

The Block by Sherry Ballou Hanson

I used to be an oak
before they cut me down.
I was substantial they said.
Catholic bells pealed for generations
and stars danced in my branches
all the nights of my life
as a tree in a wood
along the Thames

but things change. One day they came
and I was hauled out dead
before the sun had set;
better to have silvered among the stumps
than do the devil's work.

I was paired with axe
and together we served the Tower
four hundred long years,
shrinking from the screams at Tyburn
and the mob at Tower Hill
until it was our turn.

The first was worst, a mess of blood,
the severed head cut loose;
we scarce could stand the shame.
When Lady Jane knelt at last,
I felt my death again, wondered
how axe and I came to this fate,
but one goes on.
When the Earl of Essex
finally bowed his head,
we prayed for a sharpened blade.

Seven times we stood to the duty.
Axe kept his shine and I my gloss
but we were hollowed out.
Scrubbed clean now we are shunned
by all except the rack and manacles.
Nights in the Tower are cold,
and life was beautiful as a tree.