

# The Trees

*Can there be a forest without trees? Where are the trees in this poem, and where do they go?*


The trees inside are moving out into the forest,  
the forest that was empty all these days  
where no bird could sit  
no insect hide  
no sun bury its feet in shadow  
the forest that was empty all these nights  
will be full of trees by morning.

All night the roots work  
to disengage themselves from the cracks  
in the veranda floor.  
The leaves strain toward the glass  
small twigs stiff with exertion  
long-cramped boughs shuffling under the roof  
like newly discharged patients  
half-dazed, moving  
to the clinic doors.

I sit inside, doors open to the veranda  
writing long letters  
in which I scarcely mention the departure  
of the forest from the house.  
The night is fresh, the whole moon shines  
in a sky still open  
the smell of leaves and lichen  
still reaches like a voice into the rooms.

My head is full of whispers  
which tomorrow will be silent.  
Listen. The glass is breaking.  
The trees are stumbling forward  
into the night. Winds rush to meet them.  
The moon is broken like a mirror,  
its pieces flash now in the crown  
of the tallest oak.

ADRIENNE RICH



Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A. in 1929. She is the author of nearly twenty volumes of poetry, and has been called a feminist and a radical poet.

### Glossary

**to disengage themselves:** to separate themselves

**strain:** make efforts to move

**bough:** branch

**shuffling:** moving repeatedly from one position to another

**lichen:** crusty patches or bushy growth on tree trunks/bare ground formed by association of fungus and alga.

### Thinking about the Poem

- Find, in the first stanza, three things that cannot happen in a treeless forest.
  - What picture do these words create in your mind: "... sun bury its feet in shadow..."? What could the poet mean by the sun's 'feet'?
- Where are the trees in the poem? What do their roots, their leaves, and their twigs do?
  - What does the poet compare their branches to?
- How does the poet describe the moon: (a) at the beginning of the third stanza, and (b) at its end? What causes this change?
  - What happens to the house when the trees move out of it?
  - Why do you think the poet does not mention "the departure of the forest from the house" in her letters? (Could it be that we are often silent about important happenings that are so unexpected that they embarrass us? Think about this again when you answer the next set of questions.)

4. Now that you have read the poem in detail, we can begin to ask what the poem might mean. Here are two suggestions. Can you think of others?
- (i) Does the poem present a conflict between man and nature? Compare it with *A Tiger in the Zoo*. Is the poet suggesting that plants and trees, used for 'interior decoration' in cities while forests are cut down, are 'imprisoned', and need to 'break out'?
  - (ii) On the other hand, Adrienne Rich has been known to use trees as a metaphor for human beings; this is a recurrent image in her poetry. What new meanings emerge from the poem if you take its trees to be symbolic of this particular meaning?
5. You may read the poem 'On Killing a Tree' by Gieve Patel (*Beehive – Textbook in English for Class IX*, NCERT). Compare and contrast it with the poem you have just read.



### Homophones

Can you find the words below that are spelt similarly, and sometimes even pronounced similarly, but have very different meanings? Check their pronunciation and meaning in a dictionary.

- The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.
- When shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.
- The insurance was invalid for the invalid.