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In Missouri Country

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IN MISSOURI COUNTRY

You saw from a distance,
how no one town held them
as they held to each other,
with sparse, leathery roots.
Yet the landscape they traveled
stayed as constant as the wind.
A long brown snake, the Missouri cut
through a hundred miles of prairie
and another hundred
and another.
Your own perspective stood silent
before that sense of space.
The family moved but always
cottonwoods huddled by the river,
where they picnicked, Sundays,
near the town.
No one town had a name as long.
Missouri flowed along the tongue
with cottonwood, gooseberry,
chokecherry and willow.
Children were warned away
from the rumbling undertow.
They learned the still,
surface float
that would ride to a neutral current.

Looking back, from a distance,
you still heard
the meadow lark's five clear notes,
saw five children,
like five fence posts
where hawks perched,
strung along the horizon.
Their lovers, too, appeared,
silent on the horizon,

strung out in the bar rooms.
Hide and seek among the poker games.
In Missouri country,
clouds took more shapes
than the mind could encompass,
changed as fast
as the reach between lover and loved,
father and children.
You mused on a dry, still-faced land,
tuned to the river.

When your gaze ran full of distance,
the horizon came unstrung.
You saw how people leaned
to draw that distance in.
Their roots were thin wire,
searching out a radiant current.
They played for a strong hand
on space.