Rapid learning

Whanganui River, New Zealand

First of all, you have to enter the game, open yourself to risk. Perched upstream from where the water whets itself into blades between the serious granites make sure you take your time, assessing every strategy. Because once you commit to your path through the rapid’s tusks there’s no changing your mind, no turning back. This is not the place for mindless flow. Yes, let the current take you, exploit its relentless momentum, but never forget you are more than flotsam. Self-sufficiency is here between these cool-furred cliff walls that rise above you like hands in prayer. And once the rapid is finished with you take some time to breathe, coasting the stillness. Fill your lungs with survival, rinse adrenaline’s citrus from your mouth because the next rapid crouches, beating itself against the nearest horizon, just beyond sight.

Rachael Mead

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Kayaking with a head cold
Whanganui River, New Zealand

The inside of my head is a wartime infirmary.
Chills ripple me; I am wearing the skin of the river.
There are no concessions; headwinds do not relent.
I dig my way through as if shovelling my own grave.
The day stretches to the doorstep of the mythological,
but I can only sit in my kayak,
unvaccinated against everything air-borne
except confidence, that virus to which I’m somehow immune.
There is no rescue, the disease must run its course,
so here I am, no longer paddling but battering my way
through winds and rapids that are drawn around me like blankets.
I transform to stone, to water, to greed; anything relentless -
until finally the river, falling through the handclasp of its cliffs,
shines behind me, a gilded monument to nothing but itself.

Rachael Mead