1977

The Tree

Stanley Plumly

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2146
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One has been flung down with its roots in the air.
Another tilts at an angle.
One has lost a limb in the storm
and stands with a white wound.
And one, covered with vines,
every May puts out a mass of flowers.

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Poetry, says Baudelaire, is melancholy:
the more we desire, the more we shall have to grieve.
Devour a corpse with your eyes; art consists
in the cultivation of pain.
Stupidity reassures you; you do not belong
in a bourgeois establishment, it can never be your home.
Restlessness is a sign of intelligence;
revulsion, the flight of a soul.

The Tree / Stanley Plumly

It looked like oak, white oak, oak of the oceans,
oak of the Lord, live oak, oak if a boy could choose.
The names, like ganglia, were the leaves, flesh

of our fathers. So Sundays I would stand
on a chair and trace, as on a county map,
back to the beginnings of cousins,
nomenclature. This branch, this root . . .
I could feel the weight of my body take hold,
toe in. I could see the same shape in my hand.

And if from the floor it looked like a cauliflower,
dried, dusted, pieced back together, paper—
my bad eyes awed by the detailed dead and named—

it was the stalk of the spine as it culminates at the brain,
a drawing I had seen in a book about the body, each leaf
inlaid until the man’s whole back, root and stem, was veins.