

Two Poems · *Jonathan Holden*

RIVER TIME

Day after day we fell deeper
in love with gravity. Mornings
we could hardly wait to catch up
with the water. In tandem, making
aluminum shout over gravel, shush
up in the sand, I and my taciturn
friend from Minnesota would drive
our canoe down the bank at the river,
steady the boat for Tom's small son,
scramble in ourselves and then surrender.
"River time" we called it for a couple
of days, until we forgot the old time,
river time became absolute time,
the current our clock. We had struck
some common, rock-bottom pace.
We were drifting in step
with each floating leaf, with every
unblinking blister of foam
under the channel's silent spell,
no need to paddle
except to adjust to the ticking
current, trowel a slow whirlpool, a furl
filling up in the ripples we trailed,
correcting our timing to keep
in perfect stride with the law.

A dozen canoes, one canoe to a bend,
moving with the caravans of moving fog.
By noon everyone would be stoned
on pot and the hundreds of pounds
of beer we had brought.
The architect and his wife, all
the assistant professors, the various

students, even my friend in the stern
would be rendered inert,
complacent, unwilling to speak.
Whatever it was we might need
we would let the river decide.
We'd unbuttoned ourselves from our words,
we'd jettisoned the ballast
of the usual week, left all that
upstream on the bank. It made us
pleased with ourselves, day
after day, simply to register
the faithful way those banks continued
unfolding themselves and tree followed tree
through the warm, intermittent rain.
The rain meddled in everything.
It riveted the tarnished water, shooting
plump bolts through and through it,
spot-welding reflections of the sky.
The rain hopped all over your tarp
and in the hot swarm of your hair.
It was on your tongue, in your joints,
in the steam of your breath,
until you forgot to shoo off
the drops that alit, forgot
the wet yoke sticking tight to your back,
the hot swamps you lugged around
in both boots, forgot even the mush
squeezing foam between your toes.

Long before our last night on the river
we were wet beyond hope,
we could get no wetter. That night
someone's flashlight beam nicked
a flat rock with a necklace
curled on it—soft, precious—
a copperhead blocking the path.
In a hutch of clear plastic
anchored by rocks, we skinned

and steamed together. Outside, a bonfire
shooting twice as high as a man
gave its fierce work to an armload
of stones, coaxing them into embers.
We took turns steering to the tent
between tongs each red-hot rock
and scattered water on it,
making steam snarl, blinding
ourselves with blast upon blast.
Naked, whooping, we'd charge
at the river, then crawl back
in the blur of that stifling incubator
where we were babies again,
the language was skin,
you could forget even your name.
Of the girl who stole with me later
back to my tent I remember only
that she was wet wherever I parted her,
alluvial, how the graceful curved way
her hair fell seemed like a word
I had learned once—anonymous,
familiar. She was all words at once.
And I remember how, halfway
toward dawn, the cries of two
whippoorwills kept opening
and closing like twin arteries
while we answered each other.

Next morning, our last, the river
was iron, frying, leaping
in the light rain as people numbly
traded partners. I carried
my pack to the girl's canoe
and we took the current's smooth
old hand, let it take our hand,
our boat rhymed with the river,
and the drizzle lifted, the complexion
of the water cleared,

and we could see in the interior
the dark, slow, slippage of bass.
Oars shipped, we watched a moccasin
give us the slip, scribble away
deep in that gray-green psalm.
And far out through the brush
and the mist's restlessness
a bobwhite swiped its whetstone.
We just let the boat drift,
pleased with the lull of inertia,
foreseeing no end, ready
for only what could be more water,
knowing that around the coming bend
across another misty clearing
the profile of the trees would be
unbroken, curving into the next
bend where another old tree
would be succumbing, tempted
to drink, its crooked reach
combed by the water, waking
the current under the cut-bank
before the water would widen
and we'd stall
in an even purer silence,
dim canyons of boulders, of twilight
deep in the green requiem below
easing silently under our bow,
the river adagio.

That afternoon, reluctant, we beheld
through gray, scarcely seeping air
stumps of a broken bridge
and down both banks a dump,
a great population of junked cars—
bodies which, once pushed, went churning
headfirst and, catching
on roots, had flipped on their backs
with the rest of the rusty scree—

a scorched city lost under the trees—
until the next bend gathered us
in, a crowd of people came slowly
around, walking on the rocks
where two trucks were parked
and a road—a shock of sky in the trees—
petered into the floodplain stones
and at the shallows stopped.
And two men, two fat retarded twins
in bib-overalls, two comical men,
humpty-dumpties with rotted mouths
were circling my Minnesota friend,
spitting words, gesticulating at him,
arguing he better move his goddamn
hippie van because this floodplain
here belonged to *them*, while Tom,
from his cab, glared down with a stiff
slightly puzzled stare, white-knuckled
in the face. And the look the architect
slipped me meant something dirty
he knew about, it meant *Move off*.
We walked our canoe across the ford,
shoved it up on mud. The rain
returned, through the rain
we watched one brother squat
behind Tom's camper to jot the plate.
Tom's truck wallowed, bucking in reverse
like a dog digging, spewing back rocks.
But the fat guy expected it. He lurched
the gap to his pickup's cab,
and the long .22 automatic he pulled
discharged its six dried-twig snaps
at the back where Tom's boy bounced
as the rear of the fleeing camper
leapt over the crest and out of sight.

In fistfights the hate-scent can be so strong
it gets the tightening circle half incensed.
But anger, in a shot, goes so abstract
at first you can't even recognize it.
Just this detached small-kindling spark.
Could it be some practical joke
over which both brothers on the opposite bank
now chortled and whooped like Laurel and Hardy,
they were slapping their knees, congratulating
each other with whops on the back? *What time
was it?* All I knew was how wet and cold
and pathetic we looked, searching
for footholds in the mud, slipping,
digging in our heels again and heaving
our canoes up the bank—
how sick of this desolate river and the rain.
At last the road like a room in the woods.
Token of a hug was brusque enough good-bye
to the girl, who wanted to get away
as much as I did. And I talked
with the architect of what we'd seen,
our words—the words we needed—seeping
slowly back like heat into our extremities.
Then the small chagrin of comfort—
dry socks like Christmas presents,
the reassuring idle of a car—
our words now flooding back luxuriously,
words for that godforsaken place
and how to get out of it.
Later, with time enough to bathe,
the words for our excuses, the redundancies,
the first, sweet, foreshadowing
of shame.