

## To the white ash

by Sheila Stewart

— with thanks to Joy Harjo and Mark Dion

How was it to be cut in sections and driven here? To now lie prone,  
limbs outstretched, as we observe, stroke, photograph you? What do  
we know of your life at the edge of the city? What will become of you?  
*I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in the moist dark earth.*

Does it take your being dead and displayed for us to honour you? As  
with our own kind, we praise your gifts after you've died. But there I  
go, comparing you to us. How to dwell with you, be with you and  
your kin alive and dead *between sunrise and sunset* —

What language can I possibly use to address you,  
lichen-covered bark, severed branches, six-ton root ball?  
Emerald Ash Borers escaping, only to be captured and preserved  
in the museum. *I cannot walk through all realms.*

Ash, you know I lived beside a silver maple older than the house.  
From my writing desk I gazed at black squirrels chasing up and down  
its trunk, as if I wrote in a treehouse. Maple's massive branch crashed  
the day my favourite aunt died. *I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone  
in the dark* —

The city planted a London planetree — we should have asked for native.  
We've never liked it — but now house sparrows flit from fence  
to hedge to its invasive reach. But what of the waning species,  
voracious insects, wildfires? *What shall I do with all this heartache?*

Note:

From *If I Write About My Father* (Ekstasis Editions, 2024). This poem was written for Mark Dion's "The Life of a Dead Tree" exhibit, Museum of Contemporary Art, May to July 2019. The italicized lines are from Joy Harjo's poem, "Speaking Tree" from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (W.W. Norton, 2015): "I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in the moist dark earth / Between sunrise and sunset— / I cannot walk through all realms— / I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone in the dark— / What shall I do with all this heartache?"