

Jay Griswold

THE SKIN OF THE INVISIBLE

The earth is alive.
I told you, Walt Whitman, that night
we sang in the dark Ohio woods,
drunk, going down shoulder to shoulder
toward that luminous vein.
Yes, I know. You never reached
the Ohio river. Dogwoods bloom
nevertheless, and the husks
of last year's milkweed
rattle like shells in each
successive wave of wind.
I don't come to pay homage, old man.
We must have looked a sight
when we stripped ourselves naked
and swam far out in the stagnant current.

I sing a little still
and miss the sea. You would have touched me
if you could, your big, human hands
resting lightly on my shoulders
to give me something more than words.
A barge wailed, the melancholy lights
of Cincinnati fell behind us,
and in the dark I couldn't see your face,
just the motion of your white beard
the wind barely rippled.

Is it true the dead
rise up through the roots of trees?
On certain nights the stars are heard
howling at their own loneliness.
I touch the things my father's hands
have touched: smooth wood
of gunstocks, that bird's-eye maple
.06 he carved and polished
alone in the cell of himself
that winter we spent above the Hudson.
The river froze. I remember gulls
perched on the snowdrifts,
the thud of ice-breakers clearing a channel.

Tonight,
my father's hands would tremble
if they touched a living thing.
He is like an old tree
leaning in his wisdom toward the forest.
I don't think he will sing with me
those songs so sad they end in silence.

And you, Walt Whitman,
naked as the day you were born,
huge, and beautiful, and sweet,
the ink of the Ohio river
dripping off your skin
like the ghosts of herons
who will fly two thousand miles
just to build a nest in your beard
among the few surviving angels...

I sing of you, of moss-filled places where the grey
sky gathers itself: the loneliness
of loins, the secrets that are buried
in the fur of the chest,
the warmth of your breath close to my face.
Who has seen the skin of the invisible?
I pass right through
the mist; I dress
alone.

And go my way up the slag-
pitted walls of the grave.
My father's eyes might say:
who are you, and what are you doing here?
Now even he is fading away,
going back to the dark places.

And you, Walt Whitman,
what can I say
but sing a little about the earth?
Yes, I still touch the rough
bark of trees,
the way I wanted to touch
my father's cheek, and wish him
Godspeed.
The trees understand.
I too wrestle with them
roaring with love
in spring, when they grow limber again.