

# ***The River Is a Wampum***

Anne-Marie Bouchard and Manon Sioui

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I leave my house and go to it. Although I live nearby, I so rarely visit it. Yet I know that I am shaped by its moods, its currents, its twists and turns. I feel it flowing inside me, the water composing me as much as my own skin. It forms me, and perhaps this is why I retain so many images, which permeate me, as though they come to me as reflections.

And yet I still look for more, always more, in the light shimmering on its rushing surface like constellations. Rays of light filtering through the trees and gently landing on a samara, a fern, or, on a different day, the glimmering clouds seeing their mirror image in the water. By gazing at the river, we end up seeing the sky.

For a long time, we collected light on photographic film, the silver halides revealing images as the chemical compounds break up in the water. We still accumulate light, in the form of pixels stocked somewhere far away. But is there a way of making images by observing the plants react to the sun and conserving the traces of light, without contaminating the soil and water? And what if plants were the ones that held the most beautiful images? This makes me get very close to them, until I begin to see a spinal column in a fern, my palm lines in the veins of the leaves.

I go in circles in my thoughts as I walk closer to the shoal, slowly take off my shoes, uncertain. My feet touch the rough, warm rocks first, then my toes sink into the waterlogged silt. I get nearer and dip my feet in the water up to my ankles. I would like to dive all the way in, but I am very close to the mouth of the river, and I've often heard that it's polluted. So contaminated in fact that at one time, its shores were lined with concrete in hopes of purifying the water. They have since been set free, and gradually they are coming back to life. But seeing a duck and her ducklings glide by, I hope for even better water, and watching a man fishing, I wish him fish that could feed his children one day.

Many people, their minds busy with a thousand things to do, cross over the river in a rush, on the thirty bridges and footbridges that traverse it, without paying any attention to it. It's easy not to see the anemones, milkweed, juneberries. Even when close, we might notice them without knowing what they are and even be wary of them. We could conceivably not know where we come from when we don't know where the river comes from.

Through the city's noises, birdsong reaches me. My first reflex is to take out my phone, so that an app can tell me whether it's a blue jay, a crow, or a bunting making it. I must be careful not to dwell on information. It would be better to listen to the vocalizations, so that one day I might be able to recognize them the way we recognize a friend's voice, and possibly be better equipped to ask them about their news.

Between the songs of the birds and those of the currents gliding between the rocks, I hear a voice that comes from upstream, from the waterfall where the water is still clear. It's an older voice, rippled by the water, one that carries other even more ancient voices with it, descended from slumbering mountains. It says: listen to me but above all, listen to the river. Listen to every bristle of moose fur, every crown of oak trees, every husk of corn.

Every living being has something to impart, to teach, and all their stories weave together to form one shared terrain.

The river is a long wampum, a story flowing on the water reminding us of past alliances and telling us about those we will need to face challenges in the future. Building on what's come before, the river encourages us to dream of a world free of false promises and the suffering we inflict on others and on ourselves, a world that we agree to mend and take care of. A meandering path leads to this land of trees and moss, inviting us to join the sound of the drums heard from its many twists and turns.

I take off in this direction with a small flame in my heart, ready to dance by the biggest fires.

— Anne-Marie Proulx  
Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei