Placing the Academy

Kaufman, Rona, Sinor, Jennifer

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M-I-Crooked Letter-Crooked Letter

Katherine Fischer

I learned that the earliest language was not our syntax of chained pebbles but liquid, made by the first tribes, the fish people.

Margaret Atwood

As I write, my front yard is turning liquid. By next week, the basement will flood. Catfish carcasses, mud, rubber tires, and condoms left over from last summer’s season will drape the bottom step when the water recedes.

Other springs, the river runs through my living room. Then, so much depends upon a dinghy tied to the back doorknob; it’s my only deliverance to higher ground. I live on a backwater slough that oxbows off the main channel of the Mississippi River. If there’s anything wild left of this engineered, locked-and-dammed river, it’s here in the backwaters where no dredge boat can squeeze through and no barge cares to travel.

You’ve seen clips on the national news in May and June. You remember—the footage of a house sailing downstream with some poor Holstein standing helplessly on the roof, stock still, not even swishing her tail. Our stories appear on the front pages of your newspaper, too, with the heroic rescue of a frightened tot found aboard a houseboat just moments before it capsizes, crashing against limestone bluffs. In the weeks following the flood, you hear experts on National Public Radio argue over the drawbacks of floodwalls. When
a community agrees to certain government regulations about flood insurance and building regulations, FEMA buys out people like me to move us up the hill, safe from the disaster of floodplains.

But I dig my heels into the sand. I won’t go. I may evacuate, but I’ll return. The river that runs in through my front door and out the back is the same as the river that runs through me—cantankerous, wild, relentless, unpredictable, meandering, and blessed.

This is not fiction. There’s no Huck Finn or Mary Loftus in my narrative. This is true.

What is also true about living on the third largest river in the world is July when the cottonwoods snow down on island beaches as my children make castles of sand and “dig to China.” Sultry August afternoons, I arm-over-arm the Mississippi and flip with the fishes as twilight softens beneath an early autumn moon. By December, I’m walking on water, my skates gliding across the surface. Frozen midwave, tiny fish are embedded in the ice, their hearty souls stalled by winter’s onslaught. I’ve counted sixty-four hungry bald eagles in the trees that border the beach of my front yard when dead fish rise to the surface, winter softening into spring.

Under layers of knitted wool, I’ve also bristled against river winds. With pants legs rolled, I’ve waded along the shore as early as March, goosebumps cobbling my legs. With spring thaw, too, come billions of dead shad emitting the inescapable odor of rotten eggs and rotting fish flesh. The backwaters are not for the faint of heart, the inflexible, nor for those who must stack life neatly in alphabetical order.

But I didn’t always live here on the floodplain. I used to be an uplander.

Having grown up on the Wisconsin side of clear blue Lake Michigan, I once approached the muddy Mississippi with as much enthusiasm as someone embracing roadkill. We became neighbors then, this dark turgid river and I, once I left behind my Wisconsin homeland. I’d come into its territory by way of career moves with my family, but I did so with my heels dug into the mud. I was sure that beneath that brown surface unspeakable things lay waiting to grab my legs, pull me under and down to where I would choke on the slick bottom, mud flooding my gullet. But as much as I feared this river, so unlike the sapphire waters of my native lake, still the mystery of it, the layers of mud and story, of a river that moves faster and farther than any Great Lake, pulled me in. It was hate-love at first sight.
I’d heard stories. Before I made my first true communion with it—went “on the river,” as it is called in these regions when you become a river person—I’d listen to anyone around me who had a Mississippi tale to tell. Each fall, students returned to my Iowa high school English classroom and told of catching enormous catfish with eighteen-inch whiskers and of high times swinging out over limestone river bluffs before dropping in. Faculty colleagues gathered over lunch recounting the saddest tales of all, those of young people who had slipped beneath the surface and whose bodies were churned up farther downstream. Listening, I would hold my breath as long as possible, the way you’d do before letting your lungs fill up if you were drowning; then I’d shake my head, thinking of what the river takes.

Even as a child, I knew that where adventure was involved, Lake Michigan came up shallow in contrast to the Big River. North of Milwaukee, where I grew up, the lake coastline is either rocky and impassable or tame and sandy, holding little to explore other than dune grass and an occasional “crick.” Yes, there were stories about ships lost during a seiche when air pushed downward on the center of the lake like a thumbprint, causing near tidal waves at the shore. There were mariner tales of hulls torn open when even lighthouses couldn’t steer navigators safe. But these mostly involved commercial or military craft with women and children taking little part in such horrific narrations. Those adventures were only for grown-ups, mainly men who worked the Great Lakes. I loved the lake, but for me it wasn’t a river of dreams—or of nightmares, for that matter.

What I knew about the Mississippi, on the other hand, mostly involved Huck Finn. (This is the part where he comes in.) Back in fifth grade at Milwaukee’s St. Eugene School, Sister John Mary jibbed the skirts of her habit midcalf as she read how Huck climbed into his canoe to escape Pap’s drunken beatings. Sister crouched behind the podium as she described Huck and Jim hiding out on Jackson Island, eluding townspeople searching for their lost bodies.

During quiet reading time, I’d chant to myself, “M-i-crooked letter-i-crooked letter-i-p-p-i” as I pretended to trace the course of the river on my wooden desk. I’d imagine rafting with the likes of Mary Loftus and Mary Jane Wilkes, women “full of sand,” who could navigate the roughness of shanty river towns as well as (or better than) any man. I even searched
through *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to find the one passage in which Twain writes of a girl boarding a steamboat. As Becky Thatcher strode up the gangplank to brave the Mississippi, I was right alongside her.

At home after school, I fished Milwaukee’s storm ditches for catfish and pretended to smoke reeds behind the garage while balancing on a plywood raft “afloat” rain puddles. Mine may have been rivers of shoal water, but in my play, Huck’s islands and my own were the same. Like the Mississippi itself, a mile wide at points, here was a riverscape of imagination wide enough to include rascals as well as the rich, children as well as oldsters, women as well as men, teachers and students, all.

I grew up and left Lake Michigan behind, moving to the prairies of Iowa to begin my teaching career. Dubuque is a river town: the great Mississippi sweeps past it on the east, rolling down from the north. It serves as the watery border between Iowa on the western bank and Illinois and Wisconsin on the eastern shore. Surrounded by water, however, I spent years in dry dock. My time was taken up raising five children as well as navigating a writing and teaching career. There was no time for the Mississippi. Or so I’d convinced myself.

One day I found I was gazing down hundreds of feet of limestone bluffs at lock and dam eleven, where I had driven on sudden impulse. I heard the towboats pushing barges through the lock, their horns calling to me like sirens. I saw an island within a mile of the dam. There was a rowboat tied to one of the cottonwoods at the tip. Before I knew it, Becky, Huck, and I were again running through those cottonwoods, climbing, and swinging out over the river from low-lying branches yelling, “Last one in is a dirty yeller bottomsucking catfish!”

In the next minute, shedding the scales of educator, mother, and writer, I stood shoulder to shoulder with Captain Bixby in the pilothouse steering our course clear of sawyers and sandbars. The Mississippi called to me in a voice muddled yet familiar, like the voice of one’s mother heard from underwater.

From that moment on, I was full steam ahead to get on the river. I taped photographs of Evinrudes, Larsons, and Carvers to our refrigerator, dreaming of one day motoring out on the river at the helm of my own boat. Crossing the Iowa-Wisconsin bridge on one of our frequent trips to visit family back in Milwaukee, I would utter the scene in breathless awe: “Look at the surface today . . . it’s
like chocolate silk in a breeze, don’t you think?” I thought of myself as a siren, calling to my husband and children, *Come, dive in.*

I took to watching our children float plastic boats in their kiddie pool and feeling regret over my poor parenting. How could I be raising youngsters without the advantages I’d had growing up on the lake? What great natural truths would they never stumble upon, staying safely far from the river’s reach? What fantasies would they fail to develop, what metaphors never internalize? Fantasy and metaphor, adventure and my own yearning heart—these were too important to neglect. One afternoon in mid-July, I packed sunscreen, inner tubes, buckets, shovels, and bright orange lifejackets along with the children and drove to Finley’s Landing, the only beach close by that was accessible by car back then.

There we built houses out of sand and then swamped them, imitating the force of spring floods. We swam out to the diving raft and floated on our backs, doubtless looking like an assortment of drifting tangerines in our lifejackets. Then we lay on the beach, inhaling the carpy river and watching the sun go down. I knew it still wasn’t enough.

Next time, I hauled notebook and pen along and sat leaning into the page, trying to find the river in my longhand. The children played at the water’s edge digging deep enough until the river rose up in the gorge they’d created.

I stared through the “snow” of the cottonwoods floating down on a jetty of rocks near the far edge of the swimming beach. I tried to imagine twelve feet of flood—realizing, of course, that we would all be several feet underwater if this were the spring of 1965. The thought of being part of the river, part of its mysterious underwater world, was enough to do it.

“Let’s buy a boat,” I finally said to my husband. I’d pasted the pictures of boats up in the kitchen, yes, but I had never actually said the words to anyone but myself. What I didn’t say was that I knew I needed to get much closer, into the Mississippi’s very atmosphere, if I wanted to breathe river. If I wanted to teach and write the river, I would need to get beneath its skin into its soul.

What I didn’t know was that he was already talking with the marina up north about buying a sweet nineteen-foot Larson runabout. “It would be a source of everlasting regret to live so close to the Mississippi River and never have a boat,” he offered by way of persuading me to make the deal. My only everlasting regret was that I didn’t speak up much earlier.
By the time we bought the boat (and later river property), I was eager to take on this river that runs the length of a nation—and of a nation’s imagination. That first summer, I mangled the Larson’s prop, much to the amusement of local marine mechanics, “Musta been flying, lady, to do that much damage.” What did I know of wing dams?

When I asked him why in heaven’s name anyone would construct such stupid dangerous structures, he explained patiently the need for a deep channel. I stared at him with my mouth agape. No Lake Michigan tale had ever involved anything as deceptively whimsical sounding as a wing dam.

Wing dams were created in the nineteenth century. These stone and willow mat underwater walls jut out from the shore like arcs forcing currents toward the main channel. This early attempt at channelizing the Mississippi, engineers hoped, would cause the river to flow faster, thus scooping out a deeper bed.

The opposition of the two words magnetized me. How could something be both as airy as wings and as burdensome as a dam? But in fact, they are. Shaped like wings, these matted walls give flight to the current, sending it to the center of the channel in order to scour it out and make it deep enough for navigation. Too, wing dams are the safe haven for bottom-feeders like catfish.

I forged on despite the wing dams. Excited to discover hidden inlets that even old river rats might have failed to explore, I caused the runabout to flounder in underwater stump fields or to beach on sudden, thinly submerged sandbars. Local boaters, shaking their heads, kindly oared in for the rescue, flung me a line, and towed me out of harm’s way. My husband kept a spare pair of mudshoes on board in order to hop out of the boat and lift us off whatever sandbar I’d beached us on.

Together my husband and I figured out how to rev the outboard in order to churn our way out of mud and to avoid the snarl of water lilies and discarded tires. Yet it would take years before I could “see” the landscape under the river. River folks were tolerant. They taught me to read the river the way you read the dark in a room familiar to you without stubbing your toe even once.

Upon first coming to the Mississippi, I envisioned it as it appears in textbooks, one long, wild river, snaking its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Instead, today’s river is anything but a flowing blue highway. “Pool,” on the Mississippi north of St. Louis, refers to a stretch of river between two dams. The Army Corps of Engineers began
constructing locks and dams back in the 1930s to hold water back in order to ensure a nine-foot channel, deep enough for barges and boats to navigate. Because of the lock-and-dam system, the Upper Mississippi is actually a series of pools rather than a continuous flowing river. The dams are the end “walls” of the pools.

Locks provide a means by which boats can move up- and downstream without having to leapfrog these walls. Much like a watery elevator, a lock allows boats to enter on one side of the chamber and then closes its chamber door. Once the chamber is closed, the water is raised or lowered, depending on whether you’re moving up- or downstream. Once the water level reaches the same height as the next pool, the gates at the other side of the chamber are opened, and boats go on their merry little way.

Before locks, dams, floodwalls, and levees, the Mississippi meandered off course, shifting as much as ten miles to the west down near Vicksburg. In low-water Septembers, you could walk across the riverbed without getting a drop on your toes. Nowadays, however, satellite readings register automatically in the Corps’s data system. If the system doesn’t like the river level, lockmasters are directed to throw a switch and either hold more river back or let more river flow into the pool.

Floodwalls and levees have been constructed along the Mississippi to girdle it in, to keep things under control. But when you hold a flooding river to a tighter corridor, it rises higher. Go ahead. Try it yourself. Let the spigot flow freely onto your yard, and it’ll disperse water thinly across the grass. But contain water in a narrow trough and before you know it, your knees will float.

Floodwalls are impenetrable fortresses of concrete that protect cities and farmlands from the Mississippi’s powerful floods. Destructively, however, they also cause water to rise higher and more forcefully farther downstream until the lower river suffers irreparable damage, loss of wetlands, and ultimate desecration. The loss of such wetlands and their ability to absorb high water in Louisiana were particularly evident in the surge that came up from the Gulf of Mexico and wreaked havoc on New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. For the most part, floodwalls were constructed back when we didn’t know any better. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” Robert Frost claims.

Levees often have the good manners of being overcome regularly by high water. There’s a levee system on the Mississippi girdling it for hundreds of miles. While these levees may result in dryer towns
in the short run, they damage the environment in the long run. They lure people to settle in behind the false security of earthen walls. Developers establish residential neighborhoods—later leaving people homeless in the wake of The Big One. Wetlands that provided habitat for many species have dried up. High water can’t spill onto natural floodplains, so the toxicity in the river builds up until all those chemicals and hog runoff flow down past New Orleans into what is currently termed the Dead Zone and Cancer Alley. If Robert Frost were still around today, he’d write, “Something there is that doesn’t love a levee.”

After boating the river for years, we moved down the bluffs, through the woods, and onto the floodplain. My natural environmentalist tendencies became more radical as I daily witnessed the results of the engineering of the Mississippi. At the same time, I marveled at human ingenuity in controlling such a powerful waterway. No single feat garnered as much of my wonderment as wing dams. Although these underwater brush and stone walls were built over a hundred years ago extending from the riverbank toward the channel, thousands of them still exist today. Most of the time you can’t see them unless you know how to read the river. The water over a wing dam furls back upon itself in a line with small waves breaking on the surface perpendicular to shore. You can spot them frequently by locating a red “nun” buoy and scanning the surface between the buoy and the shore.

Here on the Upper River where folks know exactly how many inches their boats draw (how much depth they need to navigate a slough or the main channel), we attend to websites and Army Corps of Engineers broadcasts to track levels on any given day. Contrary to popular belief, the system of locks and dams was not created in order to control flooding; still lockmasters affect depth by holding back water or allowing some of it to flow into the pool south. In low water, wing dams are the bugaboo of boaters, who risk both propeller and keel unless they attend to river charts.

Pontoon boats, johnboats, houseboats, runabouts, and the magnificent Delta Queen sternwheeler—all boats with more than a two-foot draw—make their way downriver minding the wing dams that jut out silently underwater, unseen. Not all of them appear on Quimby’s river charts either.

On the other hand, collectively these dams prevent the channel from cutting new paths as it did for centuries before human engineering. Along with floodwalls, levees, locks, and dams, wing dams
are also responsible for drying up wetlands. Gone are the piping plovers. And those bottom-feeders hoping for a resting place? Every fisher worth her bait knows fishing off the downstream side of a wing dam is a sure bet for walleye. Throw 'em a line. Hoist 'em. Hit 'em over the head with a wooden mallet. Scale 'em. Eat 'em. What kind of safe harbor is that?

Schooled in education departments of the early 1970s, I believed that if I poured flowing streams of lessons and sage advice into student heads, their knowledge would flow downstream like a contained river—kept neatly to its shores. The right words would rise up from their mouths until bubbling into white water rapids. Back then, I thought I understood teaching and learning precisely. Back then, I thought the Mississippi was controllable. Channel student ideas into the nice flowcharts of Maslow's hierarchy. Comingle the backwaters of deconstruction, tagmemics, and behavioral modification. Wait until the spring rise, and students would certainly flood with inspiration. It would be like those lovely solutions I'd learned in calculus class—predictable and measurable.

Then reality bit. I entered the chalk dust world of secondary education, teaching five classes of Mass Media five days a week. As a college student, I'd charted Hemingway's stylistics and categorized Dickinson's images. I knew how to write a sonnet. I'd studied Milton's hell, but I never expected to feel the heat of it in the classroom. Now, I was faced with thirty students in a class, who expected me to teach plugs and wires, to use a "portapak" (the 30-pound, strapped-to-your-hip, reel-to-reel forerunner of video cameras and lightweight video disk cameras), and to numerically represent their progress in grades. It felt as though I were ensnared by a spaghetti of wires. I wandered the aisles of study hall searching under desks for literary criticism, predictable paradigms, and sure signs of self-actualization. Instead, all I found was chewing gum.

On top of this, the administration expected me to teach foreign courses like Composition. Although I could easily identify parts of speech and diagram any sentence, now I actually had to teach students to write. I was an English major of the 1970s. I didn't know nuthin' 'bout teaching writing. Junior Class Moderator, I tried to assist students in constructing an evening of prom fantasy out of crepe paper saved from the previous fall's homecoming float. Worse, I was expected to explain why Heather and Juan hadn't
jumped fourteen points on the verbal section of standardized tests in a single year. Parents wanted my advice on how to cure their teenager’s addictions to rock music and beer. My carefully mapped-out lessons for what I’d teach them were drowned out by what they needed to learn. I grabbed for any piece of driftwood in the pool.

Worried over whether I’d do a good job, I wanted sure signs by which to steer my course as an educator. My early teaching invested in locks and dams, measures to steer student learning and my own proficiency and to keep us safe from scraping bottom. I latched onto every theory and educational buzz trend that came down the pike. I made grids for students to chart their writing progress. I created lesson plan checklists and never strayed. I took copious notes at in-service workshops, thirsty for that watery elevator that would raise me through the lock chamber into the next channel. That was in the early days before I moved to the river.

The floodwalls and levees I’d built in my teaching life by following verbatim certain theories and prescribed methods weren’t holding. Sure, my students held to the middle channel, but every once in a while, all hell broke loose, and I had to admit they weren’t learning much. The wetlands were drying up. Students could memorize lists of terms and apply them to passages I’d given them, for example, but they couldn’t transfer the knowledge in useful ways. In short, I wasn’t teaching them to think. Although theory informed my classroom practice, I hadn’t yet made it organic to me.

During years of high school teaching, I suffered the dams and floodwalls of prescriptive models. One year it was Madelyn Hunter’s thumbs up/thumbs down method of assessing student response. I followed her advise solidly, asking my students to hold thumbs up if they got it, down if not, and to the side if they weren’t quite sure. All the teachers in my high school had attended the same workshop. By the end of the week, several students entered class with their opposables cartoonishly bandaged as they chanted, “No More Thumbs! No More Thumbs!” They were right. Applying a single method so rigidly was reductive when it comes to the rich art of teaching and learning. Still, what I learned from the Madelyn Hunter method was the importance of focusing on what students received versus what I thought I’d taught.

Next, it was Behavioral Objectives, a practice many of us came to refer to as the B.O. of education. I dutifully memorized the hundred verbs to use in creating B.O., but again I found that focusing too
narrowly on one theory took on an aroma matching the name we’d so glibly given the theory. Important values and qualities learned in the classroom couldn’t be adequately defined within the dammed pool of Behavioral Objectives.

I was stuck in the middle of the channel, unsure which shore to swim to. On Private Me Island, I loved both literature and writing with passion, for how they make us more richly human. But on Teacher Island, I’d been informed by current literary theory that only intellectual reader responses counted. “Gut reaction matters when it comes to art,” Private Me Island tugged. “What sets us apart from the beasts is our ability to apply critical theory to literature,” Teacher Island yanked back.

Attending the symphony in Dubuque one night, my epiphany arrived as clear-cut as twilight on the river separating light from darkness. Yes, of course, aesthetic criticism enhances appreciation, but to ask folks used to dressing in overalls to suddenly don tuxes, evening gowns, and lorgnettes in order to enjoy music originally produced for the masses is a tedious exercise in stripping away passion. I resolved to find a way to reconcile the fops and chicken bone-slinging audience of the Globe Theater with the elegance of Shakespeare’s plays in my teaching life. Surely one didn’t have to be sacrificed for the sake of the other. After all, as a second-generation American, my own roots were in the beer halls and horse stables of Milwaukee’s Miller Brewing Company; yet here I was at the front of the classroom. Perhaps opposites should attract.

What was there to lose? I no longer wanted to be part of girdling in my teaching or student learning. It was time to blow up the wing dams I’d constructed. We’d dig to China in my classroom, I imagined. Yet I worried. If students jumped out of the boat, could they swim? Could I?

Fortunately, I became the English department chair at the high school where I was teaching, and along with the appointment came more flexibility. Living on the floodplain, I learned from the neighbors about dealing with the spring rise. Some install pulleys on sofas so they can be hoisted up when water flows into the living room. Installing your furnace in an upstairs bedroom closet and elevating the water heater five feet off the ground leaves a person with a practical sense of humility—and humor. Life, I realized by living on the floodplain, was neither a bowl of cherries nor of pits. It’s a bumper-car rink. If the river rises too quickly for us to pull up the carpet beforehand, then I tear up the muddy mess later, pitch
it, and live with painted plywood and scatter rugs for a few years. Failed classroom experiment? Bump back and try, try, try again.

I entered college teaching through the back slough. First, while still teaching high school, I served as a nighttime adjunct in the degree program for nontraditional students at Clarke College. Later, I substituted for the writing lab director on leave one year to finish her PhD. I had no intention of staying. University life, however, and my new colleagues challenged me even more to experiment, to risk, to sink—and to swim. Now that I was heavily involved with river revival efforts and riparian cleanup, I found the college’s invitation to enter into full-time college teaching irresistible. Furthermore, asked to develop the core required course for Clarke’s honors program, I knew students would write, research, and write some more. But how? What?

I fretted for months over methods to engage smart students in ways that might also provide service to the community. Sitting on the dock at our boat slip one July afternoon with my big toe dangling in the river, I stared down into the surface. Only my own image reflected back at me out of the muddy water, and then I knew. The river would be their textbook. Its surface would be their writing tablet.

The local river museum was researching fish, wildlife, and environmental concerns in preparation for the forty-million-dollar National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium it would construct within a few years. The director and curator agreed to partner with us and developed a list of topics they needed more information about in order to write exhibit scripts. Since some of my students had grown up along the Mississippi and since all of them were now living within a mile of its banks, they dived in head first, eager to get to the main channel.

Researching the disappearance of Higgins’ eye mussels juxtaposed with the onslaught of zebra mussels, examining the poor results of mitigation banking as an excuse to destroy wetlands, and investigating even legal levels of chemical pollution on our stretch of the river, students learned creative methods of scholarly research. Of course, museum curators and the director performed the lion’s share of research; yet these students played significant roles in finding background information. When students presented their findings to the museum’s director and board and grappled with their questions, they gained a sense of place more expansive than the four white Sheetrocked walls of our classroom. They knew their
research, filtered through exhibits, would eventually inform millions of visitors touring the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium. Even now years later, these same students return to visit the Museum/Aquarium commenting frequently, “I remember when we did the water quality tests and recorded our data” or “They’re finding new ways to deal with those dratted zebra mussels.”

Feeling the river running through me, its wildness and unpredictability, I’ve also been drawn to teaching and writing forms of the essay first introduced by Michel de Montaigne. Often meandering, multiple-voiced, associative, and self-reflective, Montaigne’s work contrasts with Francis Bacon’s locked-and-dammed thesis-driven compositions. People like Kathleen Yancey, Wendy Bishop, Michael Spooner, and David Starkey welcomed me into academic writing, not in spite of my alternate essay forms, but because of them.

After several years of teaching and being on the river, I drove up to Lake Itasca in Minnesota north of St. Paul. Only here, north of the lock-and-dam system and levees, would I find the river in its natural state, its primitive existence predating human engineering. Over 250 tributaries drain more than forty percent of the United States. These tributaries stretch from the Rockies to the Appalachians. Its official source is tiny Lake Itasca. Barely ten feet wide and not more than two feet deep, the small stream that flows out of the northern end of the lake builds to nearly a mile wide and one hundred feet deep at points during its journey to the Gulf of Mexico. There at Itasca, where the Mississippi begins modestly, barely bubbling out of rock, I felt a reverence for small beginnings that, in time, amount to greatness. Why should teaching be any different?

Stepping carefully onto slippery rocks in the shallow cool water, I imagined the same drops streaming over my ankles in their journey down to St. Anthony’s Falls near Minneapolis, down through Dubuque, down to Cairo where they’d commingle with other drops from the Ohio River, and finally all the way down to New Orleans through to the Head-of-Passes at the Gulf of Mexico. Only there, at the Itasca headwaters, did I appreciate fully the Ojibwa naming of this “great river,” this “gathering of water,” this “Meche Sepe.” My waterscape identity gathers in me the river’s energy, beyond stereotype and myth. Ultimately, mine is the story of how the nature of the Mississippi connects with the nature of oneself.

Over all, I’ve discovered that the chief difference between the Mississippi and Lake Michigan—and all oceans, lakes, streams, puddles for that matter—is how it moves. Lakes and oceans have
tides and waves, of course, but it is the Mississippi’s current that leads Mark Twain to reiterate Heracleitus’s assertion that no one “steps into the same river twice.” It travels. Thus many of us take up residence on houseboats, our homes vehicles of floating migration, metaphor for the wandering nomadic life.

So, too, is it metaphor for my teaching life. As paradoxical as it may be for a stiff, bespectacled, lesson-planning academic to reside in harmony with wildness and caprice, it is so in my case.

So constant is the rhythm of the river’s movement that it becomes, oddly, its only stable quality. No matter when I swim out to the main channel, I know the current will take me willy-nilly if I let it, so I use caution. I never shore my boat without tying a bow and a stern line.

Ever present in our profession is change. A ten-year span of critical theory and composition practice regularly gives way to new theories and practices, oxbowing off the main channel. Mine is a recursive practice as well, which may return to previous methods in the classroom only to give way to something newer. Still, I never enter the classroom without a plan. When it suddenly strikes me midlesson to ask students to get out of their desks and waltz as we recite Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” in order to feel the rhythm of the lines, however, I’ll follow that current. In both my life on the river and in the classroom, the very unpredictability is the only predictability. I have only to steer my course—and to navigate the wing dams.

I be com e water be come walt er be come m e s m e
Notes

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Bibliography