

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 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.

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