

# River

Jan Carroll

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Book design by Debra Olson Graphics & Design,  
Whitehall, Wisconsin

Thanks to all the fellow poetry explorers in my small  
poetry-writing groups—you are an inspiration.

For Kate and Steve, who made this possible.

# Acknowledgments

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**Many thanks to the editors of the following publications in which some of these poems first appeared:**

*Avatar Review*: “Resolute at the River.”

*Cider Press Review*: “Birthday Song.”

*Life and Legends*: “Calling Deep,” “Walking Music.”

*Volume One*: “Love Note to the Eau Claire River.”



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# Part One

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“Flow patterns of water are a  
basic model for the conduct of life.”

—*Alan Watts*

“The continuity of the stream motif, from the Paleolithic  
and later, suggests that this symbol was of primary potency. ...  
To ensure life, health, and abundance from the Divine Source,  
the stream symbol was indispensable—and ubiquitous.”

—*Marija Gimbutas, The Language of the Gods*





## Calling Deep ◦

Deep calls to deep in the noise of the waterfall.  
Riverforce driven by ploys of the free-for-all

gracefully traces the arcspan of free fall and  
splashes like crashed last remarks, like a reprimand

plunges you under. The deluge disorients you,  
floundering down where few rays streak the depths of rude

awakening. Rake up a prayer, lust for breath, for lung-  
inspiration to squander, the air cheating death by one

rise like surprise to the surface, to noisiness.  
Thunder as hundreds of worshipping cascades dress

noise like the poise of an echo precariously  
hung on each rung, an elective sound synergy

deep calling deep  
calling deep.

## ○ Childhood Bridge

Sometimes I still find myself in dreams  
on the wobbly wooden walkway scaffolded  
to the side of the old Sauk bridge, gripping  
my mother's hand. The abandon  
of the wind toys with her locks,  
the black Cs of her bangs are caught up  
in the same mock and havoc as the ends  
of the red fringed scarf tied  
in a knot under her chin. I am counting on  
her oblivious gait, that she is not fazed  
as the whole structure tremors with traffic, this behemoth uneasy,  
asleep on a limb over the rush of the river, the river one vein  
of the world it cut open, its prey.

○

at the bend  
of the river, winter taking hold,  
not on the rigid ice, safe  
along the shore, there  
so long that white  
has fallen on it, but beyond,  
on the flimsy questionable difference—  
ice? water? ice?—the most beautiful crow lights,  
preens, conjectures, looks  
at me, part of a whole half  
world, with one eye,  
  
then flies.

## o Birthday Song

Crow broke off a part  
of the same wintered branch  
he stood on, jabbed it out—"See?"  
then flooped down to pick  
at a question of ice  
stuck in the craw of the river,  
his alarm wishing me  
happy in the wrinkle  
of holy commemoration,  
not unlike how one vow or another keeps  
you, her, me, him, from going completely  
under, someone's long arms opening, taking in, just then,  
at some other door, the roses you meant to wire *me*, trying  
to fit your stranger-words to her sadness being  
caught off-guard then handed down  
the eco-system, caw  
by caw.

○

Every morning, the river wears  
another face. Sometimes a student  
writes her name  
in rocks on shore, or gulls  
with pigeons in high nooks  
of the Fine Arts building, brood, flighty, looking out.

But every morning, the river  
with fresh scars of ice, sodden leaves, its legend.

## ○ River and Train, Running Parallel

All's drawn to this bridge over this unassuming river,  
long meandering, shush humming, lolling lullaby,

then hack and chug combustion of a blunt-thug locomotive,  
stuck on metal track as it projects its jig-jig-jig-jig I.

While the river is all take it in, soft wash away, the elemental giver,  
adaptive to, creating space, like swallow flight, like grace,

train discombobulates, disconcerts, disses, is a damn denotive  
ramrod, streak and gone, hammer strikes, iron-straight freight face.

River counsels this way, that way, hither, yon, and thither,  
divergent rivulets, happy rapids, beneath-the-surface clues.

Train head butts resistance, shrills out warning, churns explosive,  
rattles boxcar cages, steeps the steam, seethes, "Make me! Choose!"

"Be," say vibrations of nurturing, aquiver.

"Do," say machinations of furthering, emotive.

## Trestle and River in Crayon

—for Jessi, who drew it

The way she depicts it in colored-wax strokes, the tracks here are warped a bit, Dali-melted toward the twist of DNA. The triune pylons stalwart, waist-deep in the current, are a row of faceless referees, arms straight up, signaling in agreement that one team just scored. And in those brackets, the fairly uniform rails tip to the left, leaning toward pouring out their hearts to the greater flow just before they ease down and over the apex of a hillock, or a native burial ground, or a glacial moraine, each rail nearly losing touch with itself at that point but hanging on, the ties getting chaotic and blurred as the iron road reaches two arboreal figures on the other side, their trunks all Xs, their leaves all Os. And then, in the vanishing point—because there’s attempt at perspective here—we can’t help but lose sight of the way it goes. And so, that momentum having carried us across, the eye now travels back to the water—that one, steady impulse—arterial and tangential, underscored by the audience of debris and loose cartilage accumulated, motley, gawking from the edge, and underneath it all, closer to us, this wispy band of peach-fuzz–virginal grass, where all things must have started, though we didn’t notice at first, where we must have come from, where we—or something—by all appearances, must have begun.

## Walking Music

An odd octave of juncos kept pace with me as I plodded along a stretch of the river trail. Spurting from tree to tree, the round black notes of their heads kept catching my eye over and over again, leapfrogging in inky relay, a melody appearing then disappearing on a branchy score, accompanying me

as if they were dolphins or porpoises arcing in the water alongside some ketch, assuming *this* is the party, spelling out “Free!” with their bodies and their swimming, movement-saying how maybe we *all* could learn to thread the above, the below.

Or maybe they meant somehow to mimic those white balls bouncing above the lyrics on *Sing Along with Mitch*, 1960s TV, that helped you come to grips with the gist of the music so that everyone could give voice to at least the catchy chorus, though you felt your way along the verses too. Having kenned the first one, the rest fell into place, and you thought, being a child, that through the miracle of this broadcast, the whole world might just be singing with you.



## Gulls

This bend of river marks the place  
where native nations met and held  
huge council fires. Now it hosts  
a university—light compelled  
to mingle with the current while it mulls  
over this generation of gulls.

It's only been in recent months  
I've noticed them, and first I thought  
they seemed a bunch of icy boats  
stagnant in the flow. But then I caught  
sight of them startling into upward arcs,  
like fireworks' curvilinear sparks.

Of course they all are hot-ash white,  
though some have dipped their wings in paint  
so carbon black and branded on,  
it'll color—like lightning strike—and stain  
every effort toward and playing with flight  
they manage to ignite.

But each pair of wings, like bellows, feeds  
the filament within  
to burn consistent and  
courageous. Riding thermals, again,  
are these, come to terms with their eccentric  
strand of being, electric.

## Love Note to the Eau Claire River

You'd have little song but for these interruptions,  
little music if not for what you run up against  
below the surface. Little character without such debris.  
Without degrees of redirection, nothing near your actual  
appeal.

You (the wonder!) hatch insect life  
that feeds the swallow  
in arabesque  
and yet

you weight down the world  
for its own good with the layered  
sandstone you've been carving into  
faces for ages.

And the dying trees who've lived  
whole lives on the edge  
of your one moving melody, lean over and hope  
they might fall into you  
one day, blurring  
river, blurring  
shore.

# Streams of Beautiful

—for BC

Noon is a dark-cornered din, a cacophony perched on a rough brim.  
Day wears its blight like a gauze-wrap of black 'cross the face of a wide berth.  
Gutter resounds *still* with hymns, a receptacle grateful for bent rain.  
Dogged resilience digs through the garbage for stray worth,  
while garrulous droplets of respite seep down past the edge to the razed heart.

Scant through the skyscrapers' light-blunting cliffs comes a Kidron. The sweet brook  
glints off the tangent constructions of angles, off walls, back up doorjambs,  
musters the hopes of pedestrian mavericks who scan for this roll call,  
reaches the scabblers, the derelict crowd-splintered, trumpets a blared blast,  
shadowous streaks are defined, underscored by the bare light.

Radiant factions distend within thickness of night, wend a thin sea.  
Wading there, ankle-deep, steps blush in baptistry, steep in the wet light.  
Hazardous blindnesses plague still this estuary, pitch all their bleak tents  
to sky hide—pirate-y sails caught in dead airs and infamy. Yet, streams  
of beautiful come to retort, to dispel that craft, wielding their kind clash.



# Part Two

---

“You cannot walk off with a river in a bucket.  
If you try to capture running water in a bucket, it is clear  
that you do not understand it and that you will always  
be disappointed, for in the bucket the water does not run.  
To ‘have’ running water you must let go  
of it and let it run.”

—*Alan Watts*



# I Come to Stand a While at the River

I used to come here for harbingers or omens and  
harbingers and omens have their place, but—better—

She is *in* and *to* continuum, saying both,  
“Get up! Get to work!” and “Child. Rest.”

## ○ Resolute at the River

Dry day. Leaf whorls. Something nudges, “Look upriver.”  
Cautious phantoms—five deer—walk across the river.

Loose setter questions who I am, looks to her,  
“Ok to take this tangent across the river?”

What hard-choice desperation would make someone  
try to throw their only bike across the river?

Rough-red fabric underwater, makeshift heart,  
holds, points, indeterminant, across the river.

Scrabbler, shore-bound, read the rock runes. They’re cliff notes  
from me, pacing the edges here across the river.



So ○

So it's like he is this river  
always rolling away, yet still there—  
so much volume singing, ringing true, and then moving on,  
so much that keeps coming out of what can seem like nowhere.

It's like he is the ever-evolving edge  
of the slowly revolving horizon, and I can't plant  
any kind of claim or flag or javelin that stands  
for more than just a moment. It just falls  
to the side or gradually goes under as  
the big ball of wax rolls on  
into someone else's lucky day.

He is so often there when I open a door, startled up  
from his thoughts, flowing right to left before me like that river,  
or like a refugee resigned to the raft that carries him,  
half curious, half amused, and watching, from where he sits on it, me  
reeling by—to him, the motion—some movie done in sepia,  
no subtitles, foreign, way too abstract.

Other times he just stands there, a sentinel rock in the drift,  
silent and saying something I can't bring myself to understand.  
Or he sits by me minutes like a leaf carried close  
to shore until some call spooks him  
and he slips away, once again that river, that so subtle flow,  
that so gradual turning away of the whole wide world  
if you could see it from far enough above for what it really is.

○

sometimes a crow is a message.  
sometimes a river names names.

other times  
a crow is just a black bird.  
other times a river, a dark  
drain.

○

This morning the river  
usually so staid, so behaved, prudent  
in its flow, demanded as I  
walked by, to be seen, today swollen and blurring  
the edges, brazen after so much rain, overwhelming  
the banks, splitting rational seams.  
And even the dog not happy just to snuffle  
along the way, needed to roll in the grass now and then. That baby  
tethered in loving arms lurched rather dangerously out  
toward the sinuous movement of the water, and a tiger swallowtail,  
flustered, jittery, nearly flew into me. I woke up  
with that same kind of pulling me the length of my body and  
the breadth of my tolling—for you—knowing  
I shouldn't, the river pinning my shoulders to the ground  
of my attention, say-uncle-ing me into admitting you  
are some rushing part  
of the whole  
shebang.

○

## On the River Trail

*I was breathing you out to the updrafts.  
I was treading you into the loam.  
I was recasting you as a lesson,  
relinquishing you as either scoundrel or koan.*

1.

The first thing I noticed  
was that a twig-built cabin only a few inches high,  
maybe meant to be a live-trap for a sparrow  
or a cuboid raft for the third dimension,  
crafted by a child (or inner child)  
given the gift of woods and time  
had been left  
to the left.

Did you?

*I was needing to know about wing beats.  
I was following scraps to get home.  
I was studying currents and what-age—  
did you want company or to be alone?*

2.

Further on my way, looking up, I saw  
that the bark of one tree was nearly coming off, rolled back  
and sticking out like one of those commemorative statues  
of some explorer, bolted down at the edge  
of yet another sea, pointing  
with horizontal arm  
to what might be  
on the other side  
of open, dare-you-to-cast-your-lot-with-me water. Were you?

*I was shedding my skin like the snake-circler.  
I was changing myself into ship.  
I was shore-stuck, no sextant or star-steer,  
languishing—was this real or am I losing grip?*

3.

Then spring-green seed pods strewn  
before my evolving arriving  
bode so much  
better than rose petals.

Had you?

*I was expecting season change as harrow.  
I was trying so hard not to slip.  
I was hopeful, without much basis, that you might  
consider tending to the curve of my lip.*

4.

Down near the river bank,  
four or five trees—or the limbs of trees—converged  
as if they were athletes perpetually in a huddle  
at the raw beginning  
of another big game,  
about to erupt at the starting buzzer  
into guttural expressions and cheers.

Are you?

*I am struggling to fit you as ally.  
I am wrestling with the way things seem.  
I am looking you up in the roster,  
trying to figure out: Are we on the same team?*

5.

Just before my turn-around,  
a runner whose feet were finding all  
the contours of the land, sun-message mottled  
on his bearing, was making his way  
at a steady pace  
toward (or back from)  
Marathon.

And you?

*Are you making your way toward this?  
Are you arguing with the premise, with the theme?  
Are you spending all your energy to disprove it  
or step-splashing into this consciousness, this stream?*

## o drought

the river, in dry times, ribs and backbone  
sticking out here and there where  
the muscle of flow has, for now, wasted away, still has

beauty while it wears that other side of the coin—  
no one will drown in it, no one is likely to be fooled  
by any delusions of depth—and yet this becomes

the defining strand in this river's long unbraiding  
story, that telling vein, wanting, that in another  
season, another year, could conceivably have been,

given the not-holding-back rain let loose to fall, to course  
through (what seems now a wash), enough  
most days to free

## Giving You to the River

Every day for quite a while I will walk down  
to the bridge over the tributary and let  
another bit of this bright vortex that you in-  
advertently spun in me—happy  
hurricane, sweet centrifuge—go. And maybe

when she catches each one and runs  
to the next confluence, curving like a question  
behind the library, some other fly fisher, casting  
and reeling, caught off-guard, will stumble over  
but land them, each precious and pesky clue  
to all things swirling to all things still, and do

better with these turnings than I did  
with what was given, with what I hid.

# May You Always (Blue Heron)

*a waltz*

May you always be finding  
she who opens the door  
to the dance

May you always rekindle  
the ripe evermore  
of a chance

May you always remember  
how beautiful you are, blue heron,  
for your sake, if you think of me, as you fly to her  
far from my shore

May you always be held in  
the historied lore  
of her glance

May you always have courage to  
trust in the core  
of romance

May you always remember  
the view from the sky, blue heron,  
for your sake, if you think of me, as you fly to her  
far from my shore

May you always be able  
to carry the flame  
that she owns

May you always hold onto  
the God-given name  
in your bones



May you always remember  
what a fisher you are, blue heron,  
for your sake, if you think of me, as you fly to her  
far from my shore

May you always hear music  
that rhymes with her same  
wild tones

May you always find new ways  
to open and frame  
the unknowns

May you always remember  
how graceful you are, blue heron,  
for your sake, if you think of me, as you fly to her  
far from my shore

May you always be finding  
she who opens the door  
to the dance

May you always rekindle  
the ripe evermore  
of a chance

May you always remember  
how beautiful you are, blue heron,  
for your sake, if you think of me, as you fly to her  
far from my shore

May you always remember  
how beautiful you are, blue heron.

## One Love

The walk, as usual, starts with going down a block or two and then straight past the United Methodist Church. I and the dog, not always heeling, loiter a while in the park, take the diagonal sidewalk from one corner to its opposite, stop here and there at the angle of a caught scent. But then we make our way toward the river, this spring

running high and unapologetic, the part of the trail that goes under the bridge only a foot or two above surface. Beyond the courthouse and jail, another river merges with the first—just one more particular branching of the whole, “this one” and “the other” superfluous. This Y, this watery divining rod, is pointing out, “Here—here it is. Look no more.”

And gradually it begins

to dawn on me that I could no more love just you—or any *one*—in this elongated instance than I could doggedly hold in my vision that singular always changing expanse of river I stood at the margin of so often when you were first becoming such an eddy of questions that wouldn't settle down.      You are

integral with The All, just as every part of the greater water cycle continues and contributes—rivulet, rainfall, snowmelt, watershed—inevitably going toward gulf, or ocean, or sea, at some time then again to be taken up into the air, held a while, and sent back down as droplets or torrents of rain. And even though we eventually come to accept and understand this

we still take it kind of hard that we can't hoard one hand-hold, any more than any of us can hang on to, say, our children—or anything brought to life—ever losing and being given someone or something familiar yet new. Back at the outset, I remember now, the sign in front of the church had said the title of the next message was going to be “One Love.”

Jan Carroll's work has appeared in a number of journals, including *Bellowing Ark*, *Cider Press Review*, *Artemis Journal*, *California Quarterly*, and *Borderlands*. She facilitates small poetry-writing groups and works in regional and local publishing. She lives in the river city of Eau Claire, Wisconsin.