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Smokey Water Doubled Over

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Smokey Water Doubled Over

1.

A nylon rope tugging me up out
across the water aims my skis
into the enormous stretches of Lake Sakakawea
so hastily that ridges

along the cove have slid their necks
beneath the reservoir of Garrison Dam
before I dare lift mine.

Far ahead, Grandpa, his boat
bellyflopping waves, sprayed,
scans my towline clasped to a metal rod
lassoing the motor's blind head.

The pair of angled waves rolling away ever wider
form an arrowhead;
its shaft, froth bubbling longer
than the length of my skis.

Beneath them, I've heard,
lies Elbowoods, a town
Hidatsa, Mandan and Arikara Indians
had built near the Big Muddy.

Nowadays rumors hint about fish
evolving in depths sun sealed;
their eyes, white scales. Not a few,
gigantic, like wiggling rotted beams,
taste of burrowed silt.

My waterskis smack across the smooth foam.
Fintails thump, so I look
for the air bubble pearl
of a huge, blind fish surfacing.

2. Arikara Legend

The Wolf and Lucky-Man Create Land

*Wolf bid a duck circling
an immense lake to dive
down beneath the water to fetch dirt
from the bottom. North of shore
Wolf flung the mud, said, let it be
prairie for rambling buffalo.*

*Lucky-Man sent the same duck
underwater for even more lakebed.
Thrown south: buttes, coulees formed.
The people, he said, will choose
shelter for their ponies and dogs.
In wintertime, kicking
storms will thin the prairie.*

*Soon a river wobbling
between the two shoulders of land.*

3.

Northeast, on a flat square lot
by Whiteshield, the nearest water
the kind that lies in asphalt,
heat wavered,
never splashing the tires,

an Arikara powwow has begun.
Dancers in gaudy costumes,
numbered contestants moving to drum chants,
aimlessly circle an electricity pole
set in a grassy ring
enclosed by concessionaires, tents,
campers, a gate with a sign
that says, NO DRUGS OR ALCOHOL ALLOWED.

Fur trader's whiskey: gunpowder,
river water, Jamaica ginger,
chewing tobacco or molasses
sparked by a jigger of booze.

Suddenly an amplified voice
hushes the drummers. The dancers halt,
while the grasshoppers sit munching
the announcer's platform
built of plywood not sacred cottonwood.

The snow tree's split-axed
log faces once stacked by Indian woodhawks,
then berry-stained, dealt as cedar
to steamboats owned
by J.J. Astor's American Fur Company.

4.

Brigadier General Lewis A. Pick's
Corps of Engineers cast a concrete dam.
Pekitanoui, the smokey river
of dirt, bloated the valley
now as exposed as northern prairie.

Along the old riverbed, flooded groves
of snow trees still huddle.
Their gaunt watersilvered arms, snapped
off above the wrists, stretched,
can't reach the trinket beads
strung on powerlines overhead;
those sparkling baubles
meant to warn only bladed wings.

Awaho: floodplain timber,
wild fruit and medicinal herbs
both nurtured by surface water.
The bottomland soil held remnants
of Like-A-Fish-Hook village.

The widened river washed over
gravestones, split
the three tribes of Fort Berthold
onto lands forked by swollen creeks.
Electric plants took root.

Lifted from the rising waters,
the Mandans' Lone Man Shrine:
a water willow sash marking the high tide
around the stockade He built
to save the tribe from a great flood.

5.

Cars driving west from New Town
cross a bridge moved upstream;
its original site swallowed by Lake Sakakawea.
Nineteen spans, each named
for a different chief, but the exit
honors the Mandans' Four Bears.

Killed by a smallpox epidemic
brought aboard a steamboat, *St. Peter's*,
Mato Tope called from his deathbed
for an uprising to leave
not a single *wasicun* alive.

From the bridge, Four Bears Motor Lodge
beckons. Modern currents
flow from the outlets
in each room. Visitors,
lured by a chance to race outboard motors
like ponies down the flooded valley,
reel in big, ugly fish. Some
of them, eaten, leap hard again.

— *Daniel Hill*