

Jim Peterson

A WRESTLER OF TREES

Why would an old man undress
In the woods,
Summer gone,
Autumn swinging in the trees,
A long year's second childhood
More stinging to the skin?

He lies naked in the grass,
Crooked cane like a dead snake beside him,
Gnats in a swarming mist around him,
his body
Moving in small ways
Like an animal's
To keep the flies off,
Eyes fixed points
Against the lazy motion
Of breeze and leaves of grass.

When he stands, slumped
Like a wounded bear
Making himself a target for the second time,
One leg little more than dragging,

The hunter in his blind
Raises the gun,
Unable to shake from his sight
That pale and useless shape,
A stillness deciding to move
Having drawn into itself
All that eyes and time in a single place
Can draw.

Nestled into sapling thicket
On the side of a hill
Overlooking a small pond
There is an old easy chair
A friend brought down for him,

The stuffing blowing off in tiny bits
Like dandelion seeds.

When the old man sits
He and the chair become one thing
Still and looking, listening,
Arms flat on arms,
Backs of knees hooked snugly
Over the cushion's lip,
The old chair
Slowly fading from beneath him,
The wind
Blowing leaves against him like a stone,
Catching on the side of his face,
Somersaulting away.

Finally he grabs the slender bough
Of a young tree standing near him,
Grip returning grip,
A contest between young men
Who still have something to prove,
The muscles in his forearm
Distending once again,
The young tree trembling down into its roots,
The old man pulling something up
From the earth beneath him
That holds him to this time and place
For one more day,

That draws him back into this world
Of what the eyes and ears and nose
Can do,
Of what the fingers feel and make,
Of what the tongue can taste and say.

The old man looks around wildly,
Sings of the city of his youth,
The forest of his old age.

That is why he comes to this place,
Comes naked as the day he was born.