

The Witness Tree

One spring day two men turned up the lane
At the end of which the witness tree stood
To mark where what was no longer
One man's land ended and what was
No longer another man's began.

They wanted to know what the witness tree had seen,
But it refused to tell them
About the murders of crows,
The disorderly conduct of frogs in the pond,
The embezzlement of the moon by the Bank of Clouds
And its counterfeiting in a thousand waters.

Finally, the men threw up
Their hands and drove away.

Summer came and the men with it.
Again, they asked the witness tree
To tell them what it had seen.
Again it declined to say anything
About the shooting stars,
The misdemeanor of the mist,
The abduction of the field mice,
The barbwire tapping of the pasture...

Losing patience, the men began planting
Flags at the corners of a square
The witness tree found itself standing
In the center of, as if under suspicion.

Then they drove away.

Autumn came and went.
Relieved, the witness tree let go
Of its green breath of leaves.
It stood naked and innocent,

Neither suspected of a crime
Nor questioned about something
It hadn't seen.

But then, just when the sky was issuing
The first subpoenas of snow,
The men showed up again.

Hitched to the truck was a wood chipper.
In the bed were chain saws and chaps,
Cans of gas and oil.

They gave the witness tree one last chance
To tell them what it had seen.
Afraid, the witness tree opened its mouth,
Prepared to describe how the hunter had killed the doe
Despite the white tail she'd raised in surrender,
How the moon had been laundering its light,
How the ice had forged the signatures of the branches
One night, and in the morning disappeared.

But no words escaped its lips.
Having vowed to keep the earth's secrets,
The witness tree stood silent.

The men sighed and began cutting.
They took turns, stopping often as if to give
The witness tree a chance to talk, though
It was becoming increasingly unreliable.
After it fell they bucked its body up into chunks
And fed its fingers and hands into the chipper
And tore its roots out by the hair
And ground its stump into dust.
Where the witness tree once stood
A witness house now stands.
It sees plenty
But no one thinks to question it.