

The Long Withdrawal

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1. Summer

On the longest day of the year
the Yukon night is a brush stroke
lightning dusk
when the sun dips into a palette of mountains
then emerges dripping crimson
on the crests of the river
we have become

confluent now
we flow the stream
elusive
do you recall the merge—
distant peaks tenuous trails
and how we were hurled together
in the mouth of rapids?

(the stiletto
sinks silent/violent
between ribs)

Now we are calm, distilled
the churn of sediment
so settled in our marriage bed
we don't see the sandbar up ahead.

Hush, don't speak
words are too wet
and gravel sticks too easy
let silence lick us separate streams
Hurry past

(retraction
springs internal bleeding)

We converge in a whirlpool
shivering in the flat of a raven's shadow
arms clasp a cold embrace
silt grinds between breaths.

2. Autumn

Mountains devour the sun
recede the Yukon day to dusk
the wind insists, erratic
we shirk, skirt.

(Denial, a dam
fragile as muslin
porous as clay)

Come, kindle a fire
in the river's bowels
we could thaw bedded rock
with our hands melt lava
with our mouths.

(ache coagulates
massive/impassive)

The river dwindles
to the thin of a pencil
we search new tributaries
strangled/triangled
slash deep welts
side by side.

3. Winter

An Arctic frost moves in
the river yields to the wind
lies still
legs rigid to the shore
between thighs
a pulsing stream
you or I oceanbound?

We have become so fixed and fluid
we need not speak
listen
beneath the ice
love snaps a whip
and memories—
eager huskies with marble eyes—
tug the harness
some die
in swift explosions
some linger
scraping the under side
but we are deaf and numb
in the rigours of frost.

4. Spring

Night froths
we are bundled on separate edges
of a river bed
drinking the melt of shores by day

we can no longer taste each other
tongues thick with hoar

the river curses in a swell
uproarious

we can no longer shout
across the din
throats hoarse with torpor

(dying of exposure
bodies riddles/needled)

the sun spits out more day
a lukewarm surface thaw
we languish in the river's fingers
frostbitten
listen to the break up
in a nearby bed
taste the promise of salt
in river mouths.

Come closer
listen.

Genni Gunn is the author of a novel, *Thrice Upon a Time* (Quarry Press), a collection of poetry translations, *Devour Me Too* (Guernica 1987), and a book of short stories which is forthcoming from Oberon.