Search For A Common Language
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Begin with a River

Annick Smith

Begin with a river, and you are guaranteed a story will follow. Perhaps river talk is our common language as riversheds are our common homes. John Wesley Powell saw correctly that the life of the West is organized around watersheds. Scarce water is the life-giving source in arid lands, and where water is plentiful, river valleys have always been our main avenues of settlement and connection, which is one way of saying stories. Connection. Settlement. Source. Obstacle. Flux: words that describe or characterize rivers also describe the processes of life and so describe the way narrative works—art imitating life. And rivers are powerful metaphors. They offer a natural form and a natural subject—actual and symbolic at the same time (for stories often shape our minds and cultures).

Rivers are also instructors. They can teach us how a story works. Begin with beginnings. All rivers have a real beginning, a source, a spring from underground, a joining of waters. Tributaries flow into larger veins and become the thing they flow into—larger, like subplots in a narrative. This often happens in the troublesome middle of a story. Anyone who’s tried to write a story or a book knows that the middle is the worst part. The middle of a story is the venue for obstacles. Think of the varieties of complexity and change the river model offers: calm pools, rapids, backward-flowing eddies, waterfalls, rockslides, beaches, snags, logjams, ice.
That’s just the beginning. Rivers have currents. Some run underground for a time. They carry seeds dispersing and colonizing. They are avenues for great runs of fish that can fertilize whole ecosystems. They also carry detritus and waste. Rivers may be poisoned. They may spread disease. They destroy with floods. They create floodplains. Sometimes they run dry. But eventually rivers, like narratives, reach the third act, the climax, the ending. All rivers have endings. They end in deltas. They open in mouths. Always in the process of transformation, even their endings are transforming. For in the end, rivers become something else, something larger: a lake, a sea, an ocean, clouds in the sky.

But beyond the language of metaphor, rivers also carry our actual stories, our voyages—a voyage being one of the great forms of narrative. Think of the river narratives of America. Here are just a few of them: Louis and Clark on the Missouri and the Columbia River; Mark Twain’s Mississippi; Ann Zwinger’s Colorado River; Annie Dillard’s little Tinker Creek; Norman Maclean’s Blackfoot, which is also my river of possession; John Graves’s Clear Fork of the Brazos in Goodbye to a River. I could go on; so could you. Think of the river stories and the larger sea stories and the ocean stories. Think of stories flowing like water.

Flowing water can be the text, subtext, texture, but it is sure to hold many of our stories. Which leads me to a subject more political. For stories that are true to human experience and true to place can act as powerful agents for environmental change. Rivers in a storyteller’s heart may be associated with pure water, wilderness, animals—like Ted Kerasote’s story of the wolf and the elk, a really compelling story. Stories like Ted’s incite readers to connect their stories to wild places, to the wild places that they know—because that’s what storytelling does; it connects. Nobody cares about your story. They care about their story. And if you tell a really good story, a reader will connect to his or her story in a new and invigorated way. That’s why we even bother telling our stories, because we are hoping to incite other people to imagine their stories freshly. So, when somebody tells a story about wilderness and somebody else reads it and connects the experiences that they’ve had in the wild, they begin to value wilderness more. The stories inhabit their imagination and their hearts, and the wilderness becomes sacred. People who read stories about pure rivers, pure wildlands, and the great stories that happen in them, may want to preserve those places themselves and also preserve the possibility that the next generations will be able to find their sacred stories in the same sacred places.

Of course, rivers in a storyteller’s heart are not necessarily pure or wild. They can be like Jennifer Price’s Los Angeles River and the Chicago River of my childhood, which runs backward as well as being polluted. Such rivers speak of degradation and loss, which are also great subjects for stories. They offer hope for renewal. Wherever there is loss or degradation, there is hope
for renewal. So possibilities for change and transformation are often connected to rivers and places that have been degraded. Remember Dickens’s prescription for a good ending: a death and a wedding—you can’t lose.

Fear of loss, hope of renewal, joy of preservation—these are the emotions of our common river language. Writers seeking to help some particular environment or endangered places in general have recently found a new format, a tool if you will, that may move readers to reconsider their own stories and revalue their own sacred places. I think there’s a new form of publishing that’s happening. Maybe some of you can give me some previous examples, but I’ve only noticed this phenomenon in the last ten years or so. My companion, Bill Kittredge, defines sacred as those things we cannot do without. Each one of us has a sacred story of identity, or spirit, or connection, and each sacred story takes place or is animated by places that we also know are sacred. We cannot do without the stories or the places. If we fear they are going to be lost, we will fight to protect them. So writers and publishers have lately joined in creating collections of nonpolitical personal stories, essays, and poems about places that hold their stories.

The writers whom I’m going to be talking about don’t write environmental stories; they’re not writing propaganda. They’re writing the true and important stories that happen to them or their characters in certain, very special kinds of places, and their stories connect to those places. Later, publishers may take those stories and put them together and say, hey, look at all these stories about this river, or this wood, or this mountain; let’s see if we can publish this collection and thereby help protect those places by enabling readers to connect with them.

The first book that I know of this kind is Testimony. Put together by Terry Tempest Williams and Steve Trimble, it was an effort to try and convince federal legislators to save the southern Utah desert. And they asked writers such as Bill Kittredge and Barry Lopez—twenty writers in all—to write essays or publish already-written essays that could be used as an argument for saving the southern Utah deserts. Williams and Trimble put this book together with grant money and distributed it in a limited edition to Congress, to policy makers; then it was picked up by Milkweed Editions in Minneapolis, which also publishes a wonderful series of books called Credo, about what writers believe and value, and another series of books called The World as Home. My first book, Homestead, is part of that series. Milkweed Editions is a nonprofit, educational, literary publishing venture, and the money that it makes selling the series goes back into other nonprofit books, and sometimes part of it goes directly to the cause itself.

Testimony inspired me to try to publish a similar kind of book in Montana because my beloved river, the Blackfoot, was in danger of being killed off at its headwaters by a huge, cyanide heap-leach gold mine. And I
thought, well, let’s try and get a whole bunch of Montana writers together to write stories that have to do with the Blackfoot River—very short pieces because we wanted to influence state legislators, not federal, and Montana state legislators have a very short attention span. So we asked for five pages as an optimum length. I started to circulate queries to friends of mine—there are so many writers in Montana—and I was overwhelmed by the response. Forty-seven people sent material. Then we got a grant from an anonymous contributor to finance publication of six thousand copies, and Russell Chatham, a very fine western artist, donated artwork. Everybody donated everything; nobody was paid a cent. Finally, we gave those books away free. We gave them away free to the legislature that was sitting in session at the time. We called the anthology *Headwaters*.

During the editing of the anthology, I was bereft because my father had just died, and Bill and I were looking for consolation at the seashore in Santa Barbara when I got a call from the Associated Press stringer in Helena. And he asked, “Did you hear what happened to your book?” And I asked, “What?” And he said, “Well, they passed it around to the legislature, and one guy started reading it in, and he got to page seventeen where there are some really dirty words. And so he alerted the speaker of the house, and the speaker of the house got the sergeant at arms to confiscate all the books and put them under lock and key.” Which is why our anthology became a cause célèbre. Newspapers picked the story up, and people wrote letters to the editors about freedom of expression, and those six thousand copies just disappeared. They’re a rare item now.

*Headwaters* was followed by a book put together by Carolyn Servid and Hank Lentfer, which, like *Testimony*, was printed and distributed through Milkweed Editions. It includes little stories and testimonies that have to do with the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from people as varied as Native Indian people who live there and native Alaskans who’ve connected their lives to that place, and people who haven’t been there but value it as a sacred place in their imaginations. So *Arctic Refuge* was printed and distributed and sent to opinion makers and lawmakers.

Another similar but not overtly political book of this kind was edited by my friend Mary Clearman Blew, a wonderful writer from Montana and Idaho, who teaches at the University of Idaho. Blew was struck with people’s stories about rivers, and she put together a collection called *Written on Water: Essays on Idaho Rivers*—which came out in 2001 from the University of Idaho Press, another nonprofit publisher. This book will be followed by a collection of writings on fire.

Finally, I want to mention *The River We Carry with Us*, published by the Clark Fork Coalition, an environmental group in Montana that deals with
the various branches in the Clark Fork River: the watershed, the Blackfoot, the Bitterroot, and the Clark Fork. Like the other collections, this book includes all kinds of pieces by well-known writers, stories that connect with the watershed. Clark City Press, Russell Chatham’s press, in Livingston, Montana, printed it, and its sale will help to finance the efforts of the Clark Fork Coalition to preserve those rivers and riversheds.

I know there will be more collections of this sort coming soon, and I bet some of you can tell me about similar books that you know that I’m unaware of. For example, on my to-call list when I get back to Montana is to respond to a call from an ex-governor of Wisconsin, who heard about these kinds of books through a magazine that I was featured in and wants to know how he can do an anthology in Wisconsin to save his troubled, endangered watershed. I don’t know how politically effective this book tool is, but it is a way for writers to engage in the common language, the common purpose of helping the environment by doing what they do best. Most writers aren’t great organizers. They don’t chain themselves to trees; they’re not good at listening to meetings that go on and on. But they can write stories, and then they can try and get their stories out.

I’d like to give you some examples of the kinds of stories or poems that appear in these collections, stories about rivers or places. Let’s begin with a poem by my great friend Richard Hugo, who was a wonderful poet from Washington and Montana. This one is called “Plans for Altering the River.”

Those who favor our plan to alter the river raise your hand. Thank you for your vote. Last week, you’ll recall, I spoke about how water never complains, how it runs where you tell it, seemingly at home, flooding grain or pinched by geometric banks like those in this graphic depiction of our plan. We ask for power: A river boils or fails to turn our turbines. The river approves our plan to alter the river.

Due to a shipwreck downstream, I’m sad to report our project is not on schedule. The boat was carrying some mint for our concrete rip rap balustrade that will force the river to run east of the factory sight, through the state-owned grove of cedar. Then, the uncooperative carpenter’s union went on strike. When we get that settled and the concrete, given good weather we can go ahead with our plan to alter the river.
We have the injunction. We silence the opposition.
The workers are back, the material’s arrived
and everything’s humming. I thank you
for this award, this handsome plaque I’ll keep
forever above my mantle. And I’ll read
the inscription often, aloud to remind me
how, with your courageous backing, I fought
our battle and won. I’ll always remember
this banquet, this day we started to alter the river.

Flowers on the bank? A park on Forgotten Island?
Return of cedar and salmon? Who are these men?
These Johnnies-come-lately with plans to alter the river?
What’s this wild festival in May
celebrating the run off, display floats on fire
at night and a forest dance under the stars.
Children sing through my locked door, “Old, stranger,
we’re going to alter, to alter, alter the river.”
Just when the water was settled and at home.¹

At our symposium, we rejoiced that the Arctic Refuge was saved, at least for
now, so I include a piece from the Arctic Refuge book by John Keeble, a very
good writer and teacher of writing at University of Washington in Spokane.

At Prudhoe Bay I had a guide supplied by Arctic Oil to show me around.
It seemed a little unbelievable, the astonishing place I’d flown into com-
ing over the Brooks Range upon the vast plain. The powerful expanse
between the edifices of extraction heightens the sense of remoteness and
exquisite menace. It seemed to level the very brain. Impressive as it was,
both the topography and the insulations, with their gas plumes alight
back into the land as far as one could see. It was impossible not to con-
sider the damage caused by that infrastructure. Out there, propping up
our infrastructure of greed down at home, there the soiled wetlands, the
heaps of drill tailings, the 40,000 gallons of oily waste generated each day,
the gravel pits, the dumping pits, the 250 oil spills a years, seeping into the
sea. The litany could go on and on.

As my Prudhoe Bay guide and I sat in a GMC Suburban at the end of a
spit one evening, looking out upon the gray Beaufort Sea, four arctic foxes
materialized from the ditch. I rolled down my window to see them better.
“Don’t get out,” my guide said. “Rabies.” To me, the foxes didn’t appear
rabid in the least. They barked making a sound much like a cat’s meow
then edged closer to the Suburban one at a time. They hunkered down
until they laid flat on the ground, then passed their tails up along side their bodies and covered their noses. It was a delicate, studied and graceful motion. A long-held response to cold. I was thinking about oil, the deliquescent remains of life itself, the quintessential substance of all the last century. At that moment I was also thinking about the long controversy over Anwar. I remember the words of a native woman, a Gwich’In from Arctic Village explaining the oil battle. And yet it is like we are still lost somewhere, lost somewhere, that is how it seems to me.

Alongside the Suburban the four foxes moved again, rising, edging forward, stopping and curling their tails over their noses. I suddenly realized why they were here. This was a favorite overlook for workers; the foxes expected food to be tossed out the windows. They’d been habituated into a new dependency. They were pets. This remains mysterious to me and troubling, as I myself feel lost. We keep bombing Iraq to protect our oil interests. We keep driving our gas-guzzlers. We keep drilling and despoiling. While other choices for conservation and renewal of power generation exist, we keep doing the same thing over and over. It’s as if groping in the tunnel of our own making, we’re caught in an entropy of the imagination, too habituated to our ways to consider the alternatives. Meanwhile, the tunnel is collapsing all around us.²

An important new writer who we’ll all hear a lot more about, Debra Earling, who teaches Native American studies and creative writing at the University of Montana, provides a very different kind of story. Earling’s first novel, *Perma Red*, was published in 2002 to rave reviews and has received many prizes. This piece, eventually printed in *The River We Carry with Us*, was first published in *Big Sky Journal*, which is what some of us women in Montana call “Big Guy Journal.” This very personal essay is another way of telling stories about rivers. Its title is “River Home.”

Rivers tell us stories. My parents had been looking to buy a house and when my mother saw the house along the river she wanted it. A house we could afford and yet a house far removed from the trailer life we had once known. A house with a carved wooden banister, a riverstone fireplace; a sleepy house perched above the green tangled currents of the Spokane River. It was the house of my mother’s dreams, a luxury house with hard wood floors, a sunny kitchen with a pantry bigger than the room my brother and sister and I shared. I remember my mother and father walking through the open rooms, the gleam of our faces in the picture windows. They surmised that the house was haunted because it was so affordable. It was the home they would raise us in, they told themselves. A safe home with room to grow where we would all find certain happiness.
My parents didn’t buy that house. They didn’t buy that house, my
mother told me, because when they stepped outside to look at the lawn
that stretched down to the deep river’s edge they saw me enter the water.
“You were fearless,” my mother tells me even now. “We know we would
have lost you to the river.” And when she tells me this story, I see myself
as a child wading into the cool, embracing waters, knowing the story my
parents had told themselves was true.³

And then, a little later on in her essay, here is the dark story that did be-
come true. I won’t quote the renewal, but, trust me, there is renewal.

Years before, in the summer of my twenty-seventh year, I had come back
to the Flathead Reservation with hopes of living a life that embraced all
I was, or perhaps all that I thought I was. I am Indian, I told myself,
though my skin was lighter than my mother’s, lighter than my brother’s,
and lighter than the Indians I knew on the reservation. I was searching to
affirm my identity, to find the story I knew would define me and I walked
the rivers that summer listening for the story they would tell me. I would
put on my high boots and walk through rattle snake grass, beside the
jackal; I would spend long evenings at the car damn sight, standing high
on the banks, to stare down into the deep carving river of the Flathead.
I would stay until twilight listening to the churning water below me, be-
lieving the rivers had a story to tell me.

I did not know that the man I had married as a child of seventeen and
divorced as a child of twenty-one; the man I would let slap me, punch me
until my breath left me; the man who knew my thoughts; the man I held
through long winters of blue moon nights and white frosted windows; the
man I had lost not just once, but hundreds of times to swallows of beer
and an old grief I could not translate; the man I loved, the man I loved
beyond death, beyond the deer rifle he lifted to my head at the age of nine-
teen—that that man, horrible and wonderful, would jump off a bridge
and hit the water so hard he would shatter the sweet cage of his ribs, that
he would swallow the river and the river would swallow him like heartache
and he would sleep in the hissing water of the Spokane for seven days.⁴

Ian Frazier, who lived in Missoula for years, wrote quite a different,
lighthearted piece about a local view called, “A View of the Clark Fork.” He
writes often for The New Yorker, and published a wonderful book several
years back called Great Plains.

When I lived in Missoula, I used to walk along the Clark Fork River al-
most every day. Sometimes I stared at it, the way you stare into the flames
of a campfire; sometimes I checked it again and again like an emerging story on the TV news. Sometimes I just idled and fooled along its banks with lack of purpose that approached pure waste of time. I like to fish but I seldom fished in the Clark Fork. Fishing it would have been too utilitarian some how. Better to stand on the Higgins Avenue bridge in early spring as I used to do, dropping pennies in an attempt to get one to land on the paperback and placemat-size cakes of ice floating past. Better to sit on the riprap embankment behind the Missoulian building at dusk in early winter looking at the town’s Christmas lights reflected in its wide flat stretch of river just up stream. The current runs close to the bank here and it makes spirals on the surface like a thrown football. Better just to look at that than to do a lot I can name.

I should thank the river; throw wads of tens and twenties to it, not just pennies, for all the pointless fun it gave me. Smashing ice with my son, for example. A fact you learn when you have kids is that once they get to be about four, they can smash ice for any amount of time. He and I used to go to the little side channels by the railroad bridge on the west side of town and smash ice in the shallows until not a pane remained. Then we’d take the biggest fragments and throw them to smash smaller ones. When there was no ice, we would hit things with sticks. Throw sticks and rocks in the river and build small forts in the sand and smash them.

Once we were down there smashing and whacking, when we came upon a young man with a black Labrador at the river’s edge. The Labrador was just coming out of the water with a large riverstone in its mouth. The Lab went back in, dove, found another rock on the bottom, surfaced, and swam back, struggling stoically against the current and the rock’s weight. He already had a couple dozen similar rocks slowly drying in a pile along the riverbank. The young man said this was just what the dog liked to do. We put aside our weapons and watched while the Lab, answering a higher call, dove and returned and dove again.

Like Frazer and others, I’ve also written about a river important to me. This is the end of a piece about the Blackfoot River.

Connecting with a river means learning to float. You think you know where you’re going and then you encounter an unexpected turn, a current or flood. You are swept under. You emerge transformed by the act of surviving danger. The river hides rocks and deep snags and drowned creatures. And it is this secrecy that draws me—the tension between what’s on the surface and what lies beneath. I believe we are more like rivers than we are like meadows.
Floating on my back down the Blackfoot on a dog day in August, I like to point my toes downstream and look up to cliffs and clouds. A red-tailed hawk sails above me; I float past silver-plumed willows; blue dragonflies hover above a riffle; a kingfisher with his crested, outsized head dives for a minnow. Immersed in liquid light I find relief from self and time. Each of us has memories we sing over and over again like a song in our inner ear.

If your place of memory and connection is the Big Blackfoot River, you are blessed as I am, you will want to do what you can do to save the river so your grandchildren can float its green waters and fish its native cutthroats and bull trout. You will teach them to dive into deep pools, touch stones that go back to the beginnings of time. The river is not dead yet. Boys and girls should make love on its banks.

I'll finish this recitation with one of the funniest poets in the world, Greg Keeler. He is a wonderful poet and humorist who teaches poetry and creative writing at Montana State University in Bozeman and writes amazing songs. So this is a poem that Greg wrote for our *Headwaters* book called, “Your Waking Thoughts of Quack.”

When weather won’t hold and clouds
turn snake down skies too bright
to stay, you blame the ducks and
think bad ducks then fisting skyward
shout bad ducks at Vs that waver
but don’t quit coming.

When rivers turn dreamside down
and thicken to the green of marmalade
in a schoolgirl’s twisted fantasy,
you blame the ducks and think
duck guilt where they capsize
in backwaters to peck scum
from rocks and moon the sky
with their pointy duck butts.
When you wake to duck quacks and time flags down your waking thought of quack and quack again, you blame the ducks for last night and the night before and scatter them wobbling down the bank toward the fat confetti of their reflections, shouting beat it, bad ducks. Take this luck and scatter on the sky for good.