

# SWEET WATER

POEMS FOR THE WATERSHEDS

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watershed

describes an area of land that contains a common set of streams and rivers that all drain into a single larger body of water, such as a larger river, a lake, or an ocean. In Canada, the Mackenzie River is the largest river flowing into the Arctic Watershed while the Fraser River is the largest river flowing into the Pacific Ocean watershed.

Have you also learned that secret from the river; that there is no such thing as time? That the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere and that the present only exists for it, not the shadow of the past nor the shadow of the future.

—**Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha***

## THE BODY OF WATER AND ITS SPIRIT

Philip Kevin Paul

... imagine that even a puddle of water is a living thing, and it has a life, a spirit, and spiritedness.

Some years back, I took a job with the Institute of Ocean Sciences (IOS). My job was to compare and correlate traditional WSÁNEĆ knowledge with current scientific “discovery.” In the earliest meetings, the department heads and upper echelon of the IOS attended. They took the lead in explaining that, essentially, the water in Brentwood Bay, WSÁNEĆ people’s front yard on the west side of the Saanich Peninsula, doesn’t move. This means the water in the bay doesn’t flush out or cleanse itself in the same way as other bays and most bodies of water. After explaining this, they asked if my people had a name for this body of water. I answered, SXOXIYEM, which means “still water.” They had been studying the bay for thirty-plus years. This was a doorway between two ways of knowing.

In another meeting soon after, I met with a more intimate crowd, the staff and heads of departments I would be reporting to directly. They asked me, when I thought of the project, was there anything that came to mind immediately. I responded, “Yes, KÉNNES, the stream that runs below our graveyard and has been an essential stream for our people prior to settler contact.” The silence that followed this proclamation was mystery-filled for me. Eventually their answer to me was, “That’s freshwater. We are *ocean* scientists.” They weren’t dismissing the relationship between fresh and saltwater, they just hadn’t expected this answer out of me. My people’s territory is mostly ocean, and the scientists wanted, more than anything, my people’s understanding of the ocean.

In time, the scientists taught me about how rain saturates ground, and that the water that isn’t absorbed is called runoff, and it goes wherever it ends up. Our streams rely on this pattern or system. They also taught me that while water saturation maintains a freshwater table through this process, the maintenance of that freshwater table also keeps the ocean from its desire to rise up from underground. They also explained that roads, houses and parking lots, for instance, interrupt the even maintenance of the freshwater tables.

In WSÁNEĆ our most sacred tree is called KÓKOILĆ, which refers to the Arbutus tree; it means “water drinking tree.” It holds water, and drinks it sparingly, so when there is a drought, it endures better than other trees.

One of the most beautiful things I encountered in my entire life was when I was at the Institute of Ocean Sciences. They were surprised, but not baffled, that my first request, when working at the IOS, was that I wanted to talk about a freshwater stream. At first, I wondered if I was being taken seriously, then they rented a helicopter and hired a videographer, and we went up after a big rain. From the air, there was a very clear *plume* between the saltwater and the freshwater. As I looked down, I was reminded that fresh water is no longer drinkable in WŚÁNEĆ and that two of our essential streams have disappeared because they have been diverted into ditches.

In the entire world, there aren't many waterfalls that land directly into the ocean, but there are two right here in WŚÁNEĆ and in SŪOXIYEM. Here in WŚÁNEĆ, the one called KĒNNES is where a whale beached itself, and the other, called WEĆEĆE, is a particular sound in the WŚÁNEĆ ear, and it is the song of the stream. Really, they are beacons, sending out a signal that attracts little beings like insects, and the insects attract tiny fish who go there to feed, and the fish attract bigger and bigger fish until the salmon come, and then the whales come to eat the salmon.

Our bay was where whales used to calf. It was a time of peace between all whales. The bulls didn't come into the bay unless there was need for them. When I was very young, my grandpa took me to the beach near KĒNNES, and he said that once, at the entrance to the bay, he saw that a female was in distress, and two bulls turned and came to the female's aid. A calf was having trouble rising, half in its birth sac, so the bulls put the calf on their backs and dove and came up, dove and came up, until the calf was swimming on its own. He said we had a song for that occasion, and he sang that song for me, then he lay in my lap and cried. I don't know how old he was, but I was five or six, and it was the first time I saw an adult cry. "This song isn't sung anymore," he said, "because the whales aren't here anymore." And then he sang me a song.

Remember, water is a living thing to WŚÁNEĆ people and it has a spirit, and with its particular spiritedness, because it has its own shape, the spirit of water might lie with you in your sleep because you visited it that day. It wants you to understand that your desires are more fluid than we are often willing to accept. Our dreams that night, when the spirit of water is with us, are of acceptance, despite how we understand beauty and honour, and we are touched for a time, and held in the shape that we might truly accept, for once, ourselves.

## WATER

George Szirtes

The hard beautiful rules of water are these:

That it shall rise with displacement as a man does not, nor his family. That it shall have no plan or subterfuge. That in the cold, it shall freeze; in the heat, turn to steam. That it shall carry disease and bright brilliant fish in river and ocean.

That it shall roar or meander through metropolitan districts whilst reflecting skies, buildings and trees.

And it shall clean and refresh us even as we slave over stone tubs or cower in a shelter or run into the arms of a loved one in some desperate quarter where the rats too are running. That it shall have dominion. That it shall arch its back in the sun only according to the hard rules of water.

## WATER TO WATER

Kate Braid

*With thanks to Seamus Heaney for "Lightenings iv"*

Under the guardian cap of the water's surface  
this swimmer finds another  
memory, long-forgotten motion flowing

through arms, legs, twist of her body turning  
as if some ancient instruction  
bubbling through her, remembered at last

this is why the hairs on her arms, her head, grow  
like this, why her nose so shields her breath, caress  
of waves, diamond pattern of flickering light  
beneath her.

Bare to her body's memory, how safe and right  
it feels to be a new-born, fish, alive again,  
the body's grace joined, thirst quenched,  
water to water.

THE BIRDS, BUTTERFLIES AND SNAKES OF  
HAMILTON, ONTARIO: AN EXCERPT FROM *NEEDLEMINER*

Gary Barwin

1.

we are for the chuck-will's-widow  
the horned grebe  
the fulvous whistling-duck  
for looking directly into the semi-palmated plover  
for the shearwater  
for the lazuli bunting  
the razorbill and the canvasback redhead  
for the ferruginous hawk  
and the black-crowned night heron  
for black-legged kittiwakes in general  
and cerulean warblers specifically  
for recalling the bohemian waxwing and the black rail  
for the veery and little blue heron  
for the belted kingfisher and the least bittern  
for the american redstart and wilson's phalarope  
for the black-necked stilt  
the long-billed curlew  
the greater yellowlegs  
the muddy godwit  
for the turnstone red knot and the pectoral sandpiper  
for the storm petrel  
the glossy ibis  
for the great cormorant  
for living in madness

2.

there was  
a silver-spotted skipper  
in which

## JUDD BEACH

**Bren Simmers**

let us walk the sandy trails through spotted alder trunks, the flush of salmonberry, our blood 92% water, the river here long before we were born and long after blossoms, hot pink, blurred zing of hummingbirds darting back and forth through animal and ancestor, the river recycled into cloud, the same water falls as rain over the live corridor, over banked jumps built for BMX, the loose cluster of teens sticky sweet cottonwood buds that unfurl tender green, transform to gold filigree spilling the banks, cutting a new channel, the river, time itself, our lives rushing past wild, feral. add your track to the wet sand: dog, coyote, eagle, parentheses of elk, sometimes slow, sometimes surging, flood warning, spilling its banks brown and fast, bear scat come salmon run, socket-less skulls, stench of writhing corpses, maggots just downstream of where coho fry hide in shaded overhangs. what makes a life. vertebrae scatter in the fist-sized cobbles, basalt and andesite covered with slime kids splashing in the shallows, the river crystal clear or cloudy with glacial silt and later, rocks capped with snow rising like dough, the river a place of renewal, seasons blur into years: flooded trails that horsetails drink, pinball flight of swallows return, the source.



## WHERE

### **Katherena Vermette**

not up in the groomed grass  
of the pretty park

not in the hilly bush  
high with growth and garbage

not kneeling  
on those polished pews

not even where the upright stones  
bruise the earth

not at the street where  
the fake flowers faded long ago

or where the wounds open  
and cry out every night

not on the bridge where  
some went

or at old wood dock where  
others were taken

but here near this last bend  
in the river

here where the trees break off  
and their leaves dance high with song

here where the water licks the sky  
like smoke

and the concrete is so old  
and smoothed as rock

here where the dock broke off  
and the edge is low

where the wind moves quick in  
and long out

there is still tobacco  
and there is still fire

here with the river is where  
I will remember

## LOST STREAM

**Fiona Tinwei Lam**

Forgotten one, you remember what you were:  
mossy banks, fringes of fern, rivulets, riffles,  
cool passage for salmon. On a map  
of old streams spilling out to the strait  
you were one of hundreds  
of capillaries threading through earth  
muscled with rock, lavished with forest.  
Then the city donned concrete  
masks, civilized grids. Smothered  
into park, you were culverted, diverted, yoked,  
locked into pipes while we romped above.  
But you refuse to be choked  
under clearcut, brushcut tracts. Playing fields  
soak back into marsh. Bog rises through playground.  
One by one, oaks topple in sodden soil,  
upended roots like tangled claws.  
Submerged roads around you  
ripple in wind. Water above seeks  
water below. Deep underground,  
you gurgle, chortle, ready to rise.