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Todd Federickson

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While Canoeing the Red Lake River Near Goodridge, Minnesota, We Speak of Direction

We speak of bent willow and goldenrod, the inevitability of downstream. We speak a language of airborne seeds, a delicate geometry floating over the plowed black clods.

Bubbles swirl past, sticky on the water. A fray of snarled weeds. The slow current catches us, swings us wide around into wild rice, nudges the bow against the soft bank.

When we speak, we speak of growth in wheat, flow in river. What is most abstract is between us. Our words tangle there, and scrape.

We leave bulrush and blue gentian, and continue drifting. The riverbottom rises and falls, its bristle-red weeds combing silence like a mollusk’s foot. Looking down into the water, I wonder what is actually moving; we seem snagged while the weeds, unanchored, roll downstream.

Occasionally, a pile of beaver sticks, cleaned white, on the bottom. The large rodents have eaten what they needed to get through winter. I love their tangible efforts: the bare sticks, the mounded lodge, the woven dams. The half-cut popple notched to fall riverward.

Wheat and corn revolve around us. We think we are the center, that we have placed ourselves here. That because of us, brown mallards panic from cattails, that the rice surrounds us, rustling its ripe maroon heads against the canoe.

In this silver slot amid green, our abstractions are carried away by the water the way a hawk glides and turns, effortless over fallow fields. The way a lover, leaving, can imagine the same river many miles upstream and find it much more beautiful there.

Todd Frederickson