

Rivers: Don Welch Poetry

Flat Water

Coming down to the river is no wish
to see its liquid in the sun.
It's a wanting to smell it, a wanting
to test the old sense which pulls you on.

That's why you take the brush slowly
as a game. You remember the boys already there,
the boys diving in it, laughing at the wet cats
of their heads. That's why you think out loud,

Watch out for too much shallow, the rash
o salt-shot. And you hear girls dancing in it,
daring it to crawl higher than permission.
You feel them giggle at the soft clamps

the Platte puts into them. But you stop
50 yards from the bank, listening to underground
water. Finding its way articulated, it spreads out,
spreads down. You hear rich muted fossils,

the dark entertainment. You hear your youngest
coming back with the Platte in her hands.
You hear her laugh the bank, play the small carp
in the buckbrush. Even fore she gets to you

you say, Here comes trip's truth in small ends.
What kind of gladness is this, then, when you find
she's cupped so hard no river's left?

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The River

---For Dutch Welch

Winter,
late afternoon,
the sun a pale flare
in the westering trees.

Here, the willows
have almost gone home
to the dark,
there is a perceptible
wind trailing the edges
of minutes.

This afternoon
it was warm.

And now my father,
picking up decoys, swings
lead weights around their necks,
his back to the west.

All day,
having moved in this river
like a pleasant doom,
his surgeries blending
with the buckbrush and trees,
he has had his eyes
unraveled by birds.

Tonight deer will unfold themselves
from the dark and come forth.

In the deepest channels
slush ice will form itself
in the cold lacy jags,
the slews grow brittle
with ice.

I look west.

There is a single hole
in the colds through which
time is escaping.

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The Painter and the River

He wants to be there at dawn
to paint the vermilion channels
and the sun's gong. Or there
when the river turns silver,

making it lithe; when noon fattens it,
reddens it. If he can only cup
water in his palm, in one quick stroke
dipping up the mother-stock,

he can paint the trees
like Chinese written characters,
each one styled by weather
and wood love; or capture

the water as an utter of sunlight,
a trickle of balm, where
the late afternoon river is golden,
like the odor of quince and lemon.

And he wants to return in winter,
feeling those great sheets of ice
building up, slugging down,
grinding the edges of the sandbars,

macerating the roots of the willows.
He wants to stand on that ice,
on that blue-white tie, looking down.
And he wants to be there at night,

when black, the river flows
like a woman in a silk sheath,
when it loses its smooth gray tones
and takes on the moon.

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River Deer

Near a bridge south of Wood River, Nebraska,
two deer have slid out of the willows
and are wearing bare air.

They are standing mid-stream,
their ears great racquets.

Just beyond them
a deep-running channel is a long musical rope
tying itself in knots.

The deer look up at me high on the bridge.
Our eyes are beads of the moment.

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Now, At The Edge Of This River

Wade in. The river which grips
your ankles is the smoothest chain.
Even, still, it has you.

What it asks is the initiation
of your skin, your feet
given over to drift sand.

Look: ahead a long sandbar
has risen like an ancient whale,
head down, its flukes thrust into the land.

If you want to know its graver self,
walk carefully its taut arch,
then take its lead.

Step off again.
In the shallows you'll find grains
of sand which flake like gold.

Be glad for motes. But go on,
go much darker, dive in.
The water wants only to involve you.