

2009

River

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Recommended Citation

Hamilton, David. "River." *The Iowa Review* 39.2 (2009): 1-3. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6696>

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River

It was during our bicentennial year when I was new to Iowa that Matthew Pollard, a biology major in an undergraduate writing class, imagined fishing the Iowa River—but way off in the future, in the dimly imaginable year 2000. By then, Matthew assumed, pollution would have forced us to live under constant alert—Don't Eat Fish From This River! The joys of fishing though would remain as before, so the state had established nurseries upstream for raising trout, walleye, and bass. When fish came of age, they were slaughtered by electric shock, packaged in cellophane, and placed in the river. And, since dead fish float belly-up, nursers attached a loop to the belly of each packaged fish so a fisherman, wielding an elongated pool cue with a small brass hook on its end, could lift his catch from the stream. Matthew pictured a legion of old men lined up on the riverbank near the English-Philosophy Building, retired professors among them, taking stab after stab at fish passing beneath the Iowa Avenue Bridge.

I may remember this story better than Matthew since I've retold it often. From time to time, we run across each other, and on one recent encounter, in the locker room between senior and open swim, he surprised me by saying, "I'll bet I've published more books than you." Not that that would be hard, but I've got a couple to my credit, so I asked where I could find his. "At Prairie Lights," he replied, where I hastened to discover a small rack of flipbooks, one of which demonstrated the Australian crawl. Flipping through its dozens of pages, each drawn by Matt, you watch a man swim the crawl properly but not, alas, on the Iowa River.

Rivers are part of us, and as the summer of 2008 made clear, and not for the first time, we all tend toward belonging to a river. We were displaced from our offices all that summer while preparing last year's August issue and had spent considerable time sandbagging and removing books from the library basement when the idea for this River Issue struck, and, to twist a metaphor, we were hooked. In stories, essays, drawings, poems, and photographs gathered here, we offer our representation of River.

Even when we don't recognize it as such, River is a protagonist in our life stories and several essays take up explaining that in detail. For if one thing is clear, it is not the water in our streams, but instead the sad fact that our culture, agriculture, and industry have weighed heavily upon rivers, and not to clean them up is only to defer a problem, one that pools as if behind a dam to spill over on the next generation. When we find the determination to recover our rivers, that will signal an enormous leap ahead. May writings gathered here remind us of why we should care.

For Matthew's forward-looking depiction wasn't off by much. Not many people fish the Iowa River now, and when they do we are wary of their catch. Several years ago, on the brink of the year 2000, I was walking our dog, Ramón, along the river walk west of Iowa City when a fisherman offered me the product of his afternoon. He was packing up and taking off. He'd enjoyed the fishing but neither wanted nor needed the fish. Perhaps he was from out of town and biding his time between hospital visits and had nothing he could do with them, but that is conjecture. I had no need for them either, was just underway and outward bound on our walk, and though I had a plastic bag with me that could hold a couple of fish, I was carrying it for another purpose. So I declined, but the fisherman persisted, a second time and a third. Finally I relented and he filled my sack with two hefty catfish, not entirely dead.

So taking my plastic sack with fish in one hand and the leash in the other, I continued with Ramón on our walk. That's when Ramón met Donald Justice, as he should have done; after all, Pale Ramón was his given name. Don was off in the distance, walking toward us, high stepping, almost marching, and making, I first thought, the sign of the cross, but repeatedly. Up, down, left, right; his eyes were fixed on the walk so intently that he was startled, and slightly embarrassed to be caught out as we came abreast of each other. "Oh, hello, David, I was composing something." That much I could tell. He paused to pat Ramón and spoke of being fond of dogs. Ramón, a nervous collie-mix from a shelter, always ready to bolt from strange men, especially when bearded, on a bike, and in shorts as Don was not, stood patiently under Don's touch. We turned and fell in together, two men, one dog, and two catfish flopping in a plastic sack. I tried to ignore the fish as we spoke of the new school year, of a conference from which I had just returned, of the river running

beside us and its ups and downs over the summer which Don had observed too since he lived alongside it, and of Thomas Hardy. By the time we passed the fishing site, the fisherman had packed up and left. My fish squirmed more and more and one almost slipped out of the bag, but I was committed now and tightened my grip.

By the time we had strolled another half a quarter mile north, their squirming made a quiet Sunday afternoon walk all but impossible but we were upon a construction site then where several cement blocks lay about. It's strange how determined to hold onto something one can become. I could have dumped the two fish in the river, but I felt I had earned them and had dinner in mind. Anticipating my solution, Don offered to take Ramón off my hands. And so he did, one gentleman leading another to the riverbank where they stood with their backs to me, watching the water flow quietly past, while I battered the heads of two slippery catfish against a cement block.

The fish tasted fine, by the way, grilled, with chemicals infusing the olive oil and lemon. Maybe an occasional fish from the Iowa River is like shots I used to take as a kid, little bits of many things making my allergies manageable. But I wouldn't want to count on that.

—DH