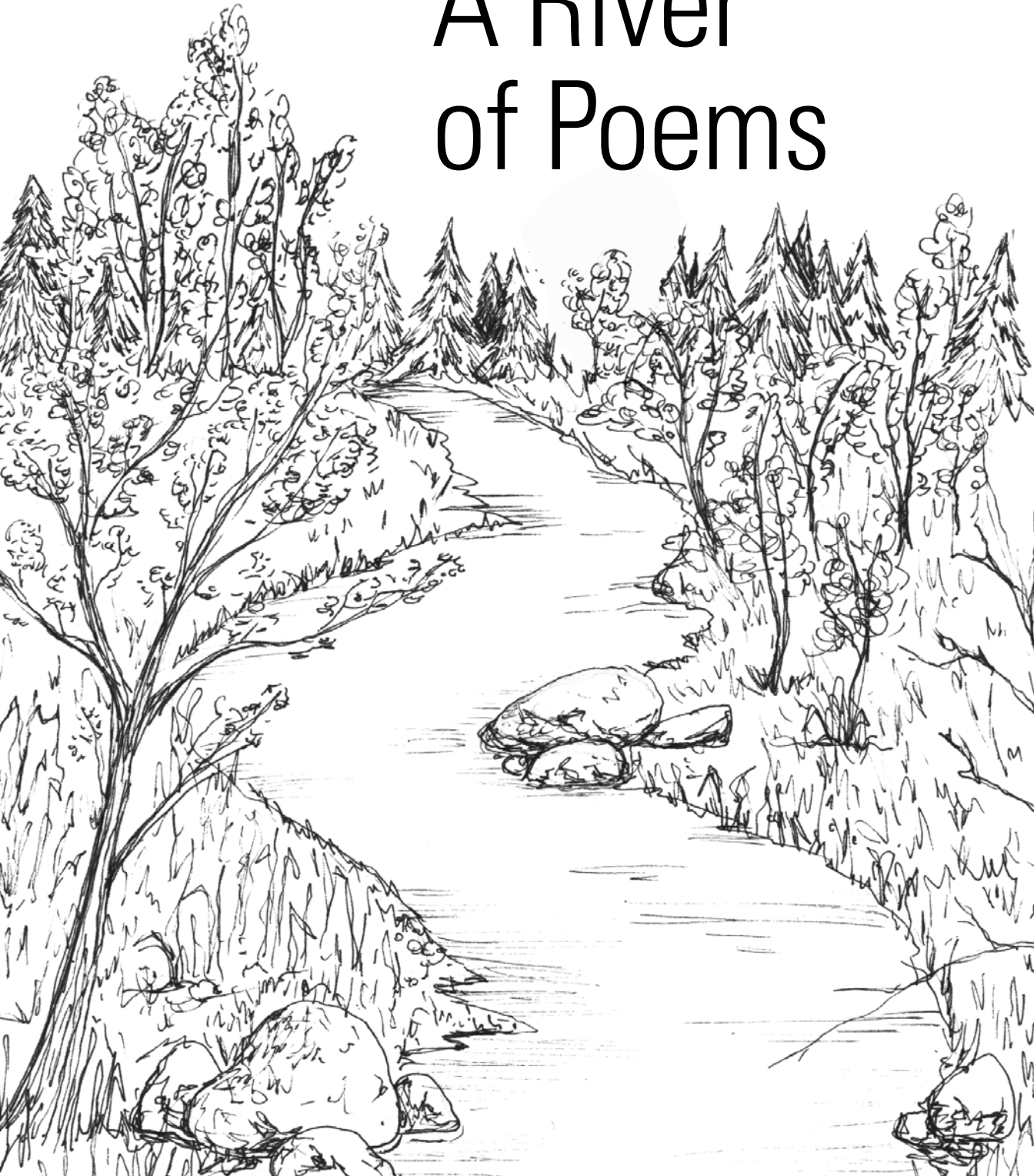
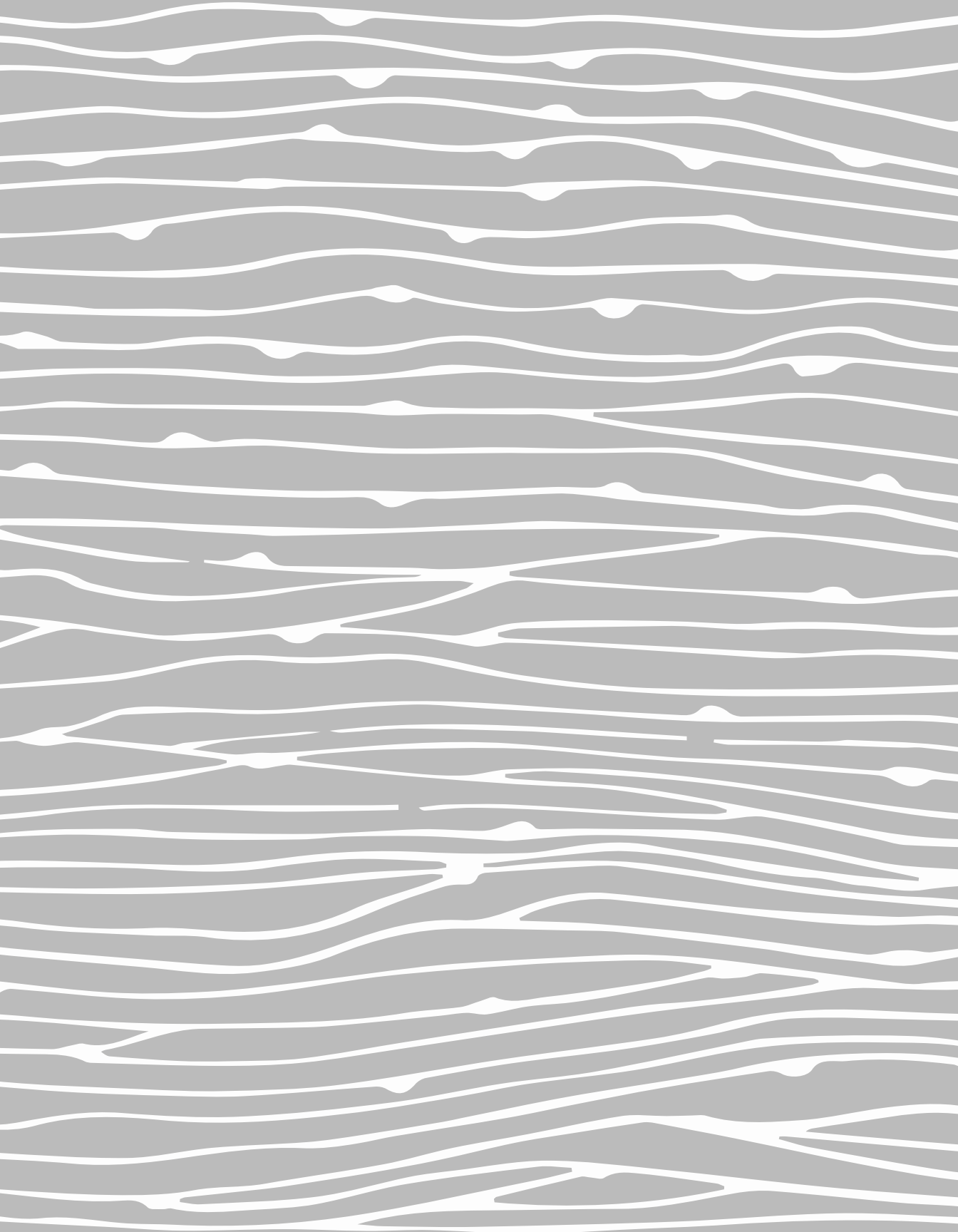


A River of Poems





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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June 2021

# “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](https://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](https://go.wisc.edu/4uz720).

— *Marie Zhuikou, Wisconsin Sea Grant*



# My Stars / Nin Anaangokaa

TYLER DETLOFF

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

*Dibaaajimo daga anaangokaa  
Giishpin gawiin, nandotaw giizhep*

*Nin zibinong aabitaa-dibikad  
Mamaan-gaashkaa aaswaa kogaa bawi*

*Noodin gabe dibik waawoono  
Oshkagoojin indawaaj ni nandom*

*Dibaaajimo daga anaangokaa  
Giishpin gawiin, nandotaw giizhep*

# I Held Us on for 36 Hours After the Levee Broke to Hell

HEATHER DOBBINS

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 swole-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.

# Catching Your Drift

LORRAINE LAMEY

*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

# Stream: Timberscombe

KATE MEYER-CURREY

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.

# Of the Saint Louis River

REBECCA NELSON

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.

# To the Beaver's Eyes

STEPHANIE NIU

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

*Detroit, Michigan*

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.

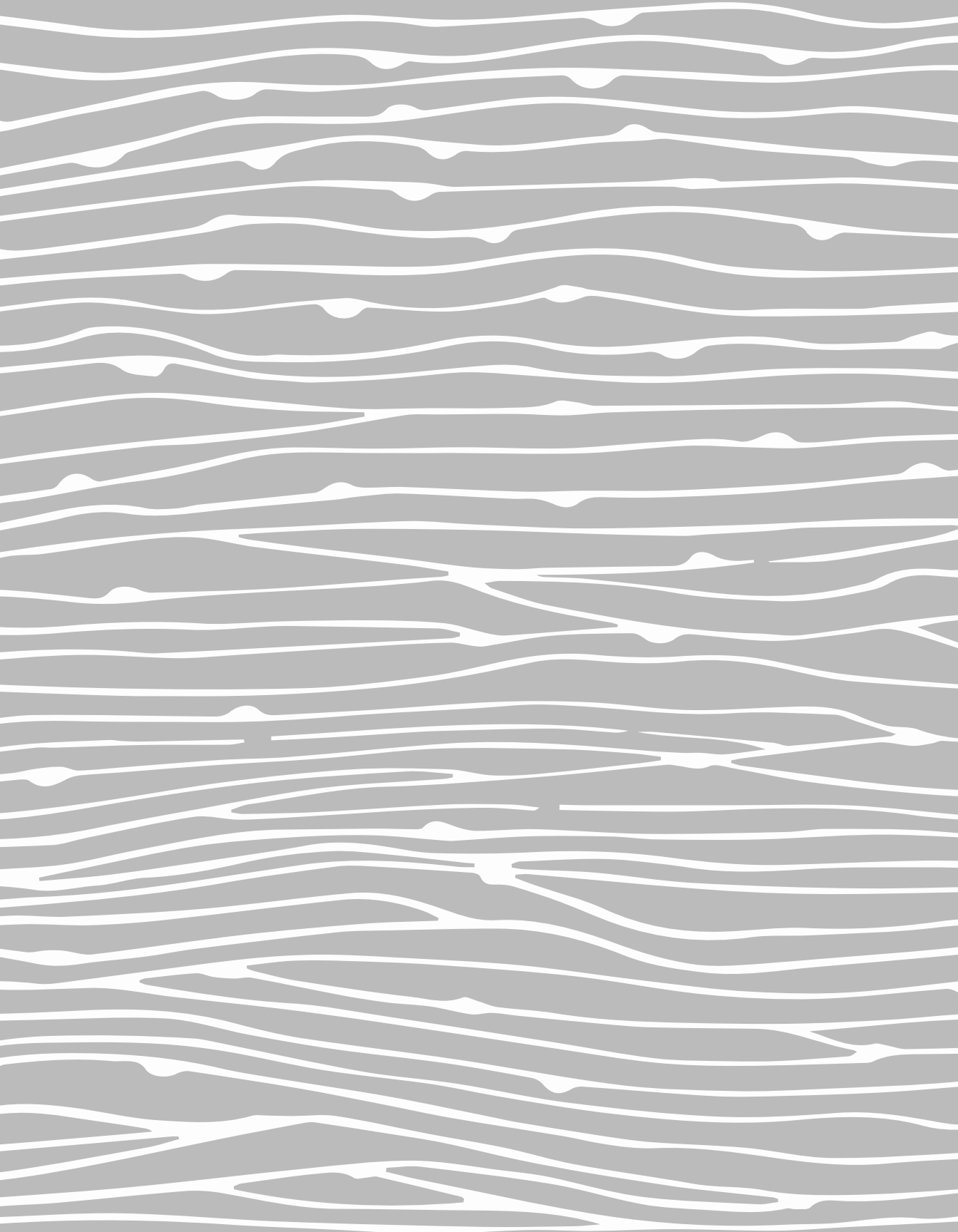
**STEPHANIE NIU** is a poet from Marietta, Ga. Currently based in New York City, she earned her degrees in symbolic systems and computer science from Stanford University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in "The Southeast Review," "Storm Cellar," "Midway Journal" and "Portland Review."

**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 TYRRELL** 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](https://go.wisc.edu/4uz720)

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