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The Yazoo; The Arkansas

Robert Bense

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Robert Bense

The Yazoo

Past catfish farms. The marsh
plain. For two weeks, rain,
and a bridge out. Sluice gates
opened. Behind the opaque
curtain, the river of the Choctaws.
Long burden of human sacrifice.
River of defeats. Sounded by
Spanish, French, Anglos.
The muddied mouth
of the Yazoo will not be seen
today discharging its shame.
Another yellow dog
snaking through the white
soil of Mississippi.
Carting off what belongs to night.
The low branch of a sourgum
tipped under, strained
by weight that goes straight
to the bottom. Below which
there is no farther.
Genitals severed. Stuffed
in the mouth.
A length of rope, the stain
aged brown. Excited flagelants'
whips. Noose of rusty chain
tossed over a tire afterwards.
Unsuspected for how many years.
Cargo
long ago sent down
by water.

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The Arkansas

arriving at the old river
De Soto crossed,
another river enters,
a crooked road out of the deep west.
The gaping mouth of the Arkansas
vengeful, disrobing blood red
in last light. The traveler
shocked into the palpable.
The story of gold, the story of fur.
No two stories are the same.
De Soto tramping into
the warm and drowsy air.
Jolliet turned back
from the western, Spanish shore.
La Salle stopping nearby
in mist too heavy to see.
Claiming everywhere for France.
We never got this far.
The Seven Cities of Cibola
out of sight. Night rhyme
of locusts, jamming on the trail.
You once said sinister clouds
were cornering us. The sky
on its side, ready to pounce.
I see your meaning.
Black trees in the gloom ahead.
Time unaccounted for
in your childhood's darkened rooms.
Ground fog shrouding the groves.
Crows in the walnut trees chanting
over receivables, uncovered debts.

A calculus of cotton futures,
Brahman cattle. The dead
weathered in cemeteries of worn churches.
The gain substantial.
Loss, everything.
I try to forget. I try to forget.
Hawks wheeling in a clearing
sky, blinded by the sunset.
Mice and Gypsy children in their
wandering caravans, safe.
A marker explains how far
the lost tribes of Israel reached
into this fleeced paradise.
Prophets and apostles preach
in the local churches.
A couple in their seventies
walk on the levee holding hands,
beat a dog. The white miasma
ahead is river mist, river heat.
The road too flat for hell—as far
as one can see.
God's second nature writing straight
again in crooked lines.