At Lake Whitman

Eric Nelson*
At Lake Whitman

I.
You still heard the owls then, & one midnight on Whitman Road we watched a line of seven skunks cut across the road like it was theirs; we froze in our tracks, turned tail, & ran back to the cabin a lot harder than we had to, thinking Pepe le Peu, imaginary terror more fun than the real thing: there were black bears out there! As my uncle Harold said of the Depression, "You made your own fun then."
And we went fishing so early that we had the muskrat & hawk for company & we caught rainbows with a bobber & a worm & ate every keeper with pancakes for breakfast. And sometimes there were bats upstairs & mice in the outhouse & bullfrogs in the cellar & black bears out there!

II.
At Lake Whitman, cousin Larry told us how he screwed Debbie Horse Woman & I didn't want to hear about it; she was gorgeous, a black-haired Indian girl, & always nice to me, & I didn't care what the freckled bastard said — she was no whore.
Debbie Horse Woman & her girlfriends rode their cayuse ponies around the lake — nothing else to do — & sometimes she'd let me take hers for a spin with her riding "bitch" & holding me by the waist, her cheek soft against my shoulder blade. And dreaming about her was — is — almost better than being with her.
III.
One night we "kiped" four cans of Rainier Beer from my cousin's cousins' cabin, & from the cedar porch we spied on our mothers & sisters as they skinny-dipped beyond the lily pads in the black crater lake; we goosed each other, giggled, & fell down hard at flashes of their white breasts & wet asses, & they laughed, too — they knew! In the firelight next door, our fathers cursed each other over a game of chess, invectives still a blessing in disguise. It was summer, my first drunk, & magic — the words still something good, carrying mystery.

— Eric Nelson