



Water Song

By Catherine Young

Selected for the anthology
The Driftless Reader edited by Curt Meine and Keefe Keely
University of Wisconsin Press, 2017

Originally published in *About Place*, "Future of Water," Volume III,
Issue II, 2013

I wake and listen for it—often in the middle of the night: the sound of the spring creek below our house. I hear it gushing from the springbox, and as it leaves the culvert, it tumbles over the weeping willow's roots, talking loudly in spring and fall when detritus is gone; softer in summer beneath swallows, beside grasses. In winter, the spring creek purls a clear, clear ringing until deep cold freezes fairy bridges across it in places. The creek is an ever-present, resonant spiral of sound.

More than voice of our Wisconsin Driftless Area farm, the spring creek is an artery in a water heart—alive and pulsing. It is a twig on a water tree, and its course shapes the branch of a trout stream called Dieter Hollow Creek, which in turn, is part of the great water tree called the Mississippi River. In spring, the winged ones in the sky follow the trail of water from trunk to twig and then in fall, back again from twig to trunk.

The coursing of the waters shapes the course of our lives—just as it surely has for all the people who have lived here over millennia. A century ago, people who spoke Norwegian filled the hollow along this creek. The family who lived here kept butter and milk in the spring house beneath our weeping willow. Stories handed down from them tell how the spring was the center of the sugarbush for indigenous people who gathered and distilled the sweet waters of this place.

Like all of the people who lived here before us, we are here because of the water.

*

The waters which flow from these hills begin as artesian springs pushing out of layers of sandstone and limestone.

The phrase *artesian spring* is alluring. A lure. I walk upstream to one of the many springs on our farm in Dieter Hollow to follow a thread of water. In the woods, I find cool trickles seeping and trace the trails through moist brown leaves to their source. I pull away the leaves, wait, and watch for the muddy swirling to settle. It reveals a roiling porridge of water bubbling through fine sand, creating patterns that beg to be deciphered. Stories swirl in those patterns—and sustain the voices of the ancients.

When I was young and not yet able to read books, black marks on white pages seemed indecipherable, and I remember the first two-syllable word I sounded out in first grade: *river*. It was mine to keep forever. I could look out from my river-shaped valley and imagine some other world around the bend. *River*. The word carried a world of secret places; outlets to wider and wider words rushing downward.

I remember too, sitting beneath a huge willow in the hollow where I grew up—an out-of-the-way part of our Appalachian mountain city. The water tumbled down the mountainside through the woods to the willow where I sat. Houses lined the street on one side, but the stream was king of the fields and woods on the other. I watched the water pulse—now dark, now light as it kept running away from where I was.

And I wondered: Where does this water come from? Why is it always moving? Where does it go? It throbbed and throbbed like my heartbeat, and if I put my fingers in the stream, the water flowed around them and kept going. I took willow leaves, kissed them, and dropped them in. They raced away, and I wondered if they would make it around the bends, down into the brook, and down, downhill to the river. *Down and away*, the water called. *Down and away*.

I learned: waters widen; words fill a page. I knew I wanted to follow waters.

*

I plunge into the stream. Silt fills around the ankles of my waders, and I remind myself that I can get stuck in stream silt. Under one arm, I hold the stadia rod used for surveying a cross-section of this southwestern Wisconsin stream. Under the other, I hold the steel soil probe, used for coring the soil in the cornfield on the streambank ahead of me. I work as a fluvial geomorphologist in Wisconsin—*the place of the gathering of waters*. I have sought these water-shaped lands of the Driftless Area, where no glacial ice has ever smoothed hills or filled valleys; a land of springs and streams all running to the Mississippi River. My job is to measure the flood history along all the tributaries to the Galena and Kickapoo rivers. The sound of the word, *fluvial*, laps against my heart.

I wade into the cornfield, set up the surveying rod, and wave a signal to my work partner across the stream. All around me, corn waves its glossy green leaves. The reflection from sunlight on corn plants blinds me. At my feet, I see the red tubular roots of each stalk anchored in coffee-and-cream colored soil as smooth as paste.

When the surveying equipment is properly set up, we will plunge the probe into the surface, deeper and deeper, until we find an almost black layer: the original prairie soil surface from the 1830s. We will plunge the core in again and again. We will use the samples to look at what the stream has laid over these past 150 years, and how often and with what force it has flooded. Sometimes we will reach the original surface at three feet. At other times we will reach the prairie soil at fifteen feet. All of the deposits on the stream banks are the result of large-scale farming. The yellowish soils here on top of the very dark original surface have been deposited from years of accelerated erosion.

Along stream banks, we can see the exposed bones of the Driftless landscape: the layers of golden limestone or verdigris-covered white sandstones. Sometimes we can see the buried prairie soil, the soil developed under the care of indigenous people over many, many centuries.

I learn the unglaciated Driftless land through layers of sediment: deposits of gravels and silts laid down, flood after flood. I read its history. Sometimes I

wade into a stream and stand, becoming a part of the living trail of water. I feel its gentle push. The water of the Driftless landscape calls to me, and I want to answer, calling it *home*.

*

The weeping willow at our farm's spring creek fills the sky. Its roots are the sounding board for water's music, allowing the cold, clear water to drop and speak. The willow watches over the creek and us.

In April, my young daughter and I wake before dawn and take a thermos of tea down to the water. We plunk our boots into the creek facing our willow. Lazily, we pull out browned stems of last year's weeds and forbs. My daughter and I pluck yellow willow wands, and weave them into bracelets. Soon, fragrant catkins will appear, and the tree will hum with our honeybees. Willow nectar is their first spring food.

In June, my feet land in the spring creek, bare-naked, crushing mint and stepping into woven strands of sunlight. In I plunge—and out! Such ache, I cannot believe my feet are a part of me. The spring waters that course so seemingly frigid in summer actually flow from the ground at the same temperature year round. And though my skin aches from the cold, other creatures stay in the spring water all year. Tiny gravelly tubes rise from stones in the stream, like an underwater garden: caddis fly larvae. Snails in black spiraled shells smaller than a letter on this page cling to golden gravel. Side swimming scuds (a name I adore) float along the creek's edges among spearmint, purple-stemmed peppermint, watercress, and jewelweed. My daughter and I pluck the jewelweed leaves. We drape them over our hands like the softest cloth, and then hold them underwater to see them shine silver.

In September, my daughter and I wade through jewelweeds, now waist high. The orange flowers have fed the Ruby-throated hummingbirds all growing season. We don't know where the hummingbirds live, but we know it's somewhere on or beneath this willow, because we have heard them zoom to life and vanish here. Now the orange jewelweed flowers with their spotted throats form pale green lenticular seed pods. My daughter and I hover over the pods as they prepare to live up to their Latin name: *Impatiens*.

Impatience: a wild, encapsulated energy held within—a perfect description. As soon as we see the darkening of the seeds within the fleshy pods, we pounce! With forefinger and thumb, we pinch the tips of the pods ever so lightly and—the pods burst! Filaments curl in, and seeds shoot out. All along the streams where we live, the jewelweed blooms orange and thick, telling us where there is running water; telling us wildlife and humans have played at the waters.

In January, snow makes visible the trails of deer, turkeys, skunks, and opossum who visit the waters while we sleep. The creek becomes the central pathway through a crystal garden and the voice which sets the crystals ringing. In this monochrome landscape of snow and wintry skies, crystallized water seeds the air and coats the trees and bushes. We wake to watch the sunrise set millions of frozen droplets on fire in every color of the rainbow. We call to one another to come to the window and see! Come see, before the sun melts the hoarfrost and allows water to flow once again. We have even seen a crystallized rainbow shimmer in our barnyard: a snowbow in the metallic colors of a soap bubble: of rust red, gold, blue, and silver. The snowbow showed no green; it magnified only what was present on the landscape.

*

When rain falls, we listen. Each drop of water that falls on our headwaters farm connects us to the Mississippi River water tree. When waters rise on the Mississippi, we watch, helpless to stop the floodwaters and damage farther down in Iowa and Missouri.

And when the Mississippi River is low as it was last year, with patches of duckweed instead of open water, it is because, in part, our branch of water has thinned.

Living on this headwaters farm, we've tried our best to be stewards of the soil and guardians of the waters. To protect the integrity of our branch of the water tree, we farm organically, and we fence our herd of dairy goats away from the trout stream and springs. We know that whatever we do affects the waters upstream as well as downstream—a subtle shift in water flow goes both directions. And though we work hard to protect the waters, we have

learned that so much is beyond our control.

In a quarter century of living beside these waters, we have seen the extremes of drought and flood. And we wonder: How does a stream that is normally as deep as a shoe and as wide as a shovel rise to a height twice as tall as any of us in our family and swell as wide as a county highway?

*

My husband and I are driving with our children to a celebration a few miles from our home. Rain has fallen all week; rain has all fallen day, but all at once the daylight darkens. Halfway in the journey, the *sound* of the rain changes.

We are blinded by rain as we head downhill. Through the windshield, we see a blurry line of headlights come toward us—*away* from the gathering. At the spillway we see why everyone is leaving: water shoots up into the air higher than the cars trying to cross over and get out. A flash flood. All the creeks are going to rise. All I can think is: *We've got to get home. We've got to get home and see if we can get back to our house.*

The same highway we just drove on minutes before becomes a moving glass surface. Alarm surges up from my core—I know what is coming. “Watch,” I say, pointing my finger. Streams beside the road rise as if I have said an incantation, as if the energy of my pointing finger pulls the waters up, turns them round and wild, and sends them roaring through every streambed along every mile back to our hollow. We race through the rains, and none of us says a word as the water pounds against the car.

We top the last ridge to our own hollow and speed downward. Next to the road, a stream that has never ever been there before churns over a pasture and into the ravine we follow.

We turn onto our driveway to face the culvert at the main channel. Can we cross? In the deepening dark, brown waters fill the stream banks. We speed to the house to get the children inside, and then my husband races our vehicles back across the waters and onto the road.

We fill jugs of clean water and wait, on edge. In the darkness, all we can hear

is the sound of rain as it beats against the house. Though lightning flashes, there is nothing to see but water. Then a new sound rises—louder than the storm—the *roar* of flood. “Listen,” I say to my children. “*Listen*. Dieter Hollow Creek—that’s what a really bad flood sounds like.”

*

When a flood comes, you don’t see all the damage at once. You can’t see anything, because everything is covered and hidden by water, mud, and disbelief. Everything you see confuses you. Your world has changed, and at first you have no words for it.

I didn’t want to admit that we lost our farm road. I didn’t want to admit that the lower garden was gone and with it, all of the food we raise to survive through a year.

*

Twenty inches of rain fall that night.

Afterwards, we hear how a road mudslide trapped families in for a few days near where we had driven, and how two horses above Readstown were washed a mile downstream, unharmed. No one saw them go—the waters were too high—and no one knows what kind of ride they had. Hundreds of creeks carve the hollows of the Driftless Area. Every single one has flooded. Sewage and dead and decaying livestock were everywhere. The scent of antibiotics hangs in the air.

We find this:

Our poultry and livestock are alive, but have nowhere to stand out of the wetness. All of the golden gravel that had composed the surface of our long driveway is gone; it lines the spring creek. Trenches in the driveway go down six feet. Boulders appear that we never knew were there—from the farmers long-ago who built this road up to the house. Midden piles emerge everywhere—on the road, in the back yard, in the fields—popping out porcelain lids for ancient-style canning jars and decayed saddle shoes. Though we are a headwaters farm, pieces of fencing and stock tank (which

are not ours) are strewn atop the mud-covered garden. Huge logs, long-dead trees, lie against the upstream side of the culvert. Our spring-house spring beneath the willow is buried, and so many rivulets are flowing, it's hard to tell where exactly the spring was.

Ten days after the first flood, rains pound and the waters gather a second deluge. We watch in confusion as both creeks rise, coffee-and-cream color; as the driveway beside our house—now without gravel—becomes a river rushing into the spring creek at the willow tree. We see it all happen in morning light.

The spring creek is washed clean of golden gravel. Gray clay and coarse sand line the gouged banks. Beneath the weeping willow, all of the jewelweeds and mints are gone. Strewn here and there, broken branches of the willow lie partially buried in clay. We have fences to fix; logs to cut. We must clean barn and coop, re-roof, re-batten, and re-gravel the farm road.

We are dazed. On edge. Each drop of rain gets our attention. We listen, as if dreading the approach of a beast that has been terrorizing the neighborhood.

Nearby, the Kickapoo River town of Gays Mills succumbs, and the residents decide to relocate the village. Some leave the area.

*

In the hills and hollows of the Driftless Area, water has always determined the shape of the land; it makes it possible for us to live. We learn to make peace with rain and ask as we make our homes here: *What does the water bring to us, and what does it carry away?*

*

New waterfalls sing as the spring creek plunges into a sequence of pools. My daughter and I walk down to the weeping willow. We drop our feet into the water. On the banks around us, sapling willow trees sprout from buried branches. They root; take hold; begin a new generation.