

Melvin Wilk

THE FIREFIGHTERS

When I first saw from a distance,  
after a week of digging fire trenches with them  
high in the Clearwater Mountains of Idaho,  
four naked men washing at evening in the swift river,  
their bodies rippling clean and beautiful,  
all their strength just under the surface, like  
the water  
in which they stood easily soaping themselves,  
I wished I dared join them.  
But I was a freshman New Yorker out West,  
not easy about being unclothed  
in a river in a forest with men whose names I  
did not know.

That night, in my sleeping bag,  
the other fighters scattered around me  
and all of us under the same stars,  
it wasn't the towering stars that moved me,  
but the possibility of brotherhood,  
drawing me close to all that was distant:  
the moral power of men who have nothing to hide.