolescence
- being unnoticed
- wisdom

- being unchanged in the midst of change
- death
- acceptance

Loren Eiseley, *The Night Country* (1971)

From “The Brown Wasps”:

I have said my life has been passed in the shade of a nonexistent tree. . . . It was planted sixty years ago by a boy with a bucket and a toy spade in a little Nebraska town. That boy was myself. It was a cottonwood sapling and the boy remembered it because of some words spoken by his father and because everyone died or moved away who was supposed to wait and grow old under its shade. The boy was passed from hand to hand, but the tree for some intangible reason had taken root in his mind. It was under its branches that he sheltered; it was from this tree that his memories, which are my memories, led away into the world. (234)

After sixty years, Eiseley decides to return to that town and visit the tree. He approaches his old house:

I came close to the white picket fence and reluctantly, with great effort, looked down the long vista of the yard. There was nothing there to see. For sixty years that cottonwood had been growing in my mind. Season by season its seeds had been floating farther on the hot prairie winds. We had planted it lovingly there, my father and I, because he had a great hunger for soil and live things growing, and because none of these things had long been ours to protect. We had planted the little sapling and watered it faithfully, and I remembered that I had run out with my small bucket to drench its roots the day we moved away. And all the years since it had been growing in my mind, a huge tree that somehow stood for my father and the love I bore him. I took a grasp on the picket fence and forced myself to look again.

A boy with the hard bird eye of youth pedaled a tricycle slowly up beside me.

“What’cha lookin’ at?” he asked curiously.

“A tree,” I said.

“What for?” he said.

“It isn’t there,” I said, to myself mostly, and began to walk away at a pace just slow enough not to seem to be running.

“What isn’t there?” the boy asked. I didn’t answer. It was obvious I was attached by a thread to a thing that had never been there, or certainly not for long. Something that had to be held in the air, or sustained in the mind, because it was

part of my orientation in the universe and I could not survive without it. There was more than an animal's attachment to a place. There was something else, the attachment of spirit to a grouping of events in time; it was part of our mortality. . .

In sixty years the house and the street had rotted out of my mind. But the tree, the tree that no longer was, that had perished in its first season, bloomed on in my individual mind, unblemished as my father's words. "We'll plant a tree here, son, and we're not going to move any more. And when you're an old, old man you can sit under it and think how we planted it here, you and me, together."

I began to outpace the boy on the tricycle.

"Do you live here, Mister?" he shouted after me suspiciously. I took a firm grasp on airy nothing—to be precise, on the bole of a great tree. "I do," I said. I spoke for myself, one field mouse, and several pigeons. We were all out of touch but somehow permanent. It was the world that had changed. (234–36)

5. Trees of Community—Sharing our tree stories

- from individuals to community
- witness trees

John Lane, *Noble Trees of the South Carolina Upcountry* (2003)

This book is a community's tribute to its trees—they are recording the stories attached to specific trees. As an example: a particular southern magnolia tree growing on Black Road in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, was nominated by Paula Baker with this note of explanation:

As a young girl, I can remember having picnics in the spring out by the tree. My friends and I would climb in the tree and also pick the beautiful yellow daffodils that grew, seemingly by the hundreds, in and around the tree. This Noble Tree is, I am sure, the reason the fragrance of the magnolia blossom is such a favorite of mine. The house where my grandmother grew up, built by her father, Colonel Samuel Miller Snoddy, is long gone, but the tree remains by my calculations, at least 138 years old.

There are three photographs of this tree, and John Lane composed a poem, "Natural History of a Family Tree" to honor it (see the handout).

Ithaca Tree Stories

Please see the handout for these poems.

Handout

Maple, Oak, or Elm?

Syracuse, 1973–1975

Maple or oak or elm? By now I know
 how to tell them apart. Yet when I think
 of falling in love as a young woman
 I think of my confusion naming them—
 maple, oak, elm? One of them always grew
 outside the bedroom window where I lay
 waiting for passion to wash over me.
 What did I know of love but that I gave
 my body for the chance to play
 the happy heroine of a love story?

But I wasn't happy, I was lonely,
 already knowing this was the wrong love
 or rather the wrong life-story for me.
 So I lay there, studying the tops of trees,
 the map of branches that might orient me
 as to where I was going by myself
 after this heartbreak. With my eye, I traced
 the traffic of the branches as they climbed
 toward their destination in the sky,
 losing myself in their hectic movements.

Until his love cry brought me back to earth,
 down through the branches, the open window,
 stealing like light across the bedroom floor,
 over the rumpled sheets to this woman
 who was and wasn't me, who didn't know
 where she was going or whom she might be:
 maybe the burning maple showing off,
 or mighty oak synonymous with strength,
 or vague elm whose unmistakable shape
 can only be discerned from a distance.

—Julia Alvarez, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*

Natural History of a Family Tree

Say 140 years ago your great-grandfather
 gives a southern magnolia to his young wife,
 a tree foreign to the upcountry, but planted—
 like settlers—beyond its natural range.

Say he hauls it up from Charleston in a stagecoach,
a sapling, with four leathery green leaves,
and plants it on a high ridge above the river,
and it catches sun next to the house and grows.

Say somehow, despite storms and summer drought,
the bull bay adds dark bulk, its trunk grown
big and hard and heavy, stands soon above
the boxwood walk and the beds of daffodils.

Say the white drooping blossoms and the green
fragrant leaves end up on your great-grandmother's
sideboard all summer, the house so full of magnolia,
she thinks it the essence of what she knows as culture.

Say your family moves to town after two more generations,
leaves the magnolia to spread, limbs almost
to the ground, still flowering March to June,
house soon falling into blackberry and volunteer pine.

Say as a young girl you return there to picnic,
climb the stout branches high, come down
to gather daffodils gone crazy in the weeds,
walk in circles around this huge hardy family tree.

And say how right it is now that sons
drive their pickups out to see this tree,
cut back planted pine, pick up scraps of pottery.

Say in this poem we go walk under branches
they all walked under, see how trees survive through stories.

—John Lane, *Noble Trees of the South Carolina Upcountry*

“My Black Walnut Tree” is described by its author, Suzanne Bury:

This poem is a memoir of growing up with a “pet” tree on our ranch west of Davis, California. I visited it 20 years ago when it and I were both about 50 years old. The black walnut tree is still standing, thanks to the present owner who occasionally removes dead limbs and mistletoe.

My Black Walnut Tree

When I was just a little girl—barely three.
My wise parents gave to me a baby black walnut tree.
Every day I'd water her and talk to her

To help her grow up like me.

Years went by and both girl and tree grew tall and slim.
I'd climb up onto her and sit upon a cuddly limb.
I'd tell her girl secrets and she'd tell me what it was like
to be a tree.

And now, since I've passed my half-century,
I went to see her again—just to see how she'd be.
And there she was!
Outstretched arms to welcome me.

So big—the queen of trees—she remembered me
And all our secrets we used to share.
She's my lovely life-time friend—
My black walnut tree who taught me how to care.

—Suzanne Bury, Ithaca, New York

Allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the trees—
the green republic of roots, limbs,
and leaves under which I stand.

Another nation, overhead,
divided by color, texture,
height, and thickness,
divisible by genus and species.
With oxygen and shade for all.

—John Lane, *Noble Trees of the South Carolina Upcountry*

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