

The Mississippi River  
by Diane Glancy

Suddenly one day we come to a huge river.  
The people cry, remembering the Ohio.  
A soldier tells us it is the Mississippi River.  
We will cross it into Missouri.  
We camp under the cover of brush and watch  
ice chunks float by Green's Ferry landing.  
The earth and sky are ghost white in the frozen air.  
Many more die waiting for the ice to pass.  
The bluff across the river is where the earth steps up to the sky world.  
I feel my fear of the river grow.  
How can we cross that river? We'll die. We'll drown like the others.  
My father doesn't say anything.  
His hair has grayed, and his eyes are dull and hollow in his head.  
Look at it. It's a spirit river.  
I watch the ice pass for a few more days.  
Then one morning I wake with the taste of peaches in my mouth.  
I hear the soldiers preparing to cross the river.  
We always have been toward the front of the line.  
We will be among the first ones to cross.  
My heart pounds wildly.  
I hold something in my hands, but always, always, I find they are empty.  
The bear camps before me as usual.  
I try to push him away, but he doesn't move.  
I feel the stirring of his breath.  
Old bear, I cry to him, today we cross the river.  
I pat his hide. Move over. I go,  
even if it's to the afterlife with mother and the baby.  
I feel a tightness in my chest. My arms hurt.  
Surely the land and the trail we walk will fold under the earth with the sun.  
I hear the trees moaning for us.  
Above us, the clouds wear my grandmother's bone-carved hairpins.  
Grandmother, I call. She smiles.  
Her face is now gray and lovely above the wind that snarls upriver.  
I see the spirits eating from my feather-edged dishes.  
I hear them in the wind.  
They put down their knives and forks.  
They come and held the sides of the tossing raft  
as we step onto it, some of us falling, others crying out.  
The spirits wear bright tunics and turbans, and I can't see beyond them  
as we cross the river.  
They hold the raft steady as it jerks between large pieces of ice.  
I spoon more corn bread to them, more squirrel meat and peach cobbler.

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I cooked it, just this morning, in my dream.  
Hold on. Hold on. I hear them say as we cross the river,  
their ghost voices laughing to the freezing wind.

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