

Mr. & Mrs. Hughes, Camping

Christine Walde

"A typical, good wilderness campsite is close to a supply of fresh water, but the tent itself is placed above water level, with front of tent facing lake"

- Chapter 22, "Selecting a good campsite"
from Better Homes & Gardens' *Family Camping, 1961*

arrive late afternoon the sun still
high not yet wobbling in the west
shuddering orange against the backdrop of trees

they stare solemnly overcome
with the power of nature so bold
& stark with dark promise they park
the car & unpack it glad to be
sleeping on a bed of earth at last they
can feel the future open its arms like the child
she is carrying but can't know yet or so history
tells us they eat biscuits so hungry he
eats straight from the box while saying with his mouth
full I'll start gathering firewood & she says shouldn't we
set up the tent first & he says yes that's a good idea

& so he goes & gets the canvas bag from the trunk &
carries it in his arms to where she's standing
saying here & he says over here
we can face it out toward the water & she says
oh yes lovely thinking of how she bought it
back in Boston where they will never go back
to their Willow Street apartment again & she says
let me help you & he reminds her how he could do it
himself since he's been camping since he was seven
even having lived in a tent on the lawn of St. Botolph's
though not that many three to be precise years ago & he says
alright rather begrudgingly since he'd rather she looked
for fire wood while he sets the tent up but
because their marriage is founded on a principle
of ideological equals in the modern sense of midcentury morals
he says alright again & so

they get to the task of opening the canvas bag which
smells sweet as the way only canvas can & they
unfold the folds of the tent where the seam is dark and cold
and creased black and they start pitching the poles



& locating the pegs & the mallet which she gets from the trunk as he calls out to her for it & they work together as they always have as they always will even in death although they don't know that yet because they're in the here and now and he's reaching out & heaving the heavy flaps open & lifting it up with his arms as she stands beside him and girds the centre beam with her hip & the work of it hard & sure as he shouts out her to hold it up while he hammers in the braces & the pegs as the fly lines glide between his fingers as the sheer physical work of it makes him sweat in the surprising July heat he thought they wouldn't get up here in Canada stopping every now

& then to consider the stillness of the trees & the call to that place in the lake where he senses the fish lie still & silent at the bottom as only fish can do & she says can I come out now & he says yes of course & as she steps out in the sun smiling stares into black trees hearing children & other families laughing & the sunlight filtering through the air in waves that echo the flat mirror of the lake that she now longs to suddenly enter after what has been three days driving north to arrive at this & she looks at him & says is that

it then & they stare at the tent proud of their accomplishment & say let's get our bed set up so they get the ground sheet & the sleeping bags & the pillows & then as they finish he says I'll go get the firewood while you get dinner ready so he walks into the trees & begins collecting branches gathering different shapes & sizes into his arms & taking them back to where she stands over the picnic table going through the boxes of goods & says where are the matches & she says here & puts the box in his hands as he puts them in his pocket & dumps the wood in the fire pit where he leans down & places the wood piece by piece like words together & he believes

a poem is like a fire & as he arranges the twigs & dry branches he breaks apart with his hands word by word branch by branch flame by flame he sees the sky now hung



high with trophies of Keatsian cloud & he knows
it's what she's thinking too
as she looks up & sees them all there
impossibly white huge undulating
in the upper echelons of air & she hears
him striking a match the rough scratch
of flint against the side of the box & she looks
over at him holding the tiny flame
of the tiny match in his hand & lighting the wood
& she thinks lovingly he knows how to make a
good fire this fine husband of mine

& he smiles in the glow until
finally after a minute of looking at the fire
she says to him are you hungry & he
looks at her & says yes yes I am

