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Rafting the Brazos

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Rafting the Brazos

Downriver rocks were rapids. All summer after chores we dragged our tractor inner tubes, patched like Uncle Murphy's face on Sunday, and launched them on the wide flat water.

We shoved them out to the middle, kicking our feet like frogmen. Splashing, our dogs barking on the bank behind us, we cursed each other for distance.

Someone always cheated. At fourteen games are serious as sex. Everything has rules and everybody breaks them. And so the day Durwood Stanley slumped over

on his tube and dropped his paddle we passed him and jeered at whatever stunt he was pulling, watching nothing but brown water turn foam-white up ahead.

Each of us fought for flumes through the boulders, the only way to keep on breathing, catching our breath and plunging under water, each man for himself,

boiling in hell and out again, back on the Brazos mud-brown, flowing as if it hadn't happened. Laughing, wiping our eyes and bragging our ride was the damnedest ever, we finally saw

Durwood's empty red and blue patched tube bob by, riding high on the river, bulging like lungs held too long, about to burst.

Later, our fathers reasoned the doctor found

no water in his lungs, nothing we could do
to save him, no matter how long we pumped
after we pulled him out, how long
we huffed and blew into his rubber mouth.