

GULKANA, 1979

“Strange word, Gulkana. What does it mean?”

—Ted Hughes, “The Gulkana”

We call the river, *C'uul C'ena'*: Kulkana

“River that pulls everything into it.”

I was sixteen the year before the question,
fishing for king salmon downstream of the bridge,
~~with~~ my feet planted firmly on the gravel shore.

But a boy of ten or eleven was standing knee-deep
in ~~his~~ green hip boots when he hooked into a king.

“Hang on tight!” his father shouted from the bank.

“Don't let go!”

The boy leaned back, holding on for dear life.

But the big salmon, what we call *luk'ece'e*,
pulled the boy into the whorling deep.

He went under, bobbed up a couple times.
~~while~~ We ran along the shore, yelling and waving,
the distraught father screaming his son's name.

But the boy's waders filled with water,
the undertow dragged him down—
~~and~~ he never came up again, ~~and~~ the river never let go.

In the summer of 1980, Ted Hughes, then the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom ~~and widower of Sylvia Plath~~, took his son, Nick, ~~on a~~ fishing ~~adventure~~ in Alaska. One of the places they fished was the Gulkana, a tributary of the Copper River. Many years later, John Smelcer met ~~up with Ted~~ Hughes at ~~a pub during~~ a literary festival in Guildford, England. Hughes was astounded when he learned that ~~John Smelcer~~ was familiar with the Gulkana River area. ~~a member of the Ahtna tribe of Alaska and that Gulkana Village—nestled along the Gulkana River—is one of Ahtna's eight traditional villages. Archaeologists say the Ahtna People have lived in the Copper River region for 7,000 years or longer.~~ After ~~Ted Hughes~~ passed away in 1998, ~~John~~ Smelcer and ~~Nick~~ and the younger Hughes, ~~who was~~ by then living in Fairbanks, Alaska, became fishing buddies ~~up~~ until Nick's Hughes's death in 2009. ~~The two friends once had their own misadventures on the Gulkana.~~

Dear John — nice job with the poem. I made a few minor suggestions — see what you think.

I had to cut down the biographical information following the poem, in hopes that poem and biographical note will fit on one page. I hope I haven't cut out too much (but much has to go; it may still be too long). Again, see what you think.

With thanks, Parkman