

FOR THE LOVE OF A RIVER

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We say oftentimes that we “love” our homes, cars, et cetera ... and sometimes, our jobs. We make this declaration because these things provide us with pleasure, comfort, pride or accomplishment. Can something incapable of being owned, something detached from our lives, that is inanimate, unresponsive and obviously uncaring be a focus for love? Can love be applied to a river?

What is a river? At first glance a river is water, but that requires the sum of many parts. The beginnings include snowmelt and rain falling on absorbent surfaces created by intact forests and grasslands. Those drops of water channeled into hundreds of small drainages, rivulets, runs, ravines and larger streams, collectively delivering the accumulated flow to a channel big enough to accommodate all of it. It needs saying that water doesn't come from a river, it first must come to a river and then, the river delivers water to us.

By the way, rivers are ill-defined. What is termed a river in one place might only be a stream or a creek in others. In Newfoundland, every bit of running water is a “brook” despite differences in size and flows. Definitions are fluid, as are the waters to which the names are attached.

A river is a network where the pieces are not divisible, surplus or of lesser priority, importance or significance. It is all together — or not at all. Always from the smaller to the greater. It is, in many ways, like the veins and arteries that form our circulatory system. You cannot exist on just part of your bloodstream.

The skeleton of a river is defined by its physical geography — bedrock, substrate and gradient. It is also a function of its geologic history, especially the action of past glaciers, which influence present day channels. A river conforms to simple laws of gravity, friction and volume of water.

A river is water — the amount of flow that fills its channel and the variation over a season. That water moves over a channel

bed that has been pushed, shoved and molded by larger flows into undulations and irregularities giving rivers a variety of configurations and water depths. Riffles, the humps, are the shallow, fast flowing and noisy sections, while pools, the hollows, are the deep, slow and quiet portions.

In defiance of the straight geometry of our roads, fields and fences, a river is curvaceous, not adhering to straight lines and edges. It runs along, tugging endlessly at its banks, causing them to crumble in real and over geologic time. Even on the insides of the curves, changing water levels can revise the riverbanks. Sometimes we build too near the edge and what we build crumbles, too. We have yet to learn that when we live on a bend in the river, we must bend with the river.

A river stirs the edge of a surveyed, manufactured world with a wildness of swirling eddies, soft backwaters and a green confusion of banks. It is like a symphony playing across the land — small streams, small instruments, each that can barely be heard but gathered together make one voice. A voice that sings. A voice of music. Within the natural harmony, a beauty of form.

Listening to a river, it gurgles and chortles to itself in notes our ears can hear but we can barely interpret. A river sings to us and sometimes, about us. It can roar with a ferocity that we can feel viscerally and we are fearful of the message. It is equally frightening when a river goes quiet as it does when flows drop to a low ebb. Deep down we know the water that runs in the river also runs in us. When a river is silent, it's a signal we need to worry.

A musical score is a series of symbols arranged on lines that must be read to understand the composer's message. River music requires the same discipline, to be able to read, interpret and comprehend the symphony of time, energy and diversity. Once acquired, it is a wonder to be able to read what the river tells us.

When we can read the notes, hear the music, comprehend a river's architecture, and appreciate its moods, a river becomes

tangible, important, and we become bonded to it. Understanding a river, seeing its beauty, intricacy, and diversity is the pathway to loving it.

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POETRY

Dog Days of Summer

The hills have turned to brown, the breeze blows hot.

The prairie roses wilt and fade during the dog days of summer.

The birds fall silent, crickets cease to chirp under the noon sun of those dog days of summer.

The dog only raises his head and gives a sigh when a cat walks by. Another time he would give a chase but not during these dog days of summer.

Grown men sweat and swear and tempers flare as they toil in the heat of the dog days of summer.

But when the winds of winter blow cold and the snow piles up. Oh, what I'd give for a dog day of summer.

Dorothy I. Rhead

Regina, SK