A River of Poems

A juried collection of poems sponsored by The River Talks, a cooperative project of Wisconsin Sea Grant and the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve
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“A River of Poems” Spans the World

We expected only a few local poets would be interested. We thought they’d offer poems about the St. Louis River on the Minnesota-Wisconsin border. That was our mindset when The River Talks planning team first developed the theme for a public poetry reading on the topic of rivers to be held in conjunction with the annual St. Louis River Summit as an evening program on March 3, 2021. We were mistaken, but in the best possible way.

In reality, our call for river poems through the literary submission management platform Submittable garnered local and global interest from 76 poets. The call reached across the U.S. and around the world resulting in 148 poems for consideration.

“As it turns out, a lot of people like to write about rivers. That’s because they are really important in our communities and in our lives,” said Deanna Erickson, director of the National Lake Superior Estuarine Research Reserve, which co-sponsors The River Talks series with Wisconsin Sea Grant.

These informal evening programs are in their eighth season and are designed to help the local community keep in touch with what’s going on with the river scientifically, socially and artistically. The monthly talks are usually held in person but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the eighth season’s talks were held virtually using the Zoom platform.

After the enthusiastic response to our call for poems, we quickly realized we were going to need more judges. In the end, we gathered six who represented a good cross section of the audience we expected to attend the summit.
We’d like to thank judges Hannah Ramage, monitoring coordinator with the Lake Superior Reserve; Julie O’Leary, director of the University of Superior’s (UWS) Undergraduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity Program; Kari Jacobson-Hedin, watershed specialist with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa; Nick Danz, dean of academic affairs for UWS; Russ Maron, poetry admirer; and myself (Marie Zhuikov), a poet and senior science communicator for Wisconsin Sea Grant.

The judging was blind, which means the poets’ names were not associated with their poems. After two rounds, the judges narrowed the number of poems down to a dozen, with a few for backup in case any of the chosen poets could not be reached.

Although communication was sometimes a challenge, all 12 poets were enthusiastic about participating in the reading. They represented a wide diversity of ages and ethnicities.

We titled the program “A River of Poems.” Helping to organize and hold it was one of the highlights of my long career as a science communicator. The warm fuzzy feelings it engendered remain with me. I could use many adjectives to describe the evening: powerful, beautiful, stark, raw, funny — but it’s really best if you read the poems and feel all the feels for yourself. The reading drew a record attendance for The River Talks series.

The Lake Superior Reserve recorded the reading and it’s available on their YouTube channel at go.wisc.edu/tx71s1. The poems are organized in this publication in the same order as read during the event (alphabetically by the poet’s last name).

Ironically, the one poem specifically about the St. Louis River was written by someone who had never visited it. Rebecca Nelson said her poem, “Of the St. Louis River” was inspired by the spiritual experiences she’s had while watching water. She grew up in the Midwest and said she wrote the poem thinking of the rivers
she knew from childhood. “I would love to visit the St. Louis River sometime after the pandemic!” Nelson said.

Barb Huberty, St. Louis River Area of Concern coordinator for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, offered this comment in the Zoom chat, “I never knew that poetry could unite people across the globe.”

Apparently, rivers can do the same thing.

For more information about River Talks, visit: go.wisc.edu/4uz720.

— Marie Zhuikov, Wisconsin Sea Grant
Tell me a story oh won’t you my stars
If not, then I’ll listen for the morning

I’m down at the river far past midnight
The waves they crash hard and I’m leaning in

To the wind and this night is howling
Without a moon so I’m asking

Tell me a story oh won’t you my stars
If not, then I’ll listen for the morning

Ojibwe translation

Dibaajimo daga anaangokaa
Giishpin gawiin, nandotaw giizhep

Nin zibinong aabitaa-dibikad
Mamaan-gaashkaa aaswaa kogaa bawi

Noodin gabe dibik waawoono
Oshkagoojin indawaaj ni nandom

Dibaajimo daga anaangokaa
Giishpin gawiin, nandotaw giizhep
They were old enough to have muscle, no baby ankles or elbows. They knew how to climb, but it was still the hardest part. I was the only one in shoes. They could grip. I told them to reach up, then down. No splinter. They used my thighs as steps. I found near top, steel spike underfoot. I sat, facing each, them holding the phone pole, me holding both in frog legs. My husband was a builder, said a triangle is the strongest shape. I keep my feet wrapped around the pole, make a triangle with my legs, another with my arms. I beg. Father. Son. Holy Spirit. Then I beg my husband, passed on a year, to help us, promise him I won’t let ours go to him, that we won’t all come now. They haven’t married, loved like we did. After the first day, they do not cry my name but Daddy. My children say, You’re sure stronger than you look. I say, “Strong isn’t like the storybooks but the parables.” We watch the waters rise as the sun sets. Sun rises again, and they cry out again. I’ve never seen this before. It’s not right. Everything is covered. I count by pressing my fingers with each prayer. I don’t tell them it helps my cramping, these locking hands. We say each prayer a decade at a time. At the hour of our death. World without end. Holy Mother. I knew my hands would not fail me,
but water eating away at our seat. Sky not holding me like it never does. When they pulled me onto the boat, I did not care. “Ma’am, my name is Leroy. See the boat below? You’re safe.” But he was wet.

Safe is dry. “Ma’am, your hands swolled-up. I’m here to get y’all down.” Once he had them, I fell. His one eye green, the other blue, like my husband’s. I knew I could let go.
Immersion: A Prayer of Intent

BENJAMIN GREEN

Water has moods:
sometimes the blush
  of soft skin touching,
sometimes the hiss and froth
  of mud in motion,
sometimes the harsh hard drought
  of fixed stone —

rivers change shape,
exploiting the simple extravagance of movement
to become
  litanies of ripple,
  dances of push,
  curl,
  swirl —

streams shallow and deepen,
  reflect and darken,
  to compose poems
  of layered meaning —

creeks make songs
that describe the gift of music:
  sheens of mirrored glass,
  jazz of beading light,
  rhythms of a fluttering heart,
  the steady beat of waving drums —
water cradles the melody of grace,
joining together sacrament,
    renewal
    reception,
    letting go —

the shape of the earth is
water
    falling,
    spilling,
    filling openings,
    asking strange questions
    never really answered —

water provokes
    considerations that last a lifetime —
        wait long, think hard (enough),
        find comfort in the mystery:
        consolation —

drift,
stream away,
meander,
descend,
return,
pass,
be carried —
    be carried beyond
        into a current stronger,
            bigger,
            better —
water will not be held back —
    stand in a river
    and you will be pushed down,
    you will grow old,
    and die,

    yet

you learn to love your life —

    immerse yourself,
    follow the flow,

    it will bring you
    home.
On July 15, 2020, a permanent hoot owl restriction for a portion of the lower Madison River has been implemented.

The statement is as clear as the Montana sky and as colorfully murky as only bureaucratese can be. Invoking the lower Madison River must mean fishing. *Permanent* is not the 24/7 forever injunction of American coastal culture.

A permanent hoot owl restriction commands that each year for one month, July 15 through August 15 to be exact, when most probably the water is inches too low and slightly warmer than 73 degrees, there’s no fishing from 2 p.m. to midnight because it is too stressful for the fish to fight for their lives in two different ways at once. Hoot owls and any of their kindred raptors are welcome any time.
The Current Feels

JOAN MACINTOSH

On a quiet river
a man glides by
paddling a canoe
He dips
his paddle
tenderly
as though
the current
feels
the thrust
of the
broad blade

I watch
from the
boathouse window, my body
melting open
as the canoe
drifts by

He reaches
for something
unseen
then
bathes his
blade again
He glides by
the boathouse window
paddling
the river’s
lush darkness
Like a thread of memory
This quiet stream seams
Overlapping fields
Of time, in valleys past.
Its ripples are in the
Clear air, glimpsed through
Every morning’s window.
It flows at the lane’s end
Where beaded houses
Are strung on the hillside’s
Swooping neck, where
Runoff tears of rain
Meet ochre earth
Puddles are open wounds
Red with lost time’s blood.
It is just a short walk
For a child sturdy
In wellingtons. A mere
Hop, skip and jump
To the low gravelled
Margins where
Plaited weed floats
Under the aspic surface
Of standing water;
Water boatmen row
In slow motion under
The stepping stone bridge
Where caddis larvae
Lurk like trolls bedecked
In costume jewellery
That catches the light;
A stone’s throw but
A giant leap for
Tentative feet that
Trip like billy goats
Over the slimy rocks;
Bare toes clench
Shocked by cold with
Grit and pebbles trapped
In their crevices, while
Cow parsley stands like
A fence to guard the
Moment where time
And water are one.
As if known before birth
and then forgotten —
the river’s music inherited
in the kingfisher’s plunge.

Pines spire. Their branches sling snow.
I sit on a basalt slab and dream
of glaciers heaving against land.
Geese pump up from the bank.

The afternoon sky
floats down in brisk blue
shards. Rapids glint.
Ice splinters.

Before memory,
came lynx tracks
in the snow and the wind changing.
It was only after hearing a hefty splash along the river at night, a sound so wide and juicy it would have been indecent if not terrifying, that I learned beavers are nocturnal. Imagine such elaborate construction at night, the careful whittling of branches to fit perfectly. Would the work not be easier in light? Beavers do not have good eyes. Of course, it is a trick of survival—the ones who learn to build by dark are not hunted by us. What other manner of life do we force into darkness? By the faint stars that night, each tree stump became a land mine. That splash not of malice but likely fear, or clumsiness. Perhaps it’s silly to wonder if beavers miss seeing the world in light. What do we expect, evolutionary memory? Nostalgic genes? Which is better, to love the daytime or to live without knowing its touch? They don’t choose. What does it mean when we say we hunters did it to survive, too?
Knowing the Way
DIANA RANDOLPH

Headwaters of some rivers
trickle in narrow channels
while some gush freely
from lakes hidden
in these ancient hills.

Rivers pulse
over stones, boulders, golden grasses,
splashing on embankments
on their journeys,
bending, twisting,
following natural courses,
knowing the way.

Crystal clear water, teeming with life
rippling to the Great Lake,
flowing like the pure blood
that runs through our veins.

Pulsing blood flowing forward,
knowing the way,
nudging us to breathe,
to fill our minds,
and to speak with pure heart,
nourished from the sources.

Life water, lifeblood.
It Took a Long Time to Discover
RON RIEKKI

that what triggered me was night
and dirt and the need to pee, my PTSD
counselor having me log every time
my heart went crazy, every time my lungs
refused to lung, how we went back
months later and looked at all the times,
drew lines, connected the stars, finding
that I couldn’t shower during the war, that
there were times we couldn’t even urinate,
so that just such a simple thing as doing that
made me feel safe, how I loved day
because no one died in the day, as if the day
was for life, the wonderful honeysuckle
that is life, its bounding prayers, and,
we discovered, aha!, it was water, that what
cured me was water, that the war was, really,
the absence of it, as if the earth had dried
up and all that was left was a violent eczema,
how, she told me, I should do things like
put a photo of a river on my phone, open it,
look down at its body, understand that I was
sixty percent water, that I was looking at me,
that peace was the headwaters, the source,
the beginning of the river, the tributary.
Rouge River
DEROLD SLIGH

You’ve never lived
if your river hasn’t been ignited
with many fires in winter.
You’ve never tasted life
if your neighborhood
hasn’t been hit
by a hydrofluoric acid fart
let off by an oil refinery
that burns the paint
off your house.

You do not understand those who live
along the river of many fires.
The water of their faucets
sludges out in milky brown
lukewarm inedible richness.
You who know nothing
tell the people to drink
because you have never seen
the fires—ghostly blue, they dance
atop the surface,
refusing to drift downstream.
You must see them first
if we are ever to be understood.
Talking Water
LUCY TYRRELL

They have trained the water to talk.
— William Stafford

The water remembers, tells
of the path it once took—
gurgles along Indian Creek
to the Blue and the Missouri;
follows the St. Louis River to
the slow and fecund estuary;
follows the Raspberry River
to Gichigami,
passes the Red Cliff language camp
where the culturally dispossessed
have to learn the language
they once knew in their bones,
the way a river knows its
banks and bends,
its shining drops of life.
Contributors

TYLER DETTLOFF is a musician and poet from the swampy Delirium Wilderness of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. His sophomore LP “Dynamite Honey: Northern Folk & Blues” was released in November 2020 by Lost Dog Records and his first chapbook of poems “Belly-up Rosehip: A Tongue Blue with Mud Songs” was released August 2019 through Swimming with Elephants Publications. He teaches college composition and Native American literature at Lake Superior State University. Tyler performs as a one-man blues band and likes the smell of a bog before a thunderstorm.

HEATHER DOBBINS is a native of Memphis, Tenn. She is the author of two poetry collections, “In the Low Houses” (2014) and “River Mouth” (2017), both from Kelsay Press. She graduated from the College Scholars program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She earned an M.F.A. from the Graduate Writing Seminars at Bennington College. Her poems and poetry reviews have been published in “Beloit Poetry Journal,” “Big Muddy,” “The Rumpus,” “TriQuarterly Review” and “Women’s Studies Quarterly,” among others. For 20 years, she has worked as an educator (kindergarten through college) in Oakland, Calif.; Memphis, Tenn.; and currently, Fort Smith, Ark.

BENJAMIN GREEN is the author of 11 books, including “The Sound of Fish Dreaming.” At the age of 64, he hopes his new work articulates a mature vision of the world and does so with some integrity. He resides in New Mexico.

LORRAINE (RAINEY) LAMEY is a member and host of the Crazy Wisdom Poetry Circle, and she cherishes her Michigan and Montana connections. She is inspired by the works of Mary Oliver, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and all who enchant through spirit, presence and rhythm. Her days are filled with words, ministry and dog walking, having spent many years working in the University of Michigan Law School Admissions Office.
JOAN MACINTOSH lives in St. John’s, Newfoundland, Canada and writes poetry and prose. Her work has been published in “TickleAce,” “NQ,” “Understorey” and others.

KATE MEYER-CURREY is from Devon, England. Landscape, whether urban or rural, shapes her writing. Her varied career in a range of frontline settings has fueled an interest in gritty urbanism, contrasted with her rural upbringing and instills the title of her forthcoming chapbook (Dancing Girl Press) “County Lines” (due in 2021). Her poem “Family Landscape: Colchester 1957” was published by “Not Very Quiet” in September 2020. Her ADHD also instills a sense of “other” in her life and writing. Showing this reality and evoking unheard, unrepresented voices drives her urge to write.

REBECCA NELSON is a Ph.D. student at the University of California Davis studying restoration ecology. She received a B.S. with honors and distinction in ecology and evolution from Stanford University as well as minors in creative writing and science communication. As a NOAA Hollings Scholar, she worked at the Northwest Fisheries Science Center. She is from Illinois. Her poetry has appeared in the “EcoTheo Review,” “Weekly Avocet” and “Stanford Daily,” and her first book of poems “Walking the Arroyo” is available on Amazon. Her writing has received a Scholastic National Art and Writing Awards gold medal and third place for the Stanford Planet Earth Arts Creative Writing Prize.

STEPHANIE NIU is a poet from Marietta, Ga. Currently based in New York City, she earned her degrees in symbolic systems and computer science from Stanford University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in “The Southeast Review,” “Storm Cellar,” “Midway Journal” and “Portland Review.”

DIANA RANDOLPH, Drummond, Wis., lives in the midst of Chequamegon/Nicolet National Forest, not too far from the Namekagon River. She works in her home Once in a Blue Moon Studio writing and painting. She also teaches art classes for adults, currently online (during the pandemic) through Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College. She enjoys silent sports, especially cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, running and walking. She studied art at Northland College. She’s author of “Beacons of the Earth and Sky, Paintings & Poetry Inspired by the Natural World” (Savage Press).
RON RIEKKI’s books include “My Ancestors Are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction” (Apprentice House Press), “Posttraumatic” (Hoot ‘n’ Waddle), and “U.P.” (Ghost Road Press). Riekki co-edited “Undocumented” (Michigan State University Press) and “The Many Lives of The Evil Dead” (McFarland), and edited “The Many Lives of It” (McFarland), “And Here” (MSU Press), “Here” (MSU Press, Independent Publisher Book Award), and “The Way North” (Wayne State University Press, Michigan Notable Book).

DEROLD ERNEST SLIGH currently lives in South Korea and was born and raised in Saginaw, Mich. He received an M.A. from Central Michigan University and an M.F.A. from San Diego State University. He was the recipient of the J.L. Carroll Arnett Creative Writing Award. He was a guest poet at the Theodore Roethke Memorial where he ran a workshop for African American fathers and sons. His work has appeared in “American Poetry Journal,” “Konundrum Engine,” “Catamaran Literary Reader,” “Santa Clara Review,” “Temenos,” “Third Coast” and “Saw Palm,” among other publications.

LUCY TYRELL sums her interests as nature, adventure (mushing and canoeing) and creativity (writing, sketching, photography, quilting). After 16 years in Alaska, where she worked as research administrator and science communicator for Denali National Park and Preserve, she traded a big mountain (Denali) for a big lake (Superior) when she moved to Bayfield, Wis. She holds a Ph.D. in botany and ecology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Lucy has published poems in a variety of journals and anthologies. She has published one chapbook, “I Fly with Feathered Forelimbs” (2020), co-edits “Ariel Anthology” and is Bayfield poet laureate 2020-21.
Learn more at go.wisc.edu/4uz720

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