

TO THE MASTER POET FROM HIS STUDENT

Knowing how it all hangs on the turn of the lathe,
on the ordinary wooden phrase, reshaped,
I try to miter your favor around my small corner.
I nod like leaves in the breeze
of your observations, answer your questions
with what I hope won't split or you can't chop.
Someone with a louder voice
has already routed the heartwood.

I search the forest for perfect pith
to drop your jaw, make you file me away
in the gray rings of your head--
oh, not near Dickinson or Eliot or Jarrell--
I hope for just enough good grain
to make you consume my unseasoned burl
with a hunger-- the hunger
of lone trees for other trunks and canopies,
ferment of kindred humus at their roots.

But the timbre of my pitch bends,
my carved sentences are cut mid-stroke, drilled
by other voices, upended and left dangling
like stringy hemlock participles. My presence
scatters like pine pollen.

"Who?" you will say a week from now
should you hear my name. I struggle to rivet you
with possibilities, rummage my tool box
for sharpness, anything pointed,
find my needles too soft and green. But watch,
long-time hero and sometimes summer mentor,
I may yet slip a splinter beneath your nail.