

Interlude

Vignette

It is maybe late summer or fall. It's dusk, I'm sure. The day is growing late and quiet, even as I hear my mother call across the water. I take another step out, and my foot sinks into red clay. The water seems to fold over itself in sheets. Another step, and my foot sinks farther into the mud. It reaches up close to my knee. I was following my dad, I think. I wanted to catch him, maybe to be carried. Water begins to swirl around my legs. "Stay there!" I can hear her calling, now from behind me. She is lying down on the bank, her back has seized up. We had fallen off the mare earlier. We were bucked suddenly while walking her up the levee. We fell and rolled. Something in the grass had spooked the horse. Mom went down first on her back into the tall grass. I fell on her. She shielded me. I was okay. But she never fully recovered, chasing chiropractors and holistic healers the rest of her life.

She is calling louder now, pleading for me to stop walking. The water is high, and my feet sink deeply into the mud as the currents of the Red River swirl around my knees. I lift my foot painstakingly out of muck. My foot comes up with a sock red stained with clay. The river mud has swallowed my shoe. As I start to cry, I feel myself swooped out of the muddy riverside by my dad and carried back to the bank. "I thought I'd lost you," she would say over and over. "I thought I'd lost you." Another murky memory.

Soon I am in the tub at my grandmother's house a mile inland from the riverbank. The warm bathwater cleans off the red mud from my socks. My clothes are being peeled off in the tub now ringed with red and brown sediment. "I was so scared," I can hear Mom say. The water is warm and calming. By the time I write this years later, the Red River will have been wrestled away from nature, its color taken, and its fierceness dormant. And later after reading this passage, my mother recalls, "One more step, and you would have been swept away. Mud saved you."