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Upper Mississippi: Fire And Water

This year the grass is so dry, a whisper
could set it off. Drought has descended

like a summer snow, bleaching the grasslands
along the river, where, for a thousand seasons,

the Mandans set the prairie on fire, loosed
the blistering monster to thunder over lives

of the slow-legged and gorge on grass.
Firefighters now, they rush in for the kill,

aiming for the fiery throat. They return home,
soot-faced, hands stuffed with money to burn.

We've penned her in, fattened her up, tamed her.
Named her 'reservoir.' All the cottonwoods

on her banks fell, choked with water.
Like corpses they toppled, barkless, leafless,

covering themselves with the sadness
of water. Snakes, the harmless but ghastly

bull snakes, slithered for cover.
A ghost scene. Scavengers drove out from town,

hauled driftwood home, doveled it out,
for trays, bowls, candle holders.

Citizens meet in the Wrangler, their arms folded
across their chests. They've been double-crossed

by the Corps of Engineers. *The Brigadier General*
has some explaining to do. They accuse him

of mismanaging the river, allowing in drought

too much water to leave her upper basin.

It flows downstream to fatten the lower basin
two states south. That isn't why Dakotans agreed

to give up the river for a dam. *It's come to this,*
hot air and steam. No one goes home satisfied.

She has a marina on the east, Jed's Landing.
Little cabins, cute cabins you can rent.

Last year Standing Rock bought the landing back.
But what can they do now for a fat river?

Who would recognize her, slim again? Her
waves, *oh, oh, oh, oh* in places. She lies low,

looking at the sky, reflecting the blue
with deep bends but never overflowing

her banks. In the land's ravines, desire
drums for the wet fervor of the former lover.

Thundercloud the rancher shows his neighbor,
Joe Keller, the platform where his mother's body

turns to dust under the sun, its slow return.
Keller, a man with ten children, remembers

dust to dust from his own catechism,
engrained in a pride of howlers,

Zachariah's shepherds with dried-up arms.
On a thin shore, we rail at small currents

from large disappointments, excited and fearful
when fire ignites the basin of an ancient sea.