

Canoeing the Milk River: A Theory of Lines

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I.
Muddy Milk River, morning sky.
Michael and I load the canoe,
strap down tarps, slip from stony shore,
hesitant red ark, sunrise on water.

We paddle. Ravens perch in poplar dew
hoarding shade for the coming noon,
points of light, lines of flight, silhouettes
of themselves in clutched wings.

A line marks
the minimal distance between
an act of inscription and
the place it makes.

The river is moving;
a raven flies downstream.

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II.

On the horizon cumulonimbus
clouds accumulate, roll dark.
We land the canoe and nest
in a cup of cliff
under the blue tarpaulin
under bruised blue clouds.

A horizon is absolute, and absolutely
porous. Wind slips in through soil pores,
cottonwoods thrust up dappling ochre mud,
then rain—

droplets patter soft earth
drawing lines—intricate rivulets
of silt and sand that slide toward
the ever-changing river.

III.

Meriwether Lewis' Diary 1805:
*The water of this river possesses
a peculiar whiteness, being about
the color of a cup of tea with milk
we called it milk river.*

A domesticated line—

each movement becomes thing,
each thing, already a word,
is etched in place.

A peculiar whiteness—

The River that Shuns all Others
becomes a cup of tea with milk.
Living water, distant ritual.

A canoe moves bodies through space the way
a name moves a body through time.

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IV.

We hunker among hoodoos
in the middle of a dead world at sunset,
driftwood fire flickers on sandstone strata—
each humble layer
ochre and umber
half a million years—
cliff and column flutter as if
the lumbering Jurassic beasts folded there
have come to dance out the sun.

A line is form carcass, system, skeleton.
A line is distinction border, horizon, stratum.
A line is time.

Our fire burns
at the bottom of an ancient sea.
Above, swallows dip and swivel,
limned in orange light they redraw sky
drawing in the night.

V.

Late afternoon we paddle into *Áísínai'pi*
land to wander a multitude scrawled in sandstone,
each image etched in a fissure of cliff.

See the line before you see the bison.
The line makes space the way a drum makes time.

This is not primitive-bison but line-bison.
It is made of the distance between
an act of inscription and
the place it marks. It makes

this place.

VI.

Michael's dad pulls up in the old Dodge
cracks a crow's smile, lifts the canoe
clattering onto the rack. Diesel chugs
up the valley, sputters over the cattle grate,
and out onto the grid of gravel and fence.

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Windows open, river in our skin
we follow the sun's sky path
burning out on the horizon.

Near the road, a coyote yips and listens,
yips and listens, then slips
through barbed wire
and out across the field.