Clues to a Drowning

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A thunderhead blocked the river canyon to the south. A sign on a tree arranged the large mouth, striped, and the small mouth, according to what should not be taken. The woman I know sat in a ripple, her legs spread as if to issue the river’s own flesh. She said, Unto everything there is time. So we held our arms to the sky, holding back an end to the trip. A police car hung on the lip of the campground, and older folks hung around at the bank—two sitting at a picnic table, three standing, as if the natural bait of their hysteria had played out on a kind of string. Rich, of Rich’s Last Resort, walked toward us, hands out, and said, We had a drowning, but talked so I thought he meant that morning, not something I could have stopped. In that dumb way we strayed up close and thought it normal to see those grandmas and grandpas shocked by currents, eddies, and wind. On a day we had commanded to be mild, my friend asked for a blessing, and I gave it. She said, Tell me it wasn’t a child. What a fate—to stand later on a bluff and watch the meandering river take, among the stones, that narrow way.