

JOHN BENSKO

Fur Traders on the Missouri, 1845

—after Caleb Bingham

In a dugout so low and fragile
they'd sink from the slightest wave

they're as helpless as we are.
Yet they're deadly, our ancestors.

The man in the stern
dips his paddle in the smooth, fast water.

The other—man? woman? lover?—
lounges precariously across the oversized cargo.

In silhouette on the bow, their small
animal, captive, looks toward us with a face

that can't be seen. A moment's lapse of balance
and we're drowned, our only warning

the creature's dark, alert outline.
Against the lounge's blue blouse and ocher

pants, it ties down loneliness.
It weighs the man's red-striped shirt, his golden

pointed hat. Not hunter but clown pushes
through the wilderness the troubling

mystery of the animal whose neck
is held by a loose

cord running to the bow.
Its shape extends far across the water

in shadow, a shadow that already
has taken us in, distant children

whose ancestors threaten who we are.
Will the background,

the misty trees along the bank,
the vast, mottled sky, help us

survive? Certainty is surface—thin layer
of shade and light. The wild, unknown,

and cat-like creature proceeds.
Dangerous, unmoving is a ripple

in the foreground made by a point of rock
shaped like one of its ears.