

How I Come to the River

[Sean Prentiss]

I.

This river—a slate honey—teems
with summer shad returning to the headwaters
that washed their scales those years ago.

From a rusting bridge, we watched them swim
upriver. *Dead by autumn*, she whispered.

II.

In dark hollows, wide-leaved elms and loose-skinned
sycamores grow. Dark and crying creeks feed
into other creeks that feed into rivers.

That summer she taught me their names—the Alleghany,
the Pequest, the Puanacussing.

I roll these names inside my mouth.

III.

I walk along a shale bank to a beach overrun
by raspberries. Years ago we fed berries to each other.
Then, during a new moon, she abandoned

her clothes to smooth rocks. She swam
bone-white to the river's middle

and bathed in no moonlight.

IV.

Midday, I slide naked into water warm
and swim along a bank of cottonwoods.
The branches hang (in accidental reverence) over the river.

The trees whisper, *Coming winter, shedding leaves,
bare branches.*

I whisper, *This is how I come to the river.*

V.

A heron leaps from McElany Island, beats its pinions twice
against water—breaking circles with circles
and circles inside them—

and then countless times against a sky that stops at nothing
(not cornfields or slate quarries or the Kittatinnies)

as it flies over every dark thing.