

River People—The Lost Watch

When we were river people
once in a while you talked different,
different because we were under
the influence of elders—their repetition,
a northern dialect of hands
coming apart in stories.

When we were river people
the sun made an alphabet
of light struck trees
while you sat on a stump
in the yard and rolled
tobacco from the plants
we grew
in the raised beds
by the power
pole.

When we were river people
the dog we took from dog death row
at the shelter got cancer and
we put her in the ground near
where young thunder woman
learned to hit golf balls
toward an old shirt on a stick
where every shot was lost.

When we were river people we made medicine
for Zahquod and fasted and sweat at dawn
for four days, following Eagleheart's instructions.
Zahquod drank the tea for a few months
and died the following fall.

When we were river people we put stones
in the mailbox to keep the weekend rowdies
from hitting it again while we slept
and we drove
to town every Thursday to
take Anungoonce to tap class.

There were boys after her after that
and we let one in.
There she held him close often and made sure
he got his needle before he stupored in
dropping sugar.

When we were river people
big leaf rhubarb grew,
wild Turkeys walked in the mist
up the drive
a few big hens in front
and the gas man apologized when
he saw you talking with pwaagun
early one Friday when you heard the news
about Zahqoud starting on interleukin 2.

When we were river people you listened
to Townes every day for a week of summer
'to live is to fly' he said 'both low and high'
he said with his cracked hard Oklahoma voice
he reminded you of Smoke
the week you watched his horse
and the belly laugh his goddaughter
Anungoonce let loose
outside the barbed wire
pasture fence as Seguili the horse ran.

When we were river people we lost power
for five days one winter, so we braced
ourselves on fallen logs when we shit outside
and we fed the woodstove and slept on the
floor and drove to Canadian Lakes to shower.

When we were river people
singing woke you one night
and you ran outside asking
the stars and the creator to help
you remember the words
remember the words
Giizhay manidoo have pity
Giizhay manidoo bring healing.

When we were river people Geeshik
Eway Abaat would not talk to you
though you kept asking to let your love
for her find its way to her, so you could
tell her about the shooting star and her birth
under a formation of white cranes
And so you could laugh with her
about when she was three,
when she came crying out
of the sweat with Grandma Rose.

When we were river people visitors
came with strangers and strangers came with
friends to bring wood and stones for namings
sweats and thirsty dance sings and all those
gifts Eagleheart shared with you
when you lived out west.

When we were river people deer
ran through morning by morning
one morning a string of them
one walking wounded outside
hobbling on three legs, an arrow
through the fourth, outside the
window as you made breakfast for all
the girls who came looking for Nawgwayawp
stayed overnight after the dance.

When we were river people there was
no time for writing, too many people
were dying, too many children were
growing, there were too many ceremonies
to make, too much firewood to cut, too many calls,
too many fasts, too many trips to
White Earth and Turtle Mountain
too much burned gas
too many names requested
to be given, to people you know
who still don't know who they are,
too many appointments, disappointments,
too much tired talk, the difference between
going to sleep and staying up
already past deciding.

When we were river people
Crow knew just like you know now
a stone is no place for a watch
as you know what we call time
can't be made up with words
lost, or remembered, or held down

to earth, or be left behind
by blessings, forgotten, or be any more
than a relative of light, who returns home,
as bright clear sun reporting all
that has gone between rising and falling.

—Gordon Henry Jr.