

# Body Counting by Taneum Bambrick

written by Guest Contributor | February 14, 2018



Photo Credit: John Holmgren

Accustomed to our baked skin, it was hard to remember we smelled like wet garbage until we sputtered past people who fakevomitted or threw solo cups in our wake. Like everyone working for the dam we maintained an image of functionality. A dam is justified by its abundance in each category: power, irrigation, navigation, recreation. Every body on the water proves that its unnatural swelling has utility. For us this meant drifting uncomfortably close to recreators & counting with a loud clicker, our GPS data demonstrating how and where the reservoir was used as a space. Flags clumped on a grey grid like ticks on deer skin.

\*

When a dam proves purposeless the government can, theoretically, take it away.

Every ten years the district files to renew their federal license, sending ours & other

collected numbers to the state. On counting days we were assured our

efforts meant something to commissioners personally. Sugar cookies & black coffee. The sort of things you offer someone after they donate a sack of their own blood, buy a house from you, count your bodies.

\*

We liked to imagine what it would look like to revoke the dam. Crush it out. Expose a scattered history. We were aware of what was sacrificed for the affordability of electricity. That, when considering the common good, flooding a truck stop town meant nothing in comparison to lit-up houses, ours especially. We never understood the generation of power but that the power was sent in boxes to other states, the dam safe due to the level at which it generates. We'd heard of the abandoned buildings one hundred feet below us accumulating algae. The imposed sacrifice of Native land so much land. Knowing what we knew about the reservoir it was difficult to count people half naked & vodka-drunk on a jet ski. They cut past. You could hear the water burning. To gather floating wrappers. Check the list of boxes saying these are important. These are the communities the dam is serving.

\*

The dam is a line after which the river is class divided. I.E. where is higher

up where has less cattle ditch run-off billowing into it. On the south end fewer bodies, a sense of purpose. There we'd count families swimming in holes where tributaries met the river. Children jumping off the knobbed branches of cherry trees. The longest stretch without a town. Buildings abandoned after the failure of the local railroad industry. People sat between cinder block foundations, digging rods into river rock to reel in ten-foot sturgeon. Not a popular fish but it made for months of meat. These were people who worked for orchards, the nuclear reservation, or with us at the dam in some capacity.

\*

The resorts north of the dam were illegally lodged in protected wetlands. Harsh, imported stones jutting around grey, repetitive condo buildings. Vacation homes of the kids I knew from high school. While we counted their party-barges I twisted my recognizably curly hair into a baseball hat. Their glowing bodies the most beautiful I'd ever seen, so forced tan like after peeling the first layer of bark off a pine tree. Walking an exposed sand dune, I had trash bags tied through belt loops. I would think, finding bottles of lube and whiskey in the brush, how I wanted to be someone with no register of environmental impact. My sweating jeans. I hated the crew for looking at these girls around me. I simultaneously wanted protection from men noticing my dressed body.

\*

Once, we counted four hundred recreators in one stretch. Spiraling footballs. Different stations of the same country music. None of them thinking their noise as a kind of violence. The steady motions of a deer's head as it swam, displaced, between those thin islands.

---



**Taneum Bambrick** is the author of *Reservoir*, which was selected by Ocean Vuong for the 2017 Yemassee Chapbook Contest. She is a recent graduate of the MFA program at the University of Arizona. She serves as an Associate Editor for *Narrative Magazine*. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Academy of American Poets*, *Blackbird*, *Pleiades*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Hobart*, *The Nashville Review*, *New Delta Review*, and elsewhere. She has received an Academy of American Poets University Prize, and scholarships from the Sewanee Writer's Conference and the Bread Loaf Orion Environmental Writers' Conference.