

WATAUGA DRAWDOWN

*In the fall of 1983, Watauga Lake
was drawn down to the original
river level, exposing the ruins of
Butler, Tennessee, the only
incorporated town wholly inundated
by the T.V.A.*

*"I never left. Every night,
when I go to bed, I see water
pouring down my living room walls."
Former resident of Butler*

I

Sleep displaces ordinary air. His mind struggles
with hydraulics, tries to inflate his lungs
with logic, goes under with the rest of him,
and he breathes memory.

In the grainy half-light
of water, a young boy stands on a porch rail,
his white hair teased by slow current that fails
to buoy him when he falls, so that his tongue,
habitually wedged between his teeth, is half-bitten off
on impact. When he tries to scream, a red cloud
blossoms to obscure his words, dyeing his hair the color
of fall sumac.

In the backyard a thin line of blood
rises to connect his father's punctured left leg
with the surface. The boy, older now, leans
on a fence, dawdling, watching bluegills nudge
the wavering capillary. His father sits
on the ground by the blocked Model A,
a tourniquet cinched on his thigh

with a screwdriver. “Get your mother,” he shouts. “Call Granny.” But the boy can’t believe a man who had come back unwounded from the war could bleed to death from a sliver of steel chipped off the small sledgehammer.

Older still, deeper in the lake of this dream, the boy stands on a bridge. Sky is water. The fields around lie under flood, yet the river flows beneath the bridge where he and his friends taunt one who would not climb the highest span and leap. But when Dickie Black jumps, falling slowly through water to water he doesn’t surface, but hangs in the current, his foot snared in twine and barbed wire, a sculpture the bottom thrusts up in the face of the dreamer, who wakes, sweat-drenched and tired, panting until light pours down his walls, floods his weighted chest, and he can breathe.

II

For three months gravity feeds the main sluice pulled nightly at the dam. The reservoir drains. Each afternoon he stops on the bluff to watch the valley fill with air, light wrapping the fine branches of trees rising from the surface full-grown but leafless, though no wind has blown for thirty-seven years.

When the water finally tapers itself to river, he returns to wander the remembered rooms of houses trucked to high ground before the flood to end all floods. At the corner of Spring and Main he stands in a parlor of mud.

Wind,
sweeping the hills the water has rubbed bald,
smells vaguely estuarial. Mud, he thinks,
you come from mud, history's silt where everything
slides.

A man and a woman slip, tugging
at something, fall and come up mud-covered,
laughing, as they right a rusted screen door
still advertising Rainbo Bread. He bites
his tongue to cut off a shout warning them away.

Toeing the mud he turns up nothing,
no rusted cap pistol, badge or toy hammer,
silent homing devices drawing him back
after almost four decades in the muck.

Through invisible beams and shingles he watches
a jet connect clouds. Three months before, his own boat
had trailed a plume across the reservoir,
this drowned community's brown sky. Now he searches
the bare hills. Terraced by the drawdown's methodical
release, they look as if the cattle, after the town
and its name were hauled away, continued
to graze the lush grass. He listens for their bells'
recession, a boy's call home where supper
always waited.

But today, no bells ring.
The slick bowl he stands in doesn't echo
and his supper waits in a town the map
shows someplace else. Leaving his truck on the bluff,
he walks the darkening river bottom toward home,
relearning the equation of viscosity and distance.

III

When night inundates the cove, he flails the dark air,
a swimmer lost, exhausted. Each time he tries
to climb the steep bank to the road he slides
back, his body gouging slick troughs that catch
the faint light the stars give up, and mock him.

There is no way out in the dark. His shouts
bring no one, though tires hum on the valley road,
even when he lies out on a flat rock
where sleep is a wall of mud that slowly rolls over him.

IV

In this dream three figures wave from the bare shore
of an island his boat circles—mud people like those
in *National Geographic*. They beckon him in,
but when his boat approaches scurry back
to blend with the tree line, reappearing,
when he turns toward deep water, to stare
in sudden rain that pounds the surface like applause.

Through the downpour's blurred curtain he strains
to recognize their faces in the contours carved
by erosion. He stammers a name, tries to shout it
when he knows the tall one, his father, who leads
the others back to water's edge as if seeking
rescue. He can save them all: the father,
gone almost forty years; and Dickie Black,
his hair flattened like wet newspapers,
hunched over, shivering as he was the day
he plunged from the bridge and never came back;
and the small boy, too, the towhead who bleeds
from the mouth, the rain-thinned blood and mud-runoff
almost indistinguishable.

But when he throttles down,
coasting to shore for the pick-up, all three
walk calmly out, step off in deep water,
and disappear. No one looks his way or waves.
In neutral, he waits for their circles to form
on a surface exploding under rain.

V

In the town's open grave he lies under star spillage,
bone cold and sore, thinking his way home.

In morning light he would climb the slick rocks
at the bridge, a mud man up from the lake bed
returned empty-handed to track the main street
in town while his neighbors, barely awake,
leaned over coffee and first cigarettes.
He would pound on their doors, call them out
in their housecoats and frowsy pyjamas,
and tell them in clear words
that time buries itself like a river under a lake
that river feeds, that though the past is irretrievable,
nothing left down there is gone.

He could see himself
in six months, afloat on the refilled Watauga
where the drowned swim forever, where his father
eternally tinkers on old Fords.

He would drift
across the hill above the pasture, listening
for the soft chime of bells to mark his anchorage.

Moored, he would sink thick chunks of red meat,
like bait for world-record catfish,
and watch the bloodlines spiral down to where
a boy waited in his fathomable yard
for the gospel of aluminum cans, messages
stamped on the bellies of lost lures.

Under clouds scattered on the calm lake, the town
would reassemble itself as in a film
time-lapsed backwards. Streets would shrug off
decades of mud, houses settle on their washed foundations,
and as townspeople scuttled into habits,
trucks would ease out of store lots and service stations,
backing toward Bristol, Johnson City and Elizabethton,
returning their undelivered loads of newspapers
and salt, hymnals and dried beans, work shoes,
fine sugar and loaf after white loaf of Rainbo Bread.

CALLING

for Bill Levin

It had been a lark, after dinner
and too much wine, to shepherd
my puzzled guests beyond
the porchlight's ragged arc
to the woodlot's edge
where I would whistle softly
for the owls. Tennessee's own
good ole boy of Winander,
I would listen, then warble
the uvular trill they always
answered when the whistle
failed.