

## Smoke

Under the last of the stars at the lake's edge among  
dying pines spiraling stark against the sky taking off  
my clothes for a swim I see dim at the dock's end a rolling  
ball of smoke, dusky and alive turning inside out, tapered  
then a hump, a rope, a knot, a lump in the soot smudge of mist,  
and then it separates—otter and two kits nursing,  
nipping, chirping, rolling off to slide under  
the water skin and gone.

Last of my clothes in a heap I walk the planks  
from human toward the other and dive into the dark  
forsaking all the claptrap of my tribe for this life of smoke—  
fluid, unencumbered, prickled by fresh cold rolling we  
are smoke only for a little while, we are breath boxed,  
brief treasure free, we are a combustion of joy  
turning inside out under stars kindled, living, spent,  
spiraling into the waters deep.

—Kim Stafford