

Blue Spruce - Annette Smitley
(Senior Non-Fiction, First Place Winner)

The vacant yard between my property line and the newly tilled field haunts me much like the phantom leg of an amputee. The emptiness of the space yields no shadow, no wind break, just an ache. I recall last November when John, a solid 40-something man with cheerful blue eyes and a permanently ruddy complexion, delivered the news that the 15-foot blue spruce behind our house was, at least partially, on his property. John executed the conversation in a practiced manner. Short factual sentences strung together like links on a chain.

"Need two more rows. Prices are down. You can remove. I can do it next spring." John adjusted the tip of his stained DeKalb hat and flashed his eyes toward his truck. Then, as if he had forgotten to grab his keys on his way out the door, he added "Sorry, mam."

I wanted to tell him that my son Jake, then five, helped me plant the tree on Earth Day. I wanted to show him the photo of Jake, at 10, standing next to the tree that finally matched his height. I wanted to tell him about the Basset Hound named Missy and the Border Collie named Nike buried just east of the tree. But I said nothing. Not even a plea for its life. I simply obliged with a blank "okay" and took the piece of paper containing the executioner's decree.

The record snowfall of the winter offered a pristine stage for the lone blue spruce, perfectly positioned between our red barn and red shed. She alone kept spring's green promise against the white backdrop. On weekend mornings, when the sunlight tipped its hat, I would find myself lingering in front of the sliding glass door, coffee in hand, concocting a plan to save her. This is what led to the red lights. I festooned her in a scarlet dress, easily announcing her presence to the distant roadways. In some delusional Disney fashion, I imagined the community coming together to save her. But my breaking heart held little ground against the property lines sketched out in black and white.

One late March day, while I worked in a nearby county, I received a call from my panicked neighbor. "Your tree...a truck...yanked with a chain." I closed my eyes and waited for his voice to silence. All day, I replayed the scene in my head, the lovely blue spruce violently plucked from life. Oddly, when I returned home to survey the site, I found no indication that the tree had even existed. No gaping hole, no roots begging for life, nothing but a barren space. I suppose the blue spruce gave up easily, resigning with no clutch on the ground that nourished her. Perhaps the farmer, with a moment's remorse, preened the area, concealing the evidence of his deed.

Now the pleasant May weather pushes me into the garden—a place to contemplate on all fours. I reposition the rocks around the red shed that have been moved by the hands of winter. I feel the foreign sun on my back and the unbridled breeze tipping my hat. The absence of the blue spruce's shadow casts me in light, fully exposed. I rest on my heels and regard the empty space. I imagine the beautiful blue spruce that once protected me from the elements. And for the first time, I wonder why I never thought about the imaginary line of what is mine and what is not.