

CLEA ROBERTS

Breakup

1. (In which a woman addresses the river)

I was a half-believer
in the myth of water.

All winter I heard the river ice
whimper and stretch in its bed.

I could speculate on breakup,
and the first boat to water
but not the weight of the ice
as it flips and squawks,
or how the water
wears it like a skin, reptilian
or how the sound of it
is like a large crowd
whispering and breaking dishes
as it goes.

It's three weeks before my steamer
heads for Dawson
stopping only at wood camps
where axes clip the air like coughs
and the forests are diminished
to log piles.

Where the channels are shallow
I feel the tug of a sandbar
like a nag, a hand on the shoulder
pulling me back.

2. (In which the river responds)

Last summer
I took the Kaska, my
slow kiss exploding
on its hull.

Like others
you dream of the gold
I drop in the shoals
of my tributaries.
With the same care
I let the caribou pass
their antlers rocking
silver under the moon.

Today I am owned.
They dig me out,
make my creeks and streams
crude and unnavigable.

And still, I deliver you
against the current
of my better judgement,
I will plant you
where my milky velocitics
pool and slow,
feel the music of your steps
cross to shore.