



# The Free-flowing River

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# Poetic Partnerships

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Landscape, Geology, Rivers, Ekphrasis,  
Musical Forms, Lines of Energy,  
Writer's Voice, and Ghosts



# St Louis River in northern Minnesota



# St. Louis River Drainage Basin

- Embarrass River
- Whiteface
- East Swan
- West Swan
- Wyne Lake
- Lake Esquagama
- Merritt Lake
- Cedar Island Lake
- Silver Lake
- Bass Lake
- Chester Creek
- Tischer Creek
- Sucker River



# Meridel LeSueur

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“...I am a woman speaking for us all / From the tongue of dust and fire / From the bowl of bitter smoke. / This is a strong for strength and power./ Water is pouring / water is running, .../ It is coming out pouring in bloom of day./ Let us all go down there and bathe in the water, The water is coming on the four paths of the eagles...”

(“Hush, My Little Grandmother” *Rites of Ancient Ripening*)

# Joseph Kalar, Iron Range poet (1930s)

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For many years, Biwabik has held a Fourth of July celebration, the Calithumpian Parade. When I was growing up, it was the annual "big drunk." The crowds numbered in the thousands. Clown bands played their drums and horns. Men dressed up as women to entertain the crowd. It was outrageous, political, and funny. The word Callithump: perhaps originated from the British "gallithump" to refer to a boisterous heckler or someone who disturbed the order at Parliamentary elections. His poem "Flagwaver" is a satirical glimpse at patriotism.

# Invocation to the Wind by Joseph Kalar

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(excerpt\_

“...blow, blow into dusty corners,/ reach cool fingers beyond cobwebs/  
festooning this/ dark room where / throats are choked with dust and / beauty  
shrivels like mushrooms/ in dry cellar--blow, blow, blow/ into factories with  
windows of dust/ and a shuffling of feet tired/ in silk stockings, and fingers/ red  
at the tips--/ blow, blow into jail,/ come like a draught of spring/ water of faces  
hunkering against/ steel bars--blow, blow into slums...”

# Reverie

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Dreaming by the river, I dedicated my imagination to water, to clear, green water, the water that makes meadows green. I cannot sit beside a stream without falling into a profound reverie.... It does not have to be the stream at home, water from home. The nameless waters know all of my secrets. The same memory flows from all fountains. (*Water and Dreams*, Bachelard, p8)

In an obituary of Tillie Olsen in *Slate Magazine*, Jess Row said, "Look around you on your way to work, she might say to us, or the next time you eat at a restaurant or visit a nail salon, and listen: That deafening silence is the sound of literature not being written."



# Flow

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Virginia Woolf reflected about her novel *To the Lighthouse* story:

"The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present."

Poetry is not unlike musical composition. The poem needs to flow. This means one should stay in metaphor, maintain focus, and avoid shifts that break the spell.

# Rhapsody

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A rhapsody in music is a one-movement work that is episodic yet integrated, free-flowing in structure, featuring a range of contrasted moods, color, and tonality. It has an air of spontaneous inspiration and improvisation.

*The Kalevala* has a rhapsodic rhythm (and so does “The Song of Hiawatha” by H. W. Longfellow). “One of the best-known stylistic devices in the *Kalevala* is parallelism – because the line is very short, every line of any length has to be divided into two, three or even more parts, each of which is repeated before proceeding to the next one. But this parallelism or repetition occurs even on a much wider scale in the *Kalevala*, sometimes achieving almost magical proportions...” (Tarasti)

# Turns

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The word verse comes from the Latin, *versus*. It means to turn. Poetry is characterized by its twists and turns. The sonnet has a shift or turn referred to as a *volta*. There are many other ways that the language in a poem turns; these turns can happen at great velocity. It signifies a shift of some kind, an associational leap, a transforming metaphor, or a change in diction or subject.

- Eavan Boland says a stanza break gives the poet “seven league boots.” A stanza break may bring the reader to a different time and place. It is an opportunity to make an associational leap.
- Line breaks and enjambment add meaning or ambiguity.

# Barry Lopez - Landscape

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“I think of two landscapes— one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape is the one we see— not only the line and color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution....

“One learns a landscape finally not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it—like that between the sparrow and the twig.” These patterns have significance.

# The interior landscape

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Lopez describes the internal landscape as the one that we grow up in or live in that becomes part of our psyche. Here, "...the speculations, intuitions, and formal ideas we refer to as 'mind' are a set of relationships in the interior landscape with purpose and order; some of these are obvious, many impenetrably subtle. The shape and character of these relationships in a person's thinking, I believe, are deeply influenced by where on this earth one goes, what one touches, the patterns one observes in nature--the intricate history of one's life in the land..." Our personal landscape is integral to our writing.

# Headwaters or Origins

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About rivers, Waters says, “sometimes this beginning is discrete and sometimes unfocused: the beginnings are many and varied in kind..” Groundwater and springs (outcrops) may contribute to the beginnings.

The poet Donald Hall describes poetry’s origins as vatic, coming from the other world. He also asserts that poetry’s origin is pre-verbal:

- Milktongue - sensual - mouth pleasure
- Goatfoot - physical rhythm - muscle pleasure
- TwinBird - mirrored image of the hands - match/unmatch

# Outside of Time

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Bachelard believes poetry exists in a perpetual now. It “condenses all thoughts, topics, and concepts in a single moment. Poetry has no origins, but is rather a general state of mind, with no past or future, but rather occupying a single moment.”

Ekphrastic poems seek to describe pieces of visual art (photographs, paintings, sculpture, etc). The poem uses exact details that exist in the visual art, but the poet also expands the meaning by using a narrative, associations, etc. One might think of the visual art as the external landscape, and the expanded meaning reflecting your internal landscape. This is a “Twinbird” exploration.

# Erosions

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Pablo Neruda was fond of things that have been worn by hands: "Let that be the poetry we search for: worn with the hand's obligations, as by acids, steeped in sweat and in smoke, smelling of lilies and urine, spattered diversely by the trades that we live by, inside the law or beyond it. A poetry impure as the clothing we wear, or our bodies, soup-stained, soiled with our shameful behavior, our wrinkles and vigils and dreams, observations and prophecies, declarations of loathing and love, idylls and beasts, the shocks of encounter, political loyalties, denial and doubts, affirmations and taxes.

"The used surfaces of things, the wear that the hands give to things, the air, tragic at times, pathetic at others, of such things - all lend a curious attractiveness to the reality of the world that should not be under prized."



# Opposing Forces

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“Landmasses that include streams and rivers -- what we may call valleys or watersheds -- constitute terrains known as erosional landscapes. The erosion of rock and land sediments is a process that moves the materials of the high plains and mountains to the sea, while at the same time the eroding process moves headward, causing river valleys to migrate upstream.” (Waters, 31)

Poetry is a “tensile being.” It uses opposing forces to create energy. Bob Dylan said he liked to sing against darkness.

# Tributaries

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Each writer's voice is unique. It is comprised by the things to which we pay attention. It contains our unique perceptions, obsessions, and things that mark us. Each writer has his or her influences. It also reflects personal history, landscape, language, culture, and ways of doing things. Voice is affected by the kinds of work that we do and the kind of work that people in our families did. It is the path of our own thoughts.

To find your own material, go deeper into your own landscapes, roads, animal life, people, histories, and ghosts. Who else lived where you lived? Whose footsteps do you walk upon? Consider the sources of inspiration: fairy tales, religious stories, myths, and quests.

# Poetry & the Body

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“The difference between the action of a poem and of an ordinary narrative is physiological” (Paul Valery, *The Art of Poetry*)

“...language, when it has served its purpose, evaporates almost as it is heard....The poem, on the other hand, does not die for having lived: it is expressly designed to be born again from its ashes and to become endlessly what it has just been. Poetry can be recognized by this property, that it tends to get itself reproduced in its own form: it stimulates us to reconstruct it identically.”

# Obstacles

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The stones in the river are the places where the water sings. Whatever gets in the way of your work becomes your work. Limits and limitations can be productive.

Meridel LeSueur wrote about her birth and early family life on the prairie. Some of her images are the small houses that dot the landscape: “Let yourself down, as if underwater, into these lost walls, to hunt for treasure, to illuminate violence with meaning. Under sea-strange light these little houses glimmer in memory, powerful as radium.” (Ripenings, p 53)

Obstacles are material for writers. Stories are about trouble, conflict, tensions, and obstacles. In narrative, what happens next reveals character.

# The aura

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Original art, said Walter Benjamin, has an “aura” or a sense of being. It calls to us, we respond. I consider this response to be a spiritual response. I’ve been moved by many kinds of art and much poetry. Even the arrangements of stones called Inuksuit seem to embody a being. Poems have been called “tensile beings” or “perceptual objects.” Often they capture the contradictions or opposing forces (like paradox or opposites). They have a unique tension that makes them remarkable.

# Permeability

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Poetry uses much more white space than other writing. This negative space adds meaning.

In the northern region, rivers were affected by glacialation, the deposit of sediment and rock that reshaped the landscape and changed the flow of ancient rivers. Our landscape is more permeable than other landscapes.

Czeslaw Milozc: “The purpose of poetry is to remind us/ how difficult it is to remain just one person,/ for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,/ and invisible guests come in and out at will.”

# The Dynamic River: The Line of Energy

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“In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader. Human energy, which is consciousness, the capacity to produce change in existing conditions. The only danger is in not going far enough.” (Muriel Rukeyser in *The Life of Poetry*)

Poetry has a lot of energy: opposing forces, resistances, enjambments, and tension between the lines. The language, images, metaphors, and patterns are the materials in poetry; the line of energy initiates the transformation or metamorphosis in a poem, creating new meaning at each reading.

# A Piece of the River

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Thomas F. Waters says the stream's structure may best be viewed as an array of patches. A river is a patch mosaic. Fish arrange themselves along the stream course based on width, depth, substrate, gradient, temperature, pool-and-riffle spacing and meanders.

The pieces of the mosaic are large: headwaters, midreach, and large river. The pieces of the mosaic are also small: a pool or riffle over a stone with moss. All these pieces are parts of a river.

Poems are a mosaic of images. As a poet, build your mosaic in your landscape.



# What You Didn't Know You Knew

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Lopez says, “Because of the intricate, complex nature of the land, it is not always possible for a storyteller to grasp what is contained in a story. The intent of the storyteller, then, must be to evoke, honestly, some single aspect of all that the land contains.

The storyteller knows that because different individuals grasp the story at different levels, the focus of his regard for truth must be at the primary one—with who was there, what happened, when, where, and why things occurred.

continued...

# Levels: The High Water Mark

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continued...“The story will then possess similar truth at other levels— the integrity inherent at the primary level of meaning will be conveyed everywhere else. As long as the storyteller carefully describes the order before him, and uses his storytelling skill to heighten and emphasize certain relationships, it is even possible for the story to be more successful than the storyteller himself is able to imagine.”

Mary Oliver says poetry is writing that casts more than one shadow. I call a poem that does this evocative. It continues to evoke new meanings with more readings.

# The end of the river is another body

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The end of a river is another body. The poem begins in the mouth of the writer and ends in the reader.

I think of a poem as a river. It is a body. It can see, hear, touch, taste and smell. It has a physical body with memory and a culture with a his(her)story and an array of associations. The poem must be written so the reader will experience the breath of the writer. It is not a boundary line but part of the valley otherwise known as the watershed. It has a shape with a resonant chamber, an architecture. It has physicality. It is a timeless listening place.

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