The Five O'clock January Light

I sit on the wall of stones we placed the short crescent blade of the shears resting against one thigh while I hone it true with a slim triangular file until the cutting edge shines.

We're only ever alive 'cause we ain't dead yet.

He used to talk like that, while we worked, side by side, for over fifteen years, without ever indulging in any extended conversation.

But he taught me how to find the face in the most stubborn and ugly piece of granite you might come across and chip it free.

And he taught me how to prune as if your blades were twined lengths of studiously selected wolves' hair, the kind most favored by Chinese calligraphers.

You create your own space, inside and out, see?

He'd clip away at the chaotic exuberance of each summer the way the conductor of an orchestra might brandish his wand and choose ragged-toothed saws and rusting axes to butcher and lop off those limbs that no longer balanced the lively ideogram he had etched against the winter sky.

When I confessed that I had always wanted to make art he asked me how you could go about doing something like that when everything was already made, everywhere at once.

He didn't have much education but he reckoned you can't create nothing out of nothing and I reckon he was right.

Now I test the blade against my thumb and become aware of the sunlight on my face strong enough to leave its mark today. Then I glance over my shoulder and study the ridge still laced with the melting snow and I know it isn't over yet.

Every year it's the same, he would say, spring bustin' in 'fore the final freeze.

It's not supposed to happen like that, but it does. And he was supposed to stick around longer than he did.

But instead he went off and disappeared, leaving me with the quiet lesson of parting: how every value adheres to the source that generates it.