

Witness Tree, by paul m. (United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2020).
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Reviewed by Terry Ann Carter

In the early 1920's Federico Garcia Lorca began writing haiku while studying the *copla*, the rural Andalusian folk lyric that "belongs to no one" and "floats on the wind like golden thistledown." Lorca began to make connections between haiku and *copla* when he wrote, "these lyrics hold the deepest, most moving songs of our mysterious soul." It is the Spanish *copla* that reminds me of Paul Miller's writing. In his newest collection, *witness tree*, Miller plumbs the "mysterious soul" by witnessing the world around him. As he writes in his introduction, "The term 'witness tree' describes trees that witnessed significant events, such as the Sickles Oak, which saw brutal fighting at Gettysburg in the American Civil War; or the Ankerwycke Yew in Berkshire, England, which witnessed the signing of the Magna Carta ... [T]he term originally referred to trees that helped surveyors map property boundaries when a more permanent marker couldn't be placed because the boundary existed in a lake, marsh, or on other impermanent ground. The poems in this book are my witness trees..."

Lyrics in the *copla* address subjects such as disappointment, love, sadness. Miller's infatuation with the world also reveals a deep heart knowing:

<p>bulbs dividing underground we speak of children we cannot have</p>	<p>a shrike's cry the river widening at the bend</p>
<p>honey bee acre after acre of burned forest</p>	<p>cancer spreading... my cell phone's single bar</p>

There is also his tender sense of humour:

field of yarrow
a butterfly's path
could be more efficient

no need
for a death poem ...
autumn caterpillar

grass trampled
by demonstrators
Earth Day

grave shopping...
the one with the nearby tree
for climbing

In his introduction Miller references Blyth, who writes of “returning ... to our moon nature, our cherry blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, to our Buddha nature... Revisiting my own circumstance, it is a return to my original nature, as if both my surroundings and myself were new. It is a mindset that restores wonder to the world.” It is also a mindset to create some of the finest haiku in the English language:

grave cleaning...
all winter a fallen tree
held by another

mourning dove calls
the sun and moon
in the same sky

The art of the *copla* involves simple story telling, songs of everyday experiences. Here, too, Miller excels. His short narratives reveal novellas:

without asking
she ladles me some soup
winter rain

summer rain
I bring some
into the bank

his final effects...
I share the elevator
with a stranger

a paperclip
holding the file together
winter hospice

And witnessing is caring. Miller speaks to the “responsibility to these same [witness] trees and, by extension, to the whole of the natural world.” As he explains in the introduction, “Humankind is part of nature, and

therefore, harm to nature—whether through deforestation, habitat loss, or overpopulation—is harm to ourselves. I believe something of this feeling of interconnectedness inhabits many of my poems. In some, as I have been recently reminded, I am not so much discovering things as rediscovering them—or, more accurately, rediscovering their significance.” The prose of Miller’s introduction could easily stand on its own as a fine personal essay; it makes me wonder why he has not included any haibun in this collection. Such interconnectedness shows itself in these poems:

paperwhite bulbs
the faint moon
in my thumbnail

milky way
I tie a stopper knot
at the end of a line

first iris
the distance
between atoms

no player
for this old cassette tape
winter stars

In back cover blurbs Michael Dylan Welch writes, “paul.m. shows once again that he is one of haiku’s finest witnesses” and Lee Gurga states, “Sip and savour here the spirits of a master distiller.” I believe that Miller’s theory—“we can be enormously moved by the smallest sparrow taking flight”—resonates deeply with Lorca’s definition of *copla* as something that “floats on the wind like golden thistle-down;” ultimately both poets are grasping for “the mysterious soul.”